

Stage races

Covering 100km in one go has its own challenges, but it's a whole different ball-game when you have to run that 100km really fast, even if over three days.

COACH NEVILLE outlines your training, gear, and strategy for multi-day events.

If running in the mountains for a day is your idea of bliss, then a stage race can be heaven... or hell, depending on how well you have trained and on how much attention you have given to gear, race strategy, nutrition, hydration, and recovery.

Stage races have mushroomed, offering a wide range of options, usually over two to three days (and longer) and traverse some of the most spectacular areas in the country.

But trying a stage race and it can quickly change from heaven to hell with forlorn runners strewn across the landscape or lying prostrate in the medical tent.

Build in block training

The main difference to your training is that you need to include two to three block weekends where you do slow back to back long runs to simulate race conditions.

These block weekends should ideally be spaced two to three weeks apart with the last block being three to four weeks before the stage race. For most runners, the longest training run need not equal the distance of the longest day. For instance, if the longest day is 30km then your longest run would be about 26km. Competitive runners going for podium though would run further than this distance as they plan to race for all three days.

Many stage races have huge climbs such as the 6km monsters on the Golden Gate Challenge. The best is to power walk these and conserve energy.

Never fight the mountain, but flow with it. If you can, find a steep climb or stairs to practice power walking in training.

Below is a block training plan for the eight weeks before a three-day stage race. You should already be able to run 20km comfortably.

	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
Week 1	Rest or light	24km	8-12km or rest
Week 2	Rest or light	26km	20km
Week 3	Rest or light	28km	12-15km or rest
Week 4	Rest or light	28km	24km
Week 5	Rest or light	30km	15-18km or rest
Week 6	26km	30km	20km
Week 7	Rest or light	24km	8-12km or rest
Week 8	Rest or light	12km easy	8km easy or rest

Essential gear

Good gear can mean the difference between having fun on the trails or having a miserable outing. And in a worst-case scenario, good gear will keep you alive when the weather turns bad or you are lost.

Your checklist could include a rain jacket, base layer, gloves, sunglasses, buff, cap, GPS watch, and a light-weight medical aid kit, along with these necessities:

Anti-chafe

Something often overlooked is a good anti-chafe cream, especially on trails with river crossings where feet remain wet. Popular choices amongst my runners are Blue Steel and Squirt, which are available at cycling shops.

Rub the cream on possible chafe points such as between your toes.

Socks

In the same vein, good trail socks are your first defence against chafing and blisters. If you are looking for something different you can try Rocket

trail socks made from bamboo fibre which prevent callouses, while some runners swear by Injinji toe socks.

Trail shoes

Don't try running a stage race in road shoes! Trail shoes provide

superior grip in all conditions and reduce your chances of rolling an ankle.

Most trails in South Africa are hard and rocky, and while one would think a shoe with big lugs underneath would provide better grip, this is not the case for most of our hard-packed trails.

A shoe such as the Salomon Speedcross with its big lugs is designed for soft terrain where the lugs can sink into the ground to provide better grip. This is perfect for soft grassy surfaces such as parts of the Golden Gate Challenge, but on a hard surface the lugs don't sink in. This means less grip and greater chance of rolling your ankle as the shoe rides high on the ground.

Shoes such as the Salomon S-LAB range or the Sense Mantra (which I



PHOTO TOBIAS GINSBERG

Tranquil Gumbo and Maphuti Phaka joined forces at AfricanX 2016, placing second in the mixed pairs category as Team Roadlesstravelled.

wear) have small lugs, well suited to a wide range of surfaces.

Make sure you have more than one pair: there's nothing worse than putting on a wet shoe in the morning.

For more about trail shoes, see podiatrist Craig Gornall's FAQ on page 68.

Hydration pack

Comfort is the key here as an uncomfortable pack can spell disaster. Most of us can afford just one pack, so rather choose a pack with sufficient packing space for gear such as rain jackets. **The ideal is to have a reservoir with a capacity of 1.5 to 2 litres, supplemented with one or two soft flask bottles.**

The soft flask bottles can be used for carrying an energy drink or for easy filling up at water points or mountain streams. Side pockets for carrying items such as gels are also important.

Nutrition and hydration

Your nutrition and hydration before, during and after each stage will largely determine how well you run and how much you enjoy the stage race. You need good carbs, proteins, and fats, as you will be burning all three and need them for recovery.

We all have our favourite foods and it is best not to try something new.

The rule of thumb is that runners need about 500ml of water and 60g of carbs (equivalent to four slices of bread) per hour while running. This however varies depending on your body weight, speed, duration of run, and so on.

Most gels contain about 20g of carbs which means most runners don't take in enough. A good strategy is to take a gel every 45 minutes and then after about two hours of running to supplement this with an energy drink mixed with an electrolyte drink

in their soft flask. Although that's not 60g of carbs an hour, it is sufficient, together with the fat burning process, to provide enough energy.

Some runners are unable to use gels and need to explore other options.

The important thing is not to rely on the water points to provide all your nutritional and hydration needs.

Post-run nutrition and hydration can be difficult sometimes as you may feel nauseous and have no appetite. This could be due to dehydration and a visit to the medic tent would be a good idea.

Other than eating a hearty meal after the run, you should bring your own snacks. Good choices are nuts and avocados for fats and protein.

Strategy

If this is your first stage race, then caution is key. **Running a stage race is like drying paint: you can't rush it.** If you run the first day too hard, you



Nomore Mandivengerei above the rest of the field on Day One of the Golden Gate Challenge. Over the next two days he narrowed the gap between himself and winner **Eric Ngubane**.
PHOTO EM GATLAND

SOUTH AFRICA'S THREE-DAY STAGE RACES				
Tankwa Trail	30km/35km/24km	WC	February	
Three Cranes Challenge	32km/42km/25km	KZN	February	
AfricanX	34km/34km/22km	WC	March	
Pondo Drifter	18km/26km/27km	EC	April/May	
iSimangaliso Challenge	6km/37km/38km	KZN	July	
Namaqua Quest	24km/25km/20km	NC	August	
Southern Cross (SOX)	30km/30km/20km	WC	August	
Oyster Catcher	25km/20km/16km	WC	September	
Wildcoast Wildrun	44km/35km/34km	EC	September	
The Cochoqua Trail	15km/25km/20km	WC	September	
Golden Gate Challenge	27km/29km/17km	FS	October	
Sneeuberg Traverse	26km/34km/40km	WC	November	
Dryland Traverse	27km/23km/11km	WC	November	

at a steady pace without maxing out, and then put the hammer down hard on day two when other runners are battling fatigue, and so make up time.

Don't worry about saving too much energy for day three. It is difficult to make up time on runners as it is usually the last and shortest day, and everyone will be racing maxed out.

A stage race is an adventure across varied landscapes over a period of days in the company of like-minded runners, during which time you become like family and create amazing memories.

And that is what trail running is all about! 🏃

are sure to struggle on the remainder of the stage race.

Day two is often the toughest and longest, so save something for it. After day two your legs will be trashed, but most people still have their best runs on the last day despite this, as they are stoked to finish and as the last day is

usually the shortest. Racing snakes are faced with a different problem: balancing the need to stay in touch with other speedsters against the need to run as efficiently as possible and spread their energy evenly over all the days. A good strategy is to run day one

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