

# UPHILLS NO SWEAT IF YOU THINK YOU CAN

By DON SIKORSKI  
*Special to the Bulletin*

It's a struggling runner's worst nightmare. Mid-way through a race, fatigue begins to set in, the competition intensifies, and looking ahead, the surface begins to rise. Running uphill is a painful experience, but it also challenges your opponent. Sometimes an uphill stretch can either make or break a race. Strength runners tend to favor challenging courses that feature uphill climbs, a great equalizer against a more fleet-footed opponent. For the runner, the value is in the preparation.

Norwich Free Academy Cross-Country Coach Chad Johnson understands the value of hill training in preparation for races on such courses. A former two-time state XC champion for the Wildcats, Johnson believes there is value in hill training beyond just the cross-country season. "I think hills are an integral part of a training routine, whether it is for cross country, road racing, or track," said Johnson. "Specificity is an important part of training. If you were a body builder, and you wanted to build big biceps, you wouldn't do leg lifts. The same goes for running. If you want to be a good hill runner, you've got to perform hill training."

Johnson's approach is a logical one, and there are a number of ways that a runner can conduct specific hill workouts into their training regime. Johnson's team conducts longer, slower hill repeats at the beginning of the season, aiming to run 4-6 intervals up a moderate grade of 2 to 3 minutes in duration. Later in the season, his runners move to a shorter, steeper hill, decreasing the repeat time to 50-70 seconds each yet running more repeats (8-10). "My runners have come to both love and fear hills at the same time," said Johnson of the physical demands of these workouts.

Johnson also preaches the benefits of proper running form on uphills. "Physically, hills develop the quadriceps and anterior tibialis (shin) muscles," said Johnson. "They force the athlete to get up on the balls of their feet. This is especially valuable to sprinters and middle distance runners. Johnson also feels that strong uphill running is more than physical. "Mentally, hills can be an important part of the race. If the runner has trained on hills, they are not intimidated by the sight of an upcoming hill in a race and will not give up so easily." Johnson also offers these tips for runners looking to improve their ability to run well on uphills. "Drive your knees and focus on pushing off the balls of their feet quickly without 'sinking' into your stride. Keep your arms low and 'punch the hill'. Most importantly, never look up," advises Johnson. "Not only does it defeat you mentally, but it is next to impossible to keep your stomach tight and hips forward while looking up a steep hill."

As far as who some of the best hills runners that Johnson has raced against, he mentions Tim Smith and Wayne Jacob as two examples of runners that ran strong on hilly courses. Johnson also cites former Lyman Memorial standout and fellow state champion Eric Blake as one of the best hill runners he has competed against. Blake, a former Olympic Trials Marathon qualifier who will be racing the Chicago Marathon on October 7<sup>th</sup>, offers three basic tips to runners who want to improve their ability to run uphill. "Divide the hill," said Blake. "Break a climb into sections. Pick a tree or sign and run to it. Shift your eye to the next spot. Soon, you'll be at the top." Blake advises that the next step is to shorten the hill. "Like a cyclist switching to an easier gear, shorten and quicken your stride when climbing," says Blake. "Try to maintain the same rapid turnover to the top." Finally, conquer the hill. "If there are few hills where you live, do a treadmill run with hills that match the race's climbs." Blake recommends a grade of 4% for gradual climbs and up to 8% for steeper grades. "This creates the mindset for uphill running".

As a former Mount Washington Road Race champion, Blake is considered by many to be the state's best uphill runner. Yet he is quick to credit others that excel at such disciplines. "The best hill runner I have ever seen is Jonathan Wyatt from New Zealand," recalls Blake. "He is a great all around runner and has gone to the Olympics multiple times". Wyatt holds the current Mount Washington record of 56:41 (Blake finished 4<sup>th</sup> that year).

Chadwick Brown takes a much less scientific approach to hill training, yet it works for him. The 32 year-old Waterford resident logs the majority of his mileage on trails, with plenty of hills along the way. "95% of the running I do is off-road," explains Brown of his training along power line trails in the woods of Montville and Waterford. "I enjoy it much more than pounding out mileage on the roads." Although Brown claims to do little in the way of formal hill training, the challenge of the rugged courses he trains on lends themselves to improved strength. "The trails go uphill, downhill, uphill constantly," said Brown. Sometimes I'll run 6 repeats of 75 to 80 seconds uphill in the woods or work on running hard on an uphill, but really, it's just the running on the trails that seems to work and helps me avoid injury."

Finally, Norwich's Carolyn Fusaro offers a much simpler mental trick to overcome the challenge of uphill running. "I'm like 'The Little Engine That Could'," joked Fusaro, who has a young daughter and is expecting a second child this winter. "I say, 'I think I can, I think I can.'" While Nursery Rhymes may help, Fusaro realizes that she still needs to do plenty of uphill running to prepare to race on hilly courses. "I used to start out with a formal (hill training) plan in the spring," said Fusaro of her approach. "My high school coach used to tell us to push 'up and over' the hill. But I run a lot of hilly courses in training and I don't min running uphills as all." Her husband Mike, also a long-time distance runner, offers this advice: "Charge the hills and pay cash for the rest". No matter how you approach uphill running, the consensus is that in order to race well uphill, a runner must train on uphills. Try this approach, plus any of these mental tricks, to conquer the uphills in your next race.

**Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at [www.moheganstriders.org](http://www.moheganstriders.org). He can also be reached by e-mail at [kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net).**