Previously: plans and planning
This one: strength and mobility
Next: training sessions

Distance running can be beneficial in terms of all-round fitness, losing weight, and developing leg muscles. But if that's the only exercise that you do, it ignores some parts of the body, and can stress areas which aren't yet strong enough to take it. Plus, if the weather's grim outside, it's sometimes good to find another thing to do.

Do something that isn't running

So it's worth consciously making time in your preparation for other activities as well. They help provide strength and mobility to make running faster and more robust, and they're also a good idea just to maintain an overall balance for your body. And being honest, even if you love running, sometimes during the build-up period there will be times when you wish you were doing something else.

This note is called 'strength and mobility' - but it's more of a general note about the value of crosstraining. Basically it's about doing things to *prepare* for running, to *substitute* for running, and most importantly to prevent injury.[1]

Do what you enjoy

Of course there are different benefits for different activities, and some are more directly relevant than others. But the point is to include something you enjoy, and which won't completely obstruct running. It doesn't *need* to be a specific programme of running-based exercises, (though there's a section on that later). As long as it's non-harmful and enjoyable, that's fine. And it may be something you can do with friends or family whom you'll potentially neglect when you head out for those longer runs!

Be aware of any risks

Ideally, you'd choose something that does no harm to your running, but there's no guarantee of anything having zero risk. For example, with yoga there's a chance of slipping or overstretching. Using weights, there's a chance of dropping them on your foot. If you cycle, you could fall. I don't mean to put you off, I just mean nothing is

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[1] As an example, I know from their coach that the Brownlee brothers would always 'do everything they can do to avoid injury', and although they hate being indoors, they are 'unbelievably committed to [indoor] strength and conditioning' because that's what enables them to do more outside. Strength work is more and more a focus for UK Athletics coaches at the elite end.

without some ‘risk’. They all have potential ‘rewards’ too. You have to make appropriate choices, and maybe become more cautious as the marathon approaches.[2]

So be sensible. Now is not the time to take up kickboxing, powerlifting or parkour for the first time, but anything is fine as long as it involves a bit of lifting (objects or bodyweight), some stretching, and not too much hard impact.

Lots of choices

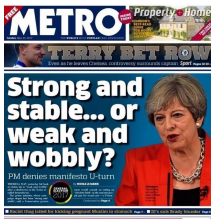
Just taking me as an example, there are lots of things I’ll do at some point in a marathon build-up. Not just because they support running, it’s because I enjoy them:

- ☐ Yoga
- ☐ Skiing and snowboarding
- ☐ Rock-climbing/mountaineering
- ☐ Outdoor swimming
- ☐ Cycling/spinning
- ☐ TRX/suspension training

Some of these have a higher risk of damage – e.g. I wouldn’t ski hard as it gets close to marathon day. Those are just examples and if it would be preferable to go to the gym or find space at home for exercise for 15-30 mins a couple of times a week, do that. A few other options:

- ☐ All-round fitness (e.g. BMF)
- ☐ Dancing
- ☐ Pilates
- ☐ Free weights

Stability more than pure strength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Strong and stable... or weak and wobbly?
PM denies manifesto U-turn

It’s not about developing pure strength in a single muscle, but all round stability that engages the smaller ‘control’ muscles as much as the ‘power’ muscles. For example, rotator cuffs as well as deltoids (shoulders), gluteus medius as well as glute max (hips).

That means smooth and slow movements rather than sudden jerks.
And ideally doing things on an unstable or uneven surface, or on one leg, so that you have to work to keep things steady – again, that means all the smaller muscles are fired up. After all, we run on one leg at a time, and if we can’t control a single-leg position then that’s a problem waiting to happen.

[2] In order to *manage* risk, you have to accept there *is* risk. You have to realise you are not bulletproof and that you can’t train endlessly without stressing your body.

Specific focus areas

Give some some thought to any injury history, what you do through the day, what areas are most likely to break down or need work. Perhaps that would include some objective testing (e.g. to measure ankle flexibility). You may have particular areas of weakness or tightness.

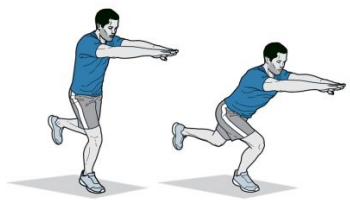
These notes go out to a lot of people and there isn't a chance to discuss individual cases, so it's down to you to apply particular focus on anything that needs it.[3] But there are three parts of the body which are likely to be relevant for all runners. These are all important in producing a running action which is controlled and balanced, and they are areas which many of us neglect or mistreat in an age of too much sitting down, computer work and driving.

1. **Hips and glutes**

The area around the pelvis is vital in absorbing the impact from the legs while keeping the body moving forwards. Many of us spend a lot of time in a chair, which means the front of the hips can become very tight (so the legs aren't free to swing through behind us). The glutes often don't function properly to stabilise the movement (and so other muscles such as TFL or piriformis take the strain). So, if you were to only think about one area, think about this one, and a basic step is just to spend more time standing rather than sitting, if you can.

The types of movement that help include:

- ☐ Hip opening
  - Lots of forms of lunges
  - Leg swings, to increase range of motion (especially behind you)
  - Quad stretches, for the front of the thighs



- ☐ Glute strength
  - Various types of squats – especially single-leg or split, so they mirror the running action
  - Bridge – lying on back with soles of feet on the ground, lifting hips
- ☐ Glute stability and activation
  - Clams and leg raises – lying on side of body and lifting leg off the ground in different ways, working the smaller glutes on side of the hip
  - Hip hikes – do them while brushing teeth?
  - Stretch the outside of the hips (gluteus medius and piriformis) with positions like 'figure four' or 'half pigeon'

When you start to fatigue and lose control, that's time to stop.

[3] Having said that, if you've got specific questions then I'm happy to chat on email.

2. Core

A strong core means a strong connection between your legs and upper body, and will help you stay tall as the miles get longer. But remember running is diagonal (linking an arm to opposite leg) or twisting, so those are the types of movement that will be most beneficial. Remember to include your side and back, as well as the front.

- ☐ Front
  - Bicycles (elbow to opposite knee)
- ☐ Back
  - Superman (lying on front, lift arms and legs)
  - Arm/leg lifts (tabletop position, extending opposite arm and leg)
  - Locust (lying on front, lift straight legs off the ground behind you)
- ☐ Side
  - Side plank, with your weight on your elbow or hand

Again, this isn't just about only doing specific gym exercises. Swimming freestyle works the diagonal muscles across the back, or digging a garden would be a great twisting core workout (but remember to swap arms halfway through).

3. Chest and shoulders

Another consequence of spending time hunched over a computer is that many of us don't have full range of movement in our shoulders. This matters because without it, our arms can't swing backwards and make a full contribution to our running.

- ☐ Chest opening
  - Arm circles – standing or jogging, circle arms forwards, then backwards
  - Shoulder stretch – use a doorframe or lamppost, lift an arm to shoulder height and place it against it. Then lean your body weight forwards to stretch the front of that shoulder.
  - Arm hang – lying on your back on a bench or the corner of a bed, let your arms hang down to each side with your palms facing upwards (letting their own weight gently open up your chest)
- ☐ Rotational flexibility
  - Seated or reclining spinal twist
  - Standing shoulder twists (or practise your golf swing!)

You can find plenty of information and demonstrations on the web.[4]

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[4] One place is www.kinetic-revolution.com. If you prefer a book try Blagrove - https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/26191810-strength-and-conditioning-for-endurance-running. Perhaps the best single demo I can provide is the RunFit app from La Clinique du Sports in Chamonix, 50% off with the code LCDS. https://befitapps.com/runfit

When to do them

Many of these will be things that you may be able to do frequently and regularly as part of a 'normal' week, and the more you do, generally speaking, the better. Try to do something at least once a week, and ideally two or three times a week at the start of the training period. Maybe that will reduce later, when you could switch to more running and a little less of other things. But don't drop it from your mix.[5] In physio-speak, think about 'prehab' rather than 'rehab' – prevent an injury, don't just treat it *after* it happens. Do the work early so you've a body that can take the volume later.

Depending what activities you do, they may themselves feel like hard work, and some of them may compromise your running. They'll take energy, they'll put some stress on your body and could leave you feeling stiff the next day (especially if it's not something you've done before). So the same principles apply – give your body time to adapt, don't do hard things straight after one another, and don't do too much.

I can't over-stress the difference it makes if you can avoid meaningful injuries. Things will feel uncomfortable at points during the training period, whatever you do. But if you invest early and always in making your body more injury-proof, then you've created your own luck and any niggles will hopefully be minor or short-lived.

The usual three points to summarise:

- ☐ **A strong and mobile body means you are less likely to develop injuries.**
- ☐ **Ideally, make it running-relevant – hips, core, and chest, and doing things on one leg**
- ☐ **But as long as you are aware of any risks, keep doing what you enjoy**

[5] This is another reason why I dislike mileage-based plans - because it means there's always a temptation to go out and clock up a few miles, when the benefits of some strength work would be far far higher. People often drop the strength work unless they feel they've got an injury.