



Training



Strength Training

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RUNNERS NEED TO IMPROVE THEIR SPEED, and one of the best ways to do that is with strength training, so claims Cathy Vasto, a three-time Olympic Trials qualifier from Jacksonville, Florida. "The benefits are amazing," says Vasto.

Look at Vasto, and you would not mistake her for a bodybuilder, yet she has bench-pressed 180 pounds. She uses her strength to compliment her speed. "Strength helps at the end of a race when your form starts deteriorating," advises Vasto. "The faster you can move your arms at the end, the faster you can move your legs and the higher you can lift your knees, propelling yourself toward the finish line."

Vasto recommends:

Go High/Low: If you're training for a running race, you don't want to bulk up. Extra weight will slow you down. To avoid putting on pounds, keep the pounds of the weights you lift low and the repetitions high. Vasto recommends lifting 50 to 60 percent of the maximum weight you can lift in a set of 12 repetitions. Two sets of 12 work well for most lifts. For maximum benefits, without wasting a lot of time, do your strength training two or three times a week, after you run, not before.

Look Good Lifting: Keep your form—not for vanity, but to prevent injury. Think 90-degrees. Most seated lifts work best if your body parts are at right angles: legs straight, feet flat against the floor, trunk erect, chin up, eyes forward. Practice the pelvic tilt where you press your torso back against the chair, or floor, to keep your back from slumping. "Good form works in lifting as much as it does in running," says Vasto.

Breathe Right: The worst mistake you can make while lifting is to hold your breath. That simply tightens the muscles that you want to keep loose. Inhale while you prepare to lift the weight, then exhale while lifting it, inhaling again while lowering it. "The best way to breathe is naturally," says Vasto, "so that you're not even aware you're doing it."

Rest by Stretching: When moving from exercise to exercise, don't rush and don't waste time chit-chatting with friends. Stay focused on your workout by stretching in between. "It's very important while strength training to have a stretching routine," warns Vasto. "You don't want to lose your flexibility, which can happen if you forget to stretch. Eccentric contractions (which occur when lowering the weights) actually can tighten the muscles." Stretching while strength training provides a double dose of conditioning in a minimum of time.

Finally, the key to the exercises presented below is to go slow and remain in control. "You're not trying to see how fast you can get in and out of the weight room," says Vasto. "You're trying to win your race on the road." Vasto's six spectacular strength exercises follow.

1. Bench Press

This is a basic lift, used by all bodybuilders, but you can use it to build strength and speed. Lie on your back on a bench (although you can also use the floor). For weight, use a barbell or dumbbells. Keep your back flat, your knees bent. Your palms should be facing forward, your hands should be equal distant and over your shoulders. Lift the bar or dumbbells straight up (think 90-degrees) and lower slowly. Do two sets of 12 reps. For an alternate workout without weights, do simple push-ups. (Strengthens the pectorals, deltoids, triceps and biceps.)

2. Rowing

Gripping dumbbells, sit on the edge of a bench or firm chair. (Remember to keep your back straight.) Hold the dumbbells with your arms extended, palms facing inward against your knees. Raise the dumbbells to just opposite your chest, then return to the starting position. Do two sets of 12 reps. You can also do this exercise while standing, keeping your knees bent at a 45-degree angle and your torso bent forward. Another option is to use a single weight gripped in both hands and bring it up to your chest. (Strengthens the rhomboids.)

3. Overhead Pull

"This is an easy exercise," says Vasto. "You can do it with a 16-ounce can of soup, a 5-pound bag of flour, or a water bottle if you don't have a dumbbell. The angle multiplies the effect of even light weights." Take the object and hold it overhead, elbows forward, back straight, knees slightly bent to take the pressure off your back. (You can also do this exercise while seated.) Lower the weight behind your head toward the back of your neck, then return to the starting position. Do two sets of 12 reps. (Strengthens the triceps.)

4. The Curl

Sit in a chair, feet flat on the floor, stomach in, shoulders back, head up. Your elbows should be against your waist above your hips, your palms up holding the weights. (Remember what we said about 90-degree angles.) Raise the weights to your shoulders, lowering slowly. Do two sets of 12 reps. This exercise can also be done standing up. (Strengthens the biceps.)

5. The Crunch

Although Vasto once did as many as 400 sit-ups a day, she recommends crunches to her clients, because it isolates the abdominal muscles. "The abs are your core of balance," says Vasto. "They support your upper body, important at the end of a race." (A crunch is a sit-up where you stop after raising your shoulders off the floor.) In the starting position, your back should be flat against the floor, your head up, eyes on the ceiling, hands gripping the back of your neck, your knees relaxed and bent, feet on the floor. Raise only to the point where you feel your stomach muscles tightening, hold then release, returning your back to the floor. Vasto recommends starting with 3 sets of 15 and working up to 4 sets of 20. A variation is to tilt sideways, pointing toward your "love handles," on alternate lifts. (Strengthens the abdominal muscles, referred to as the "abs." The love-handle variation strengthens the oblique muscles.)

6. The Lunge

The five previous exercises strengthen the upper body, often neglected by runners. The lunge will help strengthen several of the muscles of the lower body. Start this exercise with your feet shoulder-width apart. If you use a barbell, it should rest across your shoulders and behind your neck. If using dumbbells, hold them beside your thighs. Take a long step forward with one leg and descend to a low position, then rise. Bring the lead leg back and repeat with the other leg forward. Form is very important in doing this exercise to avoid injury. "Again, think 90-degrees," warns Vasto. In the forward position, your knee should be over your feet, forming a 90-degree angle. Allowing your forward knee to move too far ahead of the ankle causes unnecessary stress. Similarly, the back knee should not touch the ground. The back lower leg should be parallel to the ground, forming still another 90-degree angle. (Strengthens many of the muscles of the legs, including the quadriceps, hamstrings, gluteals and erector spinae.)

Strength is important, says Vasto, not only to improve your speed for running races, but it will make you feel good and look good and improve the quality of your life, throughout your lifetime.



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