

The Importance of Cross Training

In the 70s people did one sport like running or playing tennis and “cross trainers” referred to the shoes Nike just released. In the 80s triathlon emerged on the scene and with it came the awareness of cross training. Cross training refers to training in different ways to improve overall performance. The benefits of cross training are countless, and some of the key benefits include conditioning different muscle groups, reducing stress placed on the body, jump starting metabolism and avoiding boredom.

The human body adapts amazingly well to stress, so soon your regular run will no longer require as much effort and will burn less calories. By adding a cross training cardio exercise to your routine, you will challenge the body in a new way, recruit different muscle groups, and burn more calories. By adding strength training to your routine, you can improve performance and efficiency. With increased strength, fewer muscle cells are needed for performance. Strength training also helps stimulate metabolism.

Athletes can only do so many intense workouts before the body starts breaking down. Many athletes are forced into cross training due to injury from repetitive strain or overuse. If cross training is used proactively, it enables athletes to maintain cardiovascular fitness and reduce injury propensity. Cross training limits the stress that occurs on a specific muscle group because different activities use muscles in different ways.

The psychological benefits of cross training include preventing boredom by adding variety and enhancing the ability to mentally tolerate tough workouts. Cross training also allows injured athletes to mentally prepare for an event. For example, if an athlete can mentally endure two hours of water running on their road to recovery, then they will have the mental edge for enduring their half marathon come race day.

Now the question is how to cross train? First, determine what you are lacking in your fitness, whether it is speed, recovery, flexibility, strength or core stability. Next, choose a cross training activity that emphasizes what you’re missing. Cross training activities include strength training, hiking, water running, swimming, cycling, elliptical trainer, yoga, and Pilates. Core training is encouraged and emphasized for everyone from exercise enthusiast to high caliber athlete.

When first integrating cross training, only add one new activity per week and limit the initial cross training workout to 30 minutes. Avoid over fatiguing muscles that will be needed for performance in your primary sport. If you are exhausted, it is better to rest to allow the body to recover from the stress of exercise. Exercise is stress and we need to structure it effectively to allow the body to get stronger on the rest days. Use the “20 minute rule” to avoid injuries: if after 20 minutes of exercise you are tired and cannot get warmed up, call it a day. Focus on gentle stretching, go back to sleep, or get a massage. It is good for you to take a break when our body needs it.

Use a cross training approach as an ideal way to develop a balanced fitness program and enjoy new activities along the way.

By Chris Chorak, PT