GROWTH SPORTS: TRAIL RUNNING

Faced with the beauty of isolated mountain and forest tracks, some outdoors enthusiasts have always felt the strong desire to run for all their worth. In the 1990s, this phenomenon developed into the discipline we now call trail running, the popularity of which, among enthusiasts and brands supplying footwear, apparel and equipment, has continued to grow.

Off-road rules



Trail runners find stunning scenery and tough terrain an attractive combination.
Icebreaker

Trail running, the discipline of off-road running, is big business. Footwear brands and their specialist suppliers love trail running, presumably because runners who are intent on racing each other over distances of up to 50 kilometres on mountain trails, forest tracks, moorlands and rocks, generally need good shoes, and because even very good shoes will have a relatively short lifespan in such terrain.

Sole manufacturer Vibram, for example, has emphasised that its G-Speed sole is made from a compound it calls MultiTrek, which it contends offers the ideal level of grip for athletes who prefer muddy and rocky terrain. Swiss outdoor footwear brand Mammut has used another Vibram sole, the Reptilia, in its Claw GTX Shoe. It lists trail running (along with activities such as Nordic walking) among the activities to which the footwear is especially suited.

Salomon, Nike, The North Face, Montbell, Icebreaker, Haglöfs, Marmot, Pearl Izumi and GoLite are all brands that offer shirts, bottoms and jackets for trail runners and, on the equipment side, there are plenty of specialist products on the market now. One of these, the X-Trail headlamp, made by Swedish company Silva, won the prize in the electronics category of the ispo Outdoor awards for 2010. All of these companies must be greatly encouraged by recent growth.

Numbers game

For 1997, the first full year for which details are available, the American Trail Running Association (ATRA) acknowledges that 64 official events were scheduled to take place, including two outside the US; only 37 of these events submitted participant information. The combined number of runners for those 37 races was 11,941. Two years later, the number of events providing information was 137, with 50,222 people taking part. By 2009, the number of events (the association defines them as races with confirmed dates) had grown to 1,923. Of these, 893 submitted participant numbers, a total of 230,340. So focusing only on the races that sent runner details to the association, we can see growth in the period between 1999 and 2009 of 650% in the number of relevant trailrunning events and of 450% in the number of enthusiasts taking part.

ATRA executive director, Nancy Hobbs, says she believes these figures give a better indication of the increase in the popularity of this activity than membership of her organisation. She explains that membership numbers have stayed "fairly steady" for the past three years but says that is because many trail runners, while looking at the association's website to view the calendar of events, for example, are simply not the 'joining' type. The huge growth in participant numbers tells a far more detailed story, in her opinion. "It's tough to say in just a few sentences why trail running is so popular now," she continues. "It stems perhaps from the challenges inherent in the sport—the terrain, elevation changes, locations and so on. The vistas are scenic, the solitude is enjoyable, as is getting to places one might otherwise not visit or see. Runners find these aspects appealing, for sure."

This appeal is international. There are spectacular races on every continent, including the established ice marathon events at the North and South poles, and the terrain ranges from high mountains (WL Gore sponsors events in both the Rockies and the Alps) to deserts, including the Marathon des Sables in the Moroccan stretch of the Sahara and the Kalahari Augrabies Extreme Marathon, a seven-day, 250 kilometre run through the Kalahari Desert, which supporters and enthusiasts have labelled "the Big Daddy of South African trail running since 2000". At a less extreme level, runners everywhere brave all kinds of weather to indulge their passion for trail running over a variety of distances (starting at 5,000 metres) almost every weekend of the year.

Quality of experience

For its part, the American ATRA was formed in mid-1996 as a Colorado not for profit corporation to serve the trail and mountain running community. Its mission is to represent and promote trail and mountain running, and it's clearly made an excellent job of doing this if the growth figures are anything to go by.



2010 ispo Outdoor awards winner the X-Trail headlamp, made by Swedish company Silva, is one of a growing number of products aimed specifically at trail runners.

ispo

However, the association is now facing a degree of questioning from what we might call trail running purists, some of whom appear to believe there may have been too much growth too quickly. The current ATRA position is that although most runners consider trail runs to be strictly an off-road and primarily a mountain experience, "our definition of trail runs is fairly broad-based to include not only mountain singletrack trails but to encompass paved pathways in rural and urban areas". It points out that many out-of-the-way places in the mountains have jeep or four-wheel drive access.

For instance, the Imogene Pass Trail Race, held each September in Colorado, is run almost completely on a jeep road with a start and finish on paved roads which flank the pass from Ouray to Telluride in the San Juan Mountains. The association insists that the event still offers a genuine "trail experience" and that it is the quality of experience that best defines what is and what is not trail running. Certainly, the feedback it has received from participants concentrates on the scenery and the tests they face from the terrain and the changing weather conditions along the route.

There is even an increasing number of trail runs appearing in urban areas such as the multiuse American River Trail in Sacramento (which cyclists use to commute to and from California's state capital) and the waterfront area in Chicago. According to ATRA, federal grants have become available in recent years to allow more communities across the US to build trails in their cities or add to existing trail systems. Plenty of people love this idea as it means no longer having to drive long distances "to achieve the trail runner's experience", as the association puts it, previously on offer only in the mountains and other out-of-the-way places.

The purists might not like it, but plenty of enthusiastic trail runners clearly do.