



RUN FOR THE HILLS

PHOTOGRAPHY: SCOTTISH HILL RUNNERS/WWW.SHR.UK.COM; STEVEN FALLON

STEVEN FALLON IS SCOTLAND'S MUNRO ROUND RECORD HOLDER, HAVING ASCENDED ALMOST 4,000 PEAKS ABOVE 3,000 FEET IN 20 YEARS. HERE, HE TALKS ABOUT HIS TRANSITION TO HILL RACING AND HOW, BY MASTERING A FEW BASIC TECHNIQUES, ALMOST ANYONE CAN TAKE UP HILL RUNNING

AT THE TIME OF WRITING, I only have to bag two peaks to have 'completed' 14 rounds of Munros. So hopefully, as you are reading this, I am now the only person mad enough to have climbed all of the Munros 14 times. It therefore doesn't surprise people when I tell them I'm off to take part in a hill race. The same people often run in the other direction, however, if I suggest they might like to try Scotland's fastest growing competitive hill sport for themselves.

Back in the early 1990s, I had notched up around 100 peaks for my initial Munro round when I first encountered a hill runner in the glen below Sron a'Choire Ghairbh near Invergarry. He bounded over the grass and rush before steaming up the hill. I tried to stay with him – but didn't have a chance.

Over the years, with almost every weekend spent up a hill, my fitness improved and I found myself taking less time whenever I walked up mountains I'd already climbed. The move from hill walker to runner was taking place without a conscious decision ever being made.

Since this conversion began, hill running in Scotland has gained huge momentum with many races enjoying record fields year on year. And it is easy to see why. Conditions in Scotland are tailor made for the most rewarding, and often eventful, hill runs: mile upon mile of mountainous country, trails and pathless hill, the challenges of heather and bog – and, almost always, expansive views.

Just about anyone can get into hill running and it is not difficult or costly to get started. For those like myself who come from another background such as hill walking, however, there are distinct differences, some of which take time to adjust to.

The first adjustment has to be kit. No-one is ever **▶**

D going to take to the hills at lightning speed kitted out in full hill walking gear and it is too dispiriting to try. Walkers are often shocked at the apparent recklessness of runners who speed past them in wicker tops, shorts and miniscule camelbaks or bum-bags, but just as much thought goes into how hill runners equip themselves as hill walkers.

You'll want to travel light, but still carry food and drink, and have enough gear should the weather change for the worse or you find yourself in an emergency situation. Footwear is paramount: hill runners wear fell shoes which, unlike walking boots, are designed to allow water in and then expel it quickly. Fell shoes have great grip and durability and there is a growing choice available, depending on the terrain you'll be crossing: sturdier soles for rock, trails or road and even lighter ones but with better grip for mud and grass. There's little in the way of ankle support, so a leap of faith is required from those more accustomed to hill walking.

Tight-fitting breathable tops work best for the exposed conditions on the hilltops and the sticky heat you'll generate puffing uphill, while lycra will provide protection during the obligatory tumbles onto heather. Choose running socks over hill walking ones, which are likely to stay claggy and wet from the first soaking. And always take a lightweight waterproof top and bottoms plus, on longer routes, a hat, gloves and fleece.

For all but the easiest hill runs, keeping a survival bag, whistle and mobile on standby, along with a compass and appropriate OS map, is an essential habit to get into: you'll hopefully never need them, but will thank your prudence if you do run into difficulties.

BEING HILL FIT

Working your way up from hill walking, as I did, is a good way to develop the increased leg-muscle strength and endurance needed for hill running while also building your confidence. A good base of fitness is required, but if you have that, the best training you can do is to just get out on the hill, even if it's just a bump in your local park, and work on the different demands that uphill and downhill place on your body.

Joggers and road runners who are used to smooth, level terrain may find their first hill attempt unexpectedly hard-going – though perhaps a lot more eventful. It can be difficult to get into an even rhythm when the terrain is constantly throwing up surprises, forcing you to constantly adapt your running style and work the ankle muscles harder than ever before in fell shoes which, of course, lack ankle support. As hill running is used in resistance training for athletes, it is going to be tough on the legs. But ultimately, hill training builds leg-muscle strength and will improve your running speed and power when you return to the flat.

Assuming that with practice you're going to breeze to the top only leads to frustration when you find yourself slowing to a crawl on the uphills: here, technique is more important than speed. Uphill climbs require a fairly upright posture, a steady, even pace, and shortening of your stride as the gradient increases. You can place your

Best feet forward (clockwise from right): the author in full flow; a tricky section on Sgurr Mhic Choinnich, Skye; a textbook descent; soggy but smiling, Ben Kenneth Hill Race, South Uist; a runner in the Pentland Skyline Hill Race

Previous page: a record field at the Tinto Hill Race, Biggar





“CONDITIONS IN SCOTLAND ARE TAILOR MADE FOR THE MOST REWARDING, AND OFTEN EVENTFUL, HILL RUNS”

GETTING STARTED

Here are four top hill runs from around the country to get you started:

BEN STACK (7km, 700m of ascent. Allow 1 hour 30)
Set in the remote Northwest Highlands, Ben Stack looks formidable from the west, but from the southeast its grass-covered, gently-rising slopes provide a perfect gradient for constant uphill running and a fast descent.

BEINN A'CHUAILLAICH (6.5km, 600m. Allow 1 hour 15)
A loop above Loch Rannoch, this unassuming hill gives an enjoyable run over grass and heather to reach a huge cairn, with superb views towards Schiehallion, Beinn a'Ghlo and Ben Alder.

BEINN RESIPOL (14km, 850m. Allow 2 hours 15)
Sitting in a solitary position in the heart of beautiful Sunart, Beinn Resipol is accessed from tracks to the east. Higher up, a faint path enables pleasant running over grassy terrain.


MEALL FUAR-MHONAI DH (9km, 550m. Allow 1 hour 30)
Seen from Loch Ness far below, Meall Fuar-mhonaidh has a distinctive rounded hump. An obvious path along its northeastern shoulder gives a fine run to the summit and renowned views.

hands on your waist to aid posture, or hunch over and push your hands onto your thighs to gain more momentum on really steep sections.

Contrary to popular belief, hill running is not all about the climbs, either – no two hill routes are the same but, on many, the ascent may only account for a small portion of the route. Rough ground and obstacles are also part of the challenge and – for many – the pleasure of hill running. And then there are the descents ... controlled downhill running requires practice and a certain amount of nerve: look ahead, not at your feet, and keep your arms slightly up or out to aid balance. Lean your body forward for speed and back, with shorter strides, to slow down. Both sprinting and braking are most likely to lead to strains and injuries.

When you are confident of your technique and no longer have to push yourself on shorter distances, it is time to move on to longer routes, but don't expose yourself to challenging terrain where navigation is more of an issue until you have built up the necessary experience. One of the best ways to get to this point is by running with like-minded people.

JOIN THE CLUB

I had no idea about the hill racing scene, but my outlook changed completely when I joined the Edinburgh-based Carnethy Hill Running Club. There are loads of hill running and racing clubs all over the country and keen runners should consider joining one. Their diverse, sociable members are so enthusiastic about getting on the hills and have loads of knowledge to share. 

STEPPING OUT • HILL RUNNING

D For anyone looking for advice on technique, diet and motivation, this is a great starting point. If you fancy running the West Highland Way, tackling a Ramsay's Round (23 Munros around Glen Nevis in 24 hours) or doing a long-distance route in the Pyrenees, chances are someone in the club will have done it already and be more than willing to share their experience.

The clubs organise training, host events, trips abroad and, best of all, hill races. Most newcomers to the sport are surprised to learn that more than 100 hill races take place every year, with new races joining the calendar all the time. One of the new highlights of 2010 sees the addition of the Meall nan Tarmachan Hill Race in April – one of more than 20 Munros that runners can compete against each other on and, in many cases, raise funds for deserving causes. There are events to suit beginners, right up to races that demand considerable hill-racing experience, not to mention mountain marathons and long-distance hill running routes.

So, back to that first encounter with a hill runner. In 2009, a new race was set up by Bruce Poll of Lochaber AC over the Loch Lochy Munros. The route took us from the Dark Mile, east of Loch Arkaig, up Gleann Cia-aig. As we approached the foot of Sron a'Choire Ghairbh, I thought back to the first time I'd been here; I was now that runner bounding over the grass with other runners trying to keep up with me. ■

GET SET GO

Scotland has a growing hill racing scene, with everything from beginner-friendly events to serious mountain marathons. Try one of these for starters, or check out www.shr.uk.com and www.scottishhillracing.co.uk for more:

GYPSY GLEN HILL RACE, May (8.5km, 300m of ascent)
Road, grassy tracks, heather trods, some steep sections and boulders are part and parcel of this race near Peebles, but all in moderation – making this a fine introduction to hill racing.

BEINN SHEANN HILL RACE, June (5km, 475m)
A short and steep mid-week race from Strathyre in the Southern Highlands to a crag directly above the village and back.

BEN KENNETH HILL RACE, August (5–8km, 300m)
This race on South Uist has been taking place for 40 years. From Lochboisdale, runners can take any route to Ben Kenneth and back – the quickest route, however, requires a swim!

DRUIM FADA CHASE, November (10km, 430m)
After a climb through dense forest, this race settles into an enjoyable run along the tracks above the Loch Eil Outward Bound Centre near Fort William.

This is a selection of routes from Steven Fallon's new book *Classic Hill Runs and Races in Scotland*, which features 70 running routes with full-colour maps and essential info. Published by Pocket Mountains, price £10.00. The book is available from all good running and outdoor shops. You can also follow Steven's running and racing at www.stevenfallon.co.uk/blog.html

Pocket Mountains is offering Scotland Outdoors readers 20% off *Classic Hill Runs and Races in Scotland* and all other Pocket Mountains titles. To claim your discount, order from www.pocketmountains.com and enter the following discount code at checkout: **SCO10**.

Ups and downs (from top): running in the David Shepherd Memorial Glamaig Hill Race, Skye; a wintry run up Beinn Mhanach, near Bridge of Orchy; jumping the final stile on the Two Breweries Hill Race, Southern Uplands; 'enjoying' conditions in the Aonach Mor Hill Race on New Year's Day

