

Treadmill Training for Winter Fitness

You run different routes outdoors, so mix up your indoor routine as well. Vary the pace, incline and location of your treadmill workouts to keep them fresh.

With the weather taking a turn for the worse, more and more folks are turning to the treadmill as a safe (and warm) way to stay in shape and maintain their running fitness. While running on a treadmill can be repetitive or even a bit boring, the treadmill is a fantastic training tool when used properly.

Your winter training could prepare you for a great race if you take the time to really plan out your approach. Here are a couple of things to remember for those winter treadmill runs:

- Your heart rate values are different on a treadmill. Without external stimuli like hills, wind, heat, etc., your heart rate will be lower. It also makes a difference that the treadmill is pushing your legs instead of you pulling your body forward. As a result, at any given pace you'll notice that your HR is lower on a treadmill than on the open road. You can counteract this effect by manipulating the grade periodically to stimulate your aerobic system.

- Use a minimum of 1% grade. Running at 0% grade is similar to running on a slight downward slope. It's also very difficult to maintain solid run form on a flat treadmill, so kicking it up to a minimum of 1% means that you'll have a better chance of getting into your normal running style (foot strike, body lean, etc.). Note: As you increase the grade for hill workouts, be sure to cut back a bit on the speed. We all slow down a bit as we head uphill, but the treadmill won't unless you tell it to.

- Mix it up! Just as you have different weekly routes, so too should you have different treadmill locations and routines. I have a part of the gym where I run the hard workouts and a part where the fun/easy workouts are done. Also feel free to mix up the incline and pacing to stimulate different muscle groups. It's very easy to settle in and just watch the TV. You can't do this on race day, so don't do it during your key workouts!

- Consider cross training. Incorporating a basic weight routine is a great way to make sure your legs maintain their in-season strength through the winter. This doesn't have to be a bodybuilding routine; think squats, leg extensions, leg curls and calves for 15 to 20 repetitions each. Alternate a set of leg weights with an upper-body exercise (such as bench press or back extensions) to add variety. You should also consider other great "winter appropriate" exercise -- cross country skiing is a fantastic low-impact, highly aerobic workout.

- Get outside once a week, weather permitting. There is no substitute for the real thing. Even if you have to wait until midday on a weekend for the temperature to climb, do it. Just one outdoor session a week will help you maintain your "feel" for the road.