

Trail Training

With spring finally here many will now venture to the woods and mountains to enjoy the health benefits of fresh air and beautiful scenery. There are many places in Northern NJ alone to challenge both the novice and advanced hiker. When you add the thousands of acres in New York State you can see how one can hike every weekend for a year and not even scratch the surface of what's available in our own backyards. This column will focus on training tips that will significantly improve your physical capacity to hike and enjoy the great outdoors.

Endurance is the first and most obvious component. Keep in mind when hiking; most of your walking is performed while going up hill. A simple way to increase your endurance in the gym is to raise your grade level intensity while on the treadmill. A nice easy way to do this is to find a comfortable pace, walking not running, on the treadmill that is challenging but still allows you to talk and breathe comfortably. Every two minutes increase your grade level by two increments until you have brought the treadmill to the highest grade. Two minutes will allow enough time for the body to get used to that level before you ramp it up. When you reach the highest grade, hold that level for 5 minutes, and then bring the grade down again in two-minute increments.

Your endurance level best improves by increasing the amount of time you can stay at the highest grade. Your goal should be to sustain the highest grade for 20-25 minutes before coming down again. You can challenge yourself further by doing this with a weighted backpack strapped to you. This may feel foolish in the gym but I see it all the time for people training for serious hikes.

Another component to preparing for the great outdoors is weight training especially your legs your abdominals, and your upper and lower back. Any combination of leg machines will do. As you hike you want your legs not only capable of endurance, but you want them strong to protect the stability of your joints as you walk. Your upper back, abdominals, and lower back are very important, as they will be the primary muscles supporting you as you wear your backpack.

The lower back is simply strengthened by lying on your stomach with your hands reached out in front of you and alternating lifting your right arm, left leg and vice versa. Basic crunches will help strengthen your abdominals, and the upright row machine will do wonders for strengthening your upper back or rhomboids. For correct mechanical form when performing these exercises, consult with a trainer in the gym.

The final and by far the most overlooked component in preparing for hikes is balance and coordination. This is generally recognized as improving your

body's proprioceptive responses. In most gyms you may see lying in the corner some bizarre looking piece of wood with wheels or some kind of a bar underneath it, and watch as people desperately hold onto their balance while trying to stand on it. Those of you who remember learning how to skateboard, ski, roller blade, or surf for the first time know exactly what I'm talking about.

There exist a wide variety of such devices including stabilizing cushions and Swiss balls. I strongly encourage you to try and master each one of them. This is exactly the kind of training that effectively recruits the stabilizing muscle fibers required to sustain your balance while walking on slippery and uncertain terrain. Working with these devices can make the difference between falling down hard if you trip or instantly recovering your balance and walking on. Once you have somewhat mastered these devices, then challenge yourself further and try it with a weighted backpack on your back. Training smart in the gym will greatly enhance the time you spend hiking in the great outdoors. See you on the trails.