

# KICK SOME GRASS

To build speed and strength, sometimes you need to get off the track.

<http://www.runnersworld.com/article/0,7120,s6-238-263--6142-0,00.html>

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PUBLISHED 01/30/2004

On a July evening in Stockholm almost 19 years ago, Bruce Bickford, a 28-year-old graduate of Northeastern University, faced one of the most competitive 10,000-meter fields ever assembled. Bickford took the race lead with only five laps to go, but he knew 10,000-meter world-record holder Fernando Mamede from Portugal and Olympic 10,000-meter champion Alberto Cova from Italy weren't going to concede without a fight.

Bickford had posted an impressive personal record of 13:13.49 for 5000 meters less than a week before, but he just didn't have the stinging, last-lap sprint of Mamede or Cova. Bickford's strength was his strength. Strength he developed through consistent 110-plus mile weeks. Strength he also developed by doing many of his interval workouts on grass.

Why run on grass when a track offers stable footing and an accurate measure of distance? Actually, those may be two of the most compelling reasons not to always run on a track.

## Grass versus Track

When you run on a paved trail or a track, the hard surface, coupled with the sure footing, combine to give you an effective push-off with every stride.

The result: fast times. Remember some of those lightning-fast times posted at Atlanta's Summer Olympics in 1996? They were run on the thinnest mondo tracks with the highest durometer readings (a measure of hardness) that the rule books would allow.

Much of the energy you exert when you run on grass, however, goes right into the earth instead of rebounding back into your feet and lower legs. Just as you have to bounce a basketball with much greater force on grass than on pavement to elicit an equal rebound, when you run on grass your cardiovascular system works harder than it does when you run on a track. Yes, this means that intervals run on grass will be slower than those run on a track. But it also means you'll get stronger from running an occasional workout on grass, as you force your body to work harder to overcome the slower surface.

The benefits of grass workouts don't end there. Here are three more:

**Greater Stability.** Since grass surfaces are more unstable than a track, you'll work your stabilizer muscles, such as the internal and external obliques in your torso, harder when you run on grass. This will make you a more solid runner.

**Fewer Injuries.** The softer surface of grass means less stress on your feet and lower legs, which can reduce your risk of stress fractures or shinsplints.

**More Freedom.** Moving your workout from the track to grass can take away the pressure you might feel to hit specific times for specific distances. Instead, you run hard for a predetermined amount of time rather than for a given distance. This can be very freeing, especially on days when you know you'll have trouble hitting your interval times on a track. Simply move your workout to the grass and avoid getting down on yourself.

One of Bickford's bread-and-butter workouts was a simple ladder progression you can try in any grassy park or field. First you run up the ladder: 2 x 3 minutes hard effort, 1 x 4 minutes,

1 x 5 minutes, 1 x 6 minutes. Then back down: 1 x 5 minutes, 1 x 4 minutes, 2 x 3 minutes. Finally add a couple of 60-second bursts at the very bottom of the ladder. Take no more than 3-minute recoveries between your hard efforts.

With lots of similar grass workouts in his back pocket, Bickford had the race of his life that night in Stockholm. Close to 30,000 rabid track fans hooted and hollered and banged on the advertising placards ringing the track as Bickford fended off the ferocious final kicks of the world-record holder and the Olympic champion. Over the last mile of the race, Bickford pulled away to win by 3 seconds, in a time of 27:37.17--still the No. 7 all-time run by an American. In the end, it was strength that conquered speed.

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