

XTERRA Auckland trail run series

<http://www.totalsport.co.nz/events/run/index.php>

Winter is here and that means its time for some off road running! We can leave the monotony of pounding the pavements and head out to the beautiful regional parks that we are so lucky to have around the greater Auckland area. With this new and exciting challenge come some new risks as well. Off road running can be a very different game to road running, placing many new stresses on the foot and leg. The trails are full of obstacles such as tree roots, rocks, corners, hills and they are much softer than the road. While many people may think that running on softer surfaces is better for injury prevention this is not always the case. While a soft surface decreases the impact going through the body it also makes the foot more unstable. This can lead to over use of the muscles as they work to keep the foot stable on the ground and allow for an efficient running style. It may also cause the foot to fall into a different position to normal which again may lead to injury.

The hills also add a new challenge for the body. Running up hills can cause us to change our running style as we shift our weight forward and land more on our toes to get up the slope. We also exert a lot more force on the body as the muscles work a lot harder than normal to get us up the hill. It takes a lot of force to move the body a very short way, increasing the stress on the surrounding tissues. Running up the monster hills that they have on the courses are tough on mind and body.

The uneven ground of the trails will also add another obstacle for the body. It is important to know where the foot and leg are in space and in relation to the ground. This is called proprioception. This requires good sensory input from the eyes and also the muscles around the area to work out where to place the foot for the next step. If this is not done effectively on the trails then you may find yourself rolling an ankle or spending more time on the ground than you want, as the rocks and tree roots get the better of you.

While off road running can be challenging for the body there are many things we can do to prepare ourselves. Slowly increasing the time and distance for the runs it will allow the body to adapt to the changes. If you normally run on the road it would be a good idea to get out to the bush a few times before the race to prepare yourself for racing. Having the correct footwear can also go a long way to making the transition to the bush much more comfortable. Off road running shoes are able to provide better traction and durability, but it is still important to get the right balance of support and cushioning. Recent studies have shown that insulating the foot through thick socks or over cushioned shoes may inhibit proprioception.

Here at Foot Traffic Sports Podiatry we can check for risk factors such as gait style, muscle strength and flexibility, foot biomechanics and give shoe advice. A consultation with one of our podiatrists can assess for these risks and address them before the season to help keep you injury free. If you are unlucky enough to develop a lower limb injury over the winter you can also come and see us and we will help you to return to the trails as soon as possible.

Matt Macleod is a Sports Podiatrist at Foot Traffic Sports Podiatry. He competes in off road running events and Ironman among other sports. Watch out for him on the trails during the Total Sport Series.