

Off-Road Training: Sparing Your Legs*

From [Running Tough](#) by [Michael Sandrock](#)

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Europeans often do their hard training on grass to decrease the stress on their legs. Running on a soft surface not only can save your legs and prevent injuries; it also makes the workouts more enjoyable. In addition, because these workouts are not as structured as those on the track, some runners say they do not have the mental stress of having to hit a certain time goal during an interval session.

Too much running on hard surfaces can make you susceptible to overuse injuries, those that occur in the knees, hips, and ankles. That is one reason grass running is popular in Europe. Another is that, until recently at least, tartan and all-weather tracks have been few and far between in Great Britain and other countries. It is not uncommon for Europeans to have to travel 30 miles, one way, to run on the track (which sometimes, as in New Zealand and Australia, are made of grass). That means runners are more apt to go to a park or field for their workouts.

It is different in the United States. Here, nearly every town with a high school has a track, and there are often several tracks in a runner's neighborhood to choose from. Why then should you do grass training? The reason is simple - these runs can give you a low-impact, yet still high-quality workout while strengthening your legs. And do not use the excuse that there is no grass to train on near your home or that finding grass is too inconvenient. You can always find a park with a strip of grass around the perimeter.

English runner Paul Davis-Hale was the first to point out to me the benefits of grass running. I recall going on a 10-mile run with Paul; I ran on the sidewalks while he ran across every lawn down the block. As soon as we passed a small park, he suggested we continue our run there. So we did, on the soft grass, going round and round for another hour while ducking beneath sprinklers.

The best runners, no matter what their countries of origin, have an innate sense of what they need to do and when to do it. Frank Shorter is a good example of this. He gravitated toward running on grass while preparing for his Olympic marathon gold medal. Shorter was fast enough to set the U.S. 10,000-meter record in the qualifying round of the Munich Olympic Games, then break the record in the final, where he clocked 27:49 to finish fifth, behind Lasse Viren.

Yet one of Shorter's favorite workouts while preparing for the Olympics was not on the track or the roads, but on a rough grass field about 500 meters around. Intramural flag football games would be going on in the center of the field while Shorter and his training partners did their workouts along its outer edge, dodging Frisbees and footballs.

It is unfortunate that there is not a big cross country season in the United States, because that would, perhaps, increase the popularity of grass running. Cross

country running in Europe, as some of you might know, is a different animal than its cousin in the United States. European-style cross country is done over hills and through tall grass and mud. U.S. cross country runners often race on manicured golf courses, or even on roads part of the way! If we had real mud-and-guts cross country, perhaps we would be more apt to go out and train on the grass.

Running over grass will feel awkward at first. The uneven, thicker surface will feel a bit like running through snow. However, if you make grass running a part of your regular training regime, you will soon learn to increase your knee lift and get more pushoff with each stride, while likely decreasing the risk of injury. As I will continually mention in this book, longevity is the key to success in long-distance running, no matter what your level or your goal. And what will increase the longevity of your running? Making your training enjoyable, which grass running in a nice setting can do.

On your next run, try a little experiment. Jog over to your local park and run some strides on a concrete sidewalk. Then run some strides on the grass. Feel the difference? Now multiply that by several years and hundreds or even thousands of miles. Imagine the different stress levels your legs experience on each surface.

It is easy to put some European-style grass running into your training regime. These runs can be done any time of the year, both as recovery runs and as hard sessions (if you are training for a track race, of course, you will need to spend time on the track doing interval sessions). Running speedwork on the grass means you can often avoid the curves found on the track, and it will help you develop a sense of pace.

Head over to the best grass park you can find, and run your workout by time, not distance. Try it; like the Europeans, you might just find that it adds freshness to both your training and your legs.

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