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The Runner's Guide to Strength Training

For runners, strength training doesn't have to mean bulking up. When you approach strength work strategically, it can translate into a reduced chance for encountering injuries and faster times when you toe the line. The thinking goes that the more healthy days of training you can log and the stronger you are at executing workouts, the faster you'll be.

To be sure, a runner should approach strength training in a different way than the typical muscled gym rat. Specific strength and resistance exercises combined with endurance training will help you achieve that lean physique most runners are looking for. When you employ a strength routine prior to and during your training season, you're likely to see your running performances improve by leaps and bounds.

Benefits of Strength Training

There's plenty of research to back up the contention that strength work and running should go hand in hand. Resistance training has even been shown to have the potential to significantly improve running economy, meaning that when you're stronger you're a more efficient runner.

For instance, one study that had a group of distance runners subscribe to a 10-week strength training program found that they improved their running economy by 4 percent. For a 4:00 hour marathoner, that could potentially mean knocking a whopping 10 minutes off his or her finishing time.

Another study divided a group of students into four different training programs: A running group, a strength circuit training group, a running and strength circuit training group, and a control group who didn't participate in any special workout program. Before and after the training, they tested things like running performance in a 4km time trial and a track test to determine VO2max.

At the end of 12 weeks they discovered that the group who did circuit strength training immediately after their running workouts significantly improved both their 4km times, as well as their VO2max. Since VO2max is the volume of oxygen you're able to consume while running at maximum intensity—and therefore one of the most important measures of fitness—this result proves to be important for runners.

Indeed, there is plenty of other evidence that illustrates how strength training can boost running times. One showed how strength work helps to improve both muscle power and 5km running times. Even when a portion of a runner's endurance training is replaced with strength training, running times have been shown to improve.

The other obvious benefit of strength training for runners is the fact that it helps bulletproof your body from encountering a whole host of common injuries. Strength work has consistently been cited as an important line of defense against everything from Achilles tendinitis.

Sample Strength Training Program

When it comes to strength training for runners, it is important to implement a mix of upper and lower body exercises, as well as core work. The focus of this type of training should not only be on strengthening the big running muscles, but also the smaller stabilizer muscles that often get neglected via the repetitive nature of running. Those lesser-known muscles are the ones that often pick up the slack when you begin to fatigue.



In a perfect world, a runner should beef up their strength work in the off-season and then reduce the load as they go into the season. For most harriers, 2-3 days a week of strength training is sufficient, but it is important to be strategic about when you schedule them. Generally having at least one day in between your strength days is important to allow your muscles to recover. Additionally, you should avoid any type of strength work prior to your running workouts. Either plan on doing it right after a run or later in the day after you've completed your endurance training.

Since many runners like to avoid the big weight machines, check out this sample program of bodyweight exercises that can be performed just about anywhere. Start with fewer sets and reps and increase them as you get stronger.

- **Center planks (3-4x30 seconds):** Get down into push-up position, but instead of bracing your upper body with your hands, lower your upper body down to support yourself with your forearms. Be sure to keep your backside down, so a straight line could be drawn from the top of your head down to your ankles. Hold that position for 30 seconds, take a break and try it again.
- **Side Planks (2-3x30 seconds on each side):** Similar to the center plank, simply turn to your right side and support your body with your right forearm and the side of your right foot with your left foot stacked on top. Hold for 30 seconds, take a break, and switch sides.
- **Walking lunges (2-3x10 on each side):** Stand with your feet shoulder width apart and take an exaggerated step forward with your right foot. In a fluid motion, carefully lower your body down as you make a 90-degree angle with your right leg to the floor. Raise your body up and do the same with the left side, taking 10 steps on each side.
- **Push-ups (2-3x20):** These can be done as either traditional push-ups or you can start with knee push-ups. Be sure to engage your core as you lower your body down with each push-up.
- **Donkey Kicks (2-3x10 on each side):** Get on all fours on the ground. In a controlled motion, kick your right leg back and upwards before returning it to its starting position. Repeat 10 times and switch legs.
- **Step Ups (10 on each side):** Stand with your feet together in front of an elevated platform or stair. Step onto the platform with your entire right foot and carefully raise your body up. Slowly step back down and return to the original position. Repeat 10 times with each leg.
- **Calf Raises (2-3x15 on each side):** Standing with your feet together, raise yourself onto your tip toes, hold for 2 seconds and lower back down. Repeat 15 times.
- **Medicine Ball Twists (2-3x20):** Sit in sit-up position and hold a medicine ball at the center of your body. Twist right and then left, 20 times on each side.
- **Standing Tricep Dumbbell Raises (2-3x15):** Stand with your feet shoulder width apart and your back straight. Holding a dumbbell with both hands, lift it above your head until your arms are straight up in the air and your palms are facing upwards. Lower the weight down behind your head and then bring it back up.
- **Side Leg Raises (2-3x10 on each side):** Lie down on the floor sideways with your right leg stacked on top of your left leg. Stabilizing your body with your palm on the floor, raise your right leg up so the side of your right foot faces the ceiling. Lower your leg back down and repeat 10 times on each side.
- **Bodyweight Squats (2-3x15):** With your feet shoulder width apart, lower your body downwards until your hips are below parallel with your knees. Keep your back straight and your toes behind your knees behind your toes. With your arms straight out in front, raise your body back up and repeat.
- **Bridge (2-3x10):** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor about shoulder width apart. Raise your backside up off the ground until a straight line could be drawn from your torso to your knees. Hold that position for 2 seconds, lower back down, and repeat.

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