Deep Water Running

If you think pool running is useless and won't do much for your fitness, you've probably never tried it. That's too bad, because it's hands-down the best cross-training activity for runners. Here are the two big reasons you should try pool running:

To boost fitness: "Without exaggeration, every single one of the runners who takes my pool-running classes gets faster on the roads," says coach Doug Stern, who conducts classes for the New York City Road Runners Club. And they do so without increasing their injury risk one bit, as pool running is completely non-impact (you don't touch the bottom).

To recover from injury: Pool running is the best cross-training exercise for runners because it's running--in a pool. A whole host of injuries--shinsplints, stress fractures, and plantar fasciitis among them--won't keep you from pool running. Therefore, you won't lose fitness during your healing period.

For years, world-class runners have used pool running to maintain their conditioning when they can't run. Marathon world record holder Khalid Khannouchi ran in the pool to stay in shape when a foot injury prevented him from doing his normal training. Janis Klecker, a 1992 Olympic marathoner, has done twice-a-week pool runs for years. "If I'm too tired to run," says the dentist and mother of six, "I jump in the pool. It always reenergizes me."

Water running in the deep end of the pool is a great alternative workout for run training. One of the primary reasons is that an athlete can continue with training even if they have an injury that will not allow them to run on a hard surface. Injuries such as Achilles tendonitis, ankle sprains, soreness in the knees, lower back pain, and stress fractures and worsened with impact, but water running allows the same motion without the impact. I also schedule water-running workouts as recovery workouts after a long run or bike session. Another benefit to water running is that an athlete can do interval workouts in the pool that could be substituted for road intervals or track work. Many athletes get injured doing intense interval running on a hard surface. If done in a structured manner, the benefits of an interval workout in the pool can come close to that of an interval workout on land.

Cadence is a great way to monitor your workout in the pool. About 76 to 80 revolutions per minute with each leg will help duplicate land running. On land the recommended cadence is about 88 to 90 rpm, but due to water's resistance, the equivalent in the water is about 10 rpm less. I recommend using a vest as this will help with proper form while completing the workout.

I also have the athlete wear a heart rate monitor. After warming up, choose the correct heart rate zone for the type of workout scheduled. Keep in mind that due to buoyancy heart rate is about 10 to 15 beats per minute lower than it would be on land for same effort.

I use two workouts with my athletes. The steady-state workout consists of a 10 minute warm-up, then anywhere from five minutes to 10 minutes of steady running. I like to schedule at least three to four of these long, steady intervals with one minute easy between each.

The other workout I like to use is a tempo interval workout. After a 10-minute warm-up, start out with a set of 10 intervals of one hard minute (high HR) with 30 seconds easy between them. The next set is five intervals of two hard minutes with 30 seconds easy between them. Then a last set of three intervals of three minutes each, and again, 30 seconds easy after each. Be sure to cool down for 10 minutes.

If you can get into a pool where there is some music or find a training partner to do these workouts with you, water running can actually be fun besides an alternative to running on the road. When the workout is over you will know you did some good hard work in the pool and you will see some positive fitness results. A few tips from veteran water runners:

- Go with friends. Organize a group to run at the pool together. Time will pass more quickly when you have company.
- Take the tunes. If the pool doesn't have a PA system with music on, bring a waterproof iPod.
- Run for time. Commit to spend as much time in the water as you'd spend on a normal run. Just start your watch when you jump in, and get out after a predetermined time.
- Do regular running workouts. Vary the pace, the tempo, the length of time. Simulate a favorite running workout. Some type of interval workout, whereby you're constantly changing speeds, works best.
- Play games. Follow the leader is fun. Or bring a tennis ball, beach ball, or football and pass it around as you run.
- Or try a few minutes of running with your fingers out of the water.