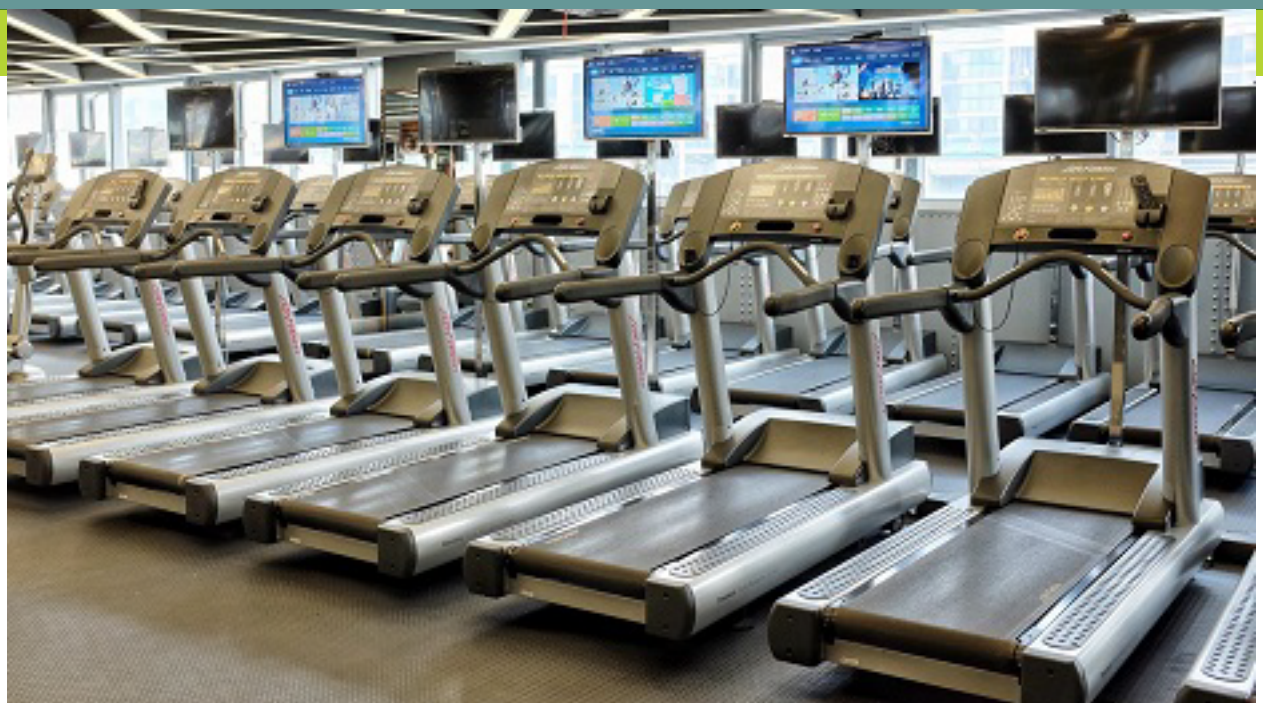

TREADMILL OR DREADMILL - 3 SESSIONS TO KEEP YOU FRESH

By James Eacott

Love it or loathe it, the treadmill should have a place in every ultra runner's armoury. It shouldn't solely be saved for the grimmest of grim days, either. There are, of course, days when the weather is somewhat Biblical and a treadmill comes in handy, but the main reason for using one for certain sessions is down to the resulting higher quality session.

I've detailed three sessions to get started with. Of course, they can be tweaked to accommodate your fitness and time available to make it work for you, but hopefully they give you a good idea of how to start.

SESSION 1 – THE STRENGTH SET

Strength is key to ultra running performance, increasingly so the longer the event. It's easy to see if you stand at the finish line.

How many are really panting and out of breath? Very few (apart from those who've put in a sprint finish over the last 200m).

How many are hunched over and walking like John Wayne? Most.

"SLOWING DURING AN ULTRA IS PREDOMINANTLY DUE TO A LACK OF LEG AND CORE STRENGTH, NOT A LACK OF CARDIOVASCULAR FITNESS"

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Slowing during an ultra is predominantly due to a lack of leg and core strength, not a lack of cardiovascular fitness. There are many ways to develop strength but hill runs offer superior bang for your buck compared to most methods.

Of course, running hills outdoors is fantastic, but when it's cold, icy and time is precious they can be done very well indoors. Maybe your next race has longer climbs than you have access to locally? Maybe you don't have any hills at the right gradient? Maybe you live in Norfolk or the Netherlands and are training for **UTMB**!

(Note: downhill running certainly has its benefits, but I'll cover that another time).

HOW TO DO IT

Warm up
10-minute easy with a few 10s strides thrown in.

Set 1

* 4 minutes uphill steady with a rolling 60 second (60s) hard effort. In the first set, do the first 60s hard then the next 3 minutes steady. In the second set, do the first 60s steady, the second 60s hard and the rest steady. In the third rep, the third 60s is hard. In the fourth, the final 60s is hard.
* Keep the gradient the same for the entire 4 minutes.
* 2 minutes 0% gradient very easy
* X 3 sets (18 min total)

Now, that may be enough for some (including me), but if you're a mountain goat and need more to feel the burn, take 5 minutes easy jog before tucking into Set 2.

Set 2

* 60 seconds hard uphill at a steeper gradient than the previous set
* Jump off treadmill (practice before doing so!)
* 30 seconds bodyweight squats. Perform as many as you can in 30s.
* 3.5 minutes 0% gradient very easy
* X 3 sets (15 min total)

Really work on intensity during Set 2

Cool down
10 minutes easy

58 minutes total

SESSION 2 – LEG SPEED AND EFFICIENCY

Speed is often neglected by all but the speediest of ultra runners. It shouldn't be. Speed is valuable to anyone who wants to cover the distance as fast and efficiently as possible (even if you're a back-of-the-packer). Long, tempo and hill runs are arguably more important, but hitting the track or treadmill once every couple of weeks will pay dividends by increasing cruising speed and improving efficiency.

Speedier sessions shouldn't feel overly tough. The Strength Set will leave your calves, quads, heart and lungs on fire, but speed sessions often finish with you wondering whether you've worked hard enough. That's because efforts are not particularly long and the focus is on running with impeccable form, rather than on butchering yourself.

HOW TO DO IT

Warm Up

* 5 minutes of easy jogging to loosen the pins
* 5 minutes with 5 x 30s strides (thrown in if you are unsure, check out this Youtube clip)

Set 1

* 8 x 200m off 2 minutes. This means you start each rep every 2 minutes, regardless of how long you take to do the 200m. If you take 50 seconds, then you'll have 1:10 to rest.

  200m will take you the following time at these speeds:
  13kph: 55 seconds
  14kph: 52 seconds
  15kph: 48 seconds
  16kph: 45 seconds
  17kph: 42 seconds
  18kph: 40 seconds

* 5 minutes easy jog
* 4 x 400m off 4 minutes. Again, each piece will start every 4 minutes. So, if you take 1:30 to run 400m, you'll then get 2:30 to recover.

  400m will take you the following time at these speeds:
  13kph: 1:50
  14kph: 1:44
  15kph: 1:36
  16kph: 1:30
  17kph: 1:24
  18kph: 1:20

These four longer reps will be harder than the 200s, but both should be all about form, posture and economy. You should not be wrecked at the end of them.

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After each 400, you'll be breathing but if you've got the pace right, you should be able to run with good form and proper foot-strike through all four reps. If your form deteriorates at any point, then you're running too fast.

This session can be spiced up by running faster, increasing reps or by decreasing the rest period. I'd advise against lengthening the 400m until you're comfortable with performing up to 12 x 400m with impeccable form.

SESSION 3 – THE RECOVERY SESSION

I don't think there can be any question about this one. A treadmill has a little give and the softer surface results in less impact on the joints. There is no "How to" on this one, just a few tips:

* Run with good form and think about great posture and a nice quick turnover
* Use comfortable, cushioned shoes to further reduce the impact on your joints

Plus, you don't want to be that guy who must walk three miles back because your dodgy knee has flared up just at your furthest point from home.

BONUS SESSION – THE TEST

Ultra runners are a tough breed. But we shy away from certain sessions, like this one! But performing a regular test session - about every 6 to 8 weeks - is crucial to evaluate how your training is progressing.

Now, the longer the test the better, because a longer test will highlight strengths and weaknesses more appropriate to ultra running. But realistically we can't go and smash a 20 mile test every 6 weeks to see if our fitness is improving.

All it needs is a simple 30-minute test. Not only does running hard for 30 minutes mean you're purely testing your aerobic system, it's also long enough to see how your form is (or isn't) holding up.

If you're self-coached, a 30-minute test is also a fantastic way to set your training zones. If you only do this session once during your training for an event, your zones will remain the same throughout your training.

You should get fitter with training so a test is necessary not only to see improvement (which is great mentally) but it'll also ensure you keep your training zones current. It may also highlight a lack of improvement, in which case your training may need modifying.

HOW TO DO IT

It's best to be well-rested for this, so have a rest day before doing this session.

* Start with a 10 – 15-minute warm up and include some strides to get your legs firing.
* Run as hard as you can for 30 minutes. After 10 minutes, hit LAP on your watch. You'll then be able to see your average heart rate for the final 20-minutes of the test. We do this because we're less interested in the first 10 minutes as your heart rate will take a few minutes to rise, and will thus skew your average. Your average BPM over those 20 minutes is your Lactate Threshold Heart Rate (LTHR).

Once you have your average, there are plenty of online calculators you can use but this how to work your subsequent training zones. They'll be something like this (according to guru Joe Friel):

Zone 1: Less than 85% of LTHR
Zone 2: 85 – 89% of LTHR
Zone 3: 90 – 94% of LTHR
Zone 4: 95 – 99% of LTTHR
Zone 5a: 100 – 102% of LTHR
Zone 5b: 103 – 106% of LTHR
Zone 5c: More than 106% of LTHR

Those Zone 5 variations are obviously hard to keep within because the margins are small and are thus only really achievable on a treadmill when you can cancel out any variations of wind and gradient.

The benefit of doing this on the treadmill is that you can control the controllables and when you repeat the test you can be confident that regardless of weather, traffic and hills, the environment should be the same.

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