

TRAIL RUNNING 101

by Diana Norcross

I stop running, rest my hands on my knees and watch my breaths come out in short white puffs. I am in the middle of Rocky Mountain National Park on a trail I've forgotten the name of, gazing across a snowy meadow at a dense grove of pine trees and, behind them, white craggy peaks jutting upwards into the clouds. I am completely alone.

I started running in 2008 when I was 48, after my husband and I moved to Boulder, CO, and we both succumbed to the outdoor fitness mania that infuses this city. We signed up for our first ever road race, the BolderBoulder, and began training for it. When we remembered. When the bathroom didn't need cleaning.

The next year we got serious and joined a running group, started doing hill repeats and 400m intervals, learned the difference between a tempo run and a steady run, what to eat and when, and the purpose of strides. I like strides. Strides are my favorite. Strides make me feel like I'm a kid again.

Over the following two years we continued with our running group, honed our race pace, shaved minutes off our race times, gained new PRs. Got fitter. Got faster. Got comfortable with the routine of waking, fueling, hydrating, running, recovering. All on the roads and bike paths of Boulder.

And then one of our coaches, who lives in Estes Park and holds training camps there, invited us up for the weekend. "We'll go trail running," Coach Terry said. Trail running? What's that? "It'll be fun," he added. My husband looked glum. "I'll be in San Diego that weekend," he said regretfully, then turned to me and brightened. "But you can go."

It is the third day of my trail running camp. It is the third time I have ever run on a trail, and as I lift my hands from my knees and slowly straighten my back I am struck by how quiet it is. Sure, four inches of new powder will deaden most sounds, but also there are no cars, no buses, no barking dogs. I can't hear any birds. There isn't even any wind. There is no movement of anything. Anywhere. It's-kind of-weird.

I stare at the silent grove of trees up ahead and recall the N.Y. Times Sunday crossword puzzle I completed yesterday with the help of our second coach, Coach Nancy. 84 down. Seven letters. The clue read, "Bear, vis-à-vis the

woods, e.g." Great, I muse. Like I need to be thinking about bears. Now.

"There are a few things to remember when you are out running trails," Coach Nancy told us yesterday during our info session. "First, trail running is about changing gears, not about speed like you roadies are used to." Everyone in the room smiled in recognition, and I readied my pen to list everything else she said. Walk when you need to. Watch where you're going, and try to see a little way ahead so you can anticipate where your feet will go. Plan to get dirty. At some point you'll probably fall--everybody falls. Also, everybody gets lost, so try to keep track of where you've been, of landmarks. Carry a map. Wear layers of clothing and be prepared for the weather to change. You may encounter wild animals, but it's unlikely; they're usually shy of people.

Yeah, but suppose it's April--springtime--and they're waking up hungry? Sweat trickles down my back. Right now my husband is completing his 55 minute easy run on a smooth, populated bike path that follows the curve of the Pacific. I've been running for 37 minutes in the middle of nowhere and I need to make a decision soon. I can't stand here all day, cooling off, tightening up. Denizen. That was the answer to 84 down. Denizen. A bear by any other name...

I arrived in Estes Park on Friday at 4:30pm. One hour later I was running on my first wilderness trail, something called a single track, rocky, rooty, winding uphill and down again. I was desperately trying to impress Coach Terry by not tripping and falling flat on my face, so I concentrated on my feet, avoiding the rocks and stepping high over the roots. I shifted my weight forward, to the balls of my feet. My arms broke free of their two-dimensional, back and forth motion at my sides, and lifted outwards at the elbows for balance. The plodding regularity of my cadence changed to a stutter step and my breathing, usually a precise echo of my cadence, began to rise and fall with the hills. I started to fly.

After the info session the next day we ran again, up sandy steps cut into a small mountain, around trees, through bushes and down again, never in a straight line, never on a smooth surface. As I flashed past, I caught the aroma of some budding tree, and then leapt over a pile of scat in the middle of the trail. Deer? Elk? At the bottom of another hill I bounded over a water-filled ditch and then charged up the other side, stopping at the top to admire the view. I couldn't help it. "Wa-HOOO," I called in

a high-pitched howl, thrilled when the mountains answered me.

Coach Terry signaled it was time to turn around and go back, and I thought it must be a mistake. We hadn't been out there that long. I looked at my watch and couldn't believe the amount of time that had passed without my counting, without measuring my pace, distance, my heart rate. Without my noticing.

I thought of all the workouts back home. It's true they produce satisfying race results, and running with the group is motivating. I've made some good friends. Plus the coaches really know their stuff. Ultimately, though, as I think about those workouts, I realize that the best thing about them is the moment when they're over and I can go home and have a shower and not think about running until the next training session.

It is so beautiful out here, so peaceful. Right now, in this place, I have the opportunity to exist outside of the boundaries of time and effort, to know what it's like to run just for the sheer joy of running. And I'm not really alone. Somewhere up ahead Coach Nancy is leading the faster runners. Somewhere behind Coach Terry has stopped to answer a question from a lingerer. The trail stretches in front of me, beckoning. I take off, my feet thudding softly in the snow. Leap over a half-hidden rock. Dodge a snow-laden branch. Probably I will turn around before I get to the grove of pine trees with its potential cache of hungry bears, but who knows? Maybe some day I'll be comfortable enough out here to consider myself a denizen of the woods. For now I'm just running like a kid and I can't help it.
"Wa-HOOOO!"