How to Run Up Steep Trails
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Trail runners can learn a valuable lesson from mountain bikers when it comes to climbing: Optimize efficiency by “downshift” for better traction and a more comfortable spin. When the hills get steep, top trail runners alter their stride for the use of small steps and many ultra-distance trail runners find it more efficient to alternate between walking and running, using a long, swinging stride, when they aren’t running.

1. Use a lower gear when you find yourself struggling with a high heart rate or over-exerting the muscles in your legs. A shorter stride enables you to remain relatively light on your feet, allowing for easier clearance of barriers and capricious direction changes to avoid rocks, roots and other obstacles.

2. Engage in power hiking, especially when you are already somewhat spent, the grade is particularly steep, the footing is iffy, or at high altitude. This is often more efficient and even faster than running, giving your heart and lungs a break.

3. Shift from running uphill to walking in a fast, swinging style smoothly, keeping your heart rate steady. Keep in mind, that it is best to deploy a “steady forward progress” strategy until you see the top of a climb when, if you feel strong, you can pick up your cadence and lengthen your stride.

4. Think about your posture. An upright stance is key because it affects breathing, digestion and lower back pain. By staying in an erect position, you will improve traction and push-off while relieving back strain that can be caused by leaning too far forward.

5. Keep your trunk straight to allow for a fuller range of motion in your hip flexors and to open your breathing passages without compressing your digestive tract — which can lead to an upset stomach, especially on longer runs.

6. Look up! Staring at the trail directly beneath your feet can reduce the important flow of oxygen, so be sure to focus uphill.
7. Concentrate on leg motion, and visualize your steady breaths forcing oxygen to the back of your legs, glutes, hamstrings and calves. A corresponding steady arm swing will help you power up the hills and maintain forward momentum.

8. Avoid favoring one leg, especially when leaping up big steps. This can result in disproportionate strength between the legs and a need to stutter-step to time push-offs for the power leg. Alternate using both legs for planting and pushing off in order to remain equally balanced.

All of these tactics for better uphill running should be practiced and, if you don’t live near trails that have climbs, you can apply most of these tips to stairs or stadiums, which are reasonable substitutes for hills. During your hill running, don’t forget the mental aspects. Remember to focus on rhythm, tempo, momentum, and form to maintain steady movement.

For more information, go to: www.trailrunner.com and www.runningtimes.com