

Guidance for Coaches - Off-road running

Off-road running is rapidly becoming a popular environment for endurance runners. With the challenges of varied terrain and the temptation of interesting, more remote and beautiful surroundings, the sport provides a mix of enjoyment and increased risk. The following text offers guidance to coaches who are designing, implementing and delivering running activities for participants in this environment. The range of terrain types and potential extreme variation in conditions for this type of running is broad and it is important to consider this when you are planning against the guidance below.

If working remotely with a runner, make sure they are aware of and plan for the items listed in the guidance below.

Whilst not exhaustive, this list provides some of the more common hazards to consider.

This guidance has been developed to raise awareness and help identify the potential hazards a training session presents and examples of how to mitigate the risks of accidents and injuries occurring. 'It is the responsibility of all coaches and athletes to ensure that all training sessions are conducted in a safe manner' (UKA Code of Practice, 2022).

What are the Hazards and who might be harmed?

'A hazard is something with potential to cause harm to an individual. This can be an object, an activity, a medical condition (diagnosed or unknown), environmental conditions and even substance abuse' (UKA Code of Practice, 2022).

Whether a coach is familiar with a venue or using a facility for the first time, hazard identification and applying control measures to mitigate risk will form an integral part of session preparation, planning and delivery. Pre-activity, during activity and post-activity checks should be made to ensure the environment is safe for all users. An athletics training facility is a dynamic, changeable environment often comprising multiple user groups with differing needs and objectives. When coaches work together and communicate well this is beneficial to the safety, well-being and enjoyment for all athletes, coaches, and event disciplines.

What is a Risk Assessment?

A risk assessment is an inspection which is carried out to identify any hazards which may occur during an activity. The purpose is to identify, assess and determine the level of risk or likelihood that the hazard could cause accidents and injuries.

It is best practice to conduct a risk assessment as part of club activity, both generally to cover all areas of the clubs training and competition activities at all venues, as well as a specific event group risk assessment. Once in place the risk assessment can act as a reminder and check list when conducting all aspects of training.

Some of the common Hazards include

- Slips, trips, and falls
- Collisions with others
- Equipment
- Environment.

Slips, Trips and Falls

- Plan routes in advance, considering experience level of group.
- Plan the time of departure according to the weather forecast and daylight
- Advise on correct footwear for the route planned
- Headtorches/Lights advised in poor visibility or at night-time
- Carry back up light / batteries
- Recce route in advance and be aware of athlete's ability on more technical sections of trail.
- Have the number of the local mountain rescue or other emergency service stored in the phone if running in remote areas
- Consider varied trail conditions at different times of year or day eg: risk of ice
- Carry an electronic navigation aid

Collision with others

- Ensure any road crossings within trail runs are crossed with care and attention. Use pedestrian crossings where available
- Consider your visibility to others may be limited or unexpected if entering another trail or road from the side and adjust your running accordingly
- If running at night or in poor light, increase visibility of group with high viz/reflective clothing and most important of all a head torch
- Be aware of other environment users, eg downhill MTB riders on trails that cross your route, military exercises, hunting
- Ensure recommended coach to athlete ratios to maintain safe training to runners, coaches and others. Consider a lower ratio on longer or more technical routes and in adverse conditions
- Activities should be arranged so that runners are well spaced, and the likelihood of collision is limited
- Runners should be involved in ongoing assessment of the route and encouraged to flag any risk to the coach and others.

Equipment and equipment failure

- All equipment shall be checked prior to use
- Athletes should be encouraged to get involved with safety checks to promote good health and safety practice
- Athletes who train in more remote areas should keep a standard first aid kit in their running backpack and replace items when they are used or out of date
- Advise runners to ensure kit choices, footwear, water/wind-proofing and head torches are in good repair before run
- Advise runners to check waterproof/windproof material before longer outings
- Regularly check contents of safety equipment if stowed long term in a bag
- Advise runners to ensure headtorch/light is fully charged and working before running in dark or poor light conditions. Potentially carry a small emergency light or spare batteries for battery operated torches
- Damaged equipment should never be used

- In general, equipment should only be used for the purpose that was intended. If equipment is to be used for a purpose for which it was not primarily designed, great care must be taken.
- Athletes should take responsibility for not using damaged equipment and report damaged equipment to the coach
- Footwear should provide appropriate support, cushioning and traction for the terrain and weather
- Laces should be well tied and runners should be encouraged to carry spare laces
- Glasses should be with plastic or unbreakable lenses
- If runners wish to use running poles, signpost them to a specialist provider to ensure that the poles are the right length and the runner knows how to use them.

Environment – off-road terrain poses several safety issues; surfaces and underfoot conditions, weather, isolation, distance from help if an incident occurs.

- Research weather conditions for entirety of the run planned and adapt route accordingly
- Forecast time that will be required for the route and plan departure time accordingly
- In more remote areas, carry an electronic navigation aid and know how to use it
- Have separate routes planned for bad weather or low visibility conditions
- Advise runners to wear and bring appropriate factor sun cream
- Let someone not on the run know of route choice, timing and ETA
- Make runners aware of the terrain and potential weather before and at start of run
- Make sure runners are dressed (including shoe type) and equipped appropriately for the terrain route length, technicality and conditions. Full waterproof body cover should be carried on longer runs
- Check runners during run and consider a buddy system for larger groups
- Ensure terrain is suitable for the ability of the group and support/ plan alternatives for those who become uncomfortable on terrain
- Be prepared to change/adapt route and plans with regard to changes in the environmental conditions or terrain (eg. Landslide) or psychological responses within group (fear of terrain or route choice)
- Ensure you are familiar with the route and the terrain surrounding your route
- Advise athletes that the risk of slips, trips and falls increase when tired, wet, cold or under-fuelled and educate athlete on the need to carry a mobile phone, appropriate fuel and appropriate clothing during longer outings
- Be confident and competent in your ability to navigate in the environment/terrain in which you are leading
- If working remotely with a runner make sure they are aware they are responsible for route choice, risk management and appropriateness of terrain/conditions when training on their own
- Discourage runners from wearing ear/headphones, or recommend if they do that they are sport specific and bone conducting
- Be aware of emergency procedure for the environment you are training in, for example the local mountain rescue contact number
- Where there is likely to be no phone coverage, consider radio communication ('walkie talkies') with one at the 'base' and the other with the runner/coach and run within the range
- Plan for emergencies, with evacuation possibilities considered for more remote areas
- Be aware of and plan to avoid mine shafts, disused quarries, unstable cliff edges, high and fast flowing rivers, observing and adhering to warning signs and notices

- Advise runners to use bridges, stiles, gates to the side of cattle grids, designated railway crossings
- Be aware of risk from animals, both domestic and wild
- Be aware of risk from other members of the public eg mountain bikers, or horse riders
- Consider phobias and fears of group re: animals. (eg dogs off lead or cows).

Athlete Overload

- Ensure training is supervised by a qualified professional (qualified and licensed coach)
- Training prescription should be age-related and not age- determined. Prescription should be based according to biological status, training age, motor skill competency, technical proficiency, existing strength levels, and psychosocial maturity
- Ensure runners are taught how to navigate different terrains correctly and are technically competent
- Training volume and intensity should not be increased at the expense of technical competency
- Check during session that loading and progression is appropriate for those in the group
- Be aware of general fatigue, tiredness, illness or minor injuries that might be due to overloading. Plan in extra rest days or adapt training where necessary.

Pre-existing medical condition

- Ensure appropriate runner needs analysis is carried out
- Ensure medical questionnaire is carried out, including PARQs
- Have accessible ICE (In case of emergency) details for Leader/ Coach & participants
- Coaches shall discuss and share the above process(es) with parents/guardians (under18)
- Ensure runners carry necessary equipment for pre-existing medical conditions, such as an epi-pen and that guidance for use has been shared with the coach and understood
- Remind runners to ensure they are hydrated before the session starts and have access to a drink and refuelling either before, during or post session
- Have an outdoor First Aid Training certificate
- Have a First Aid Kit, with contents determined by the route, terrain and conditions
- If there are other registered first aiders in the group, agree with them in advance that they are willing if necessary to act
- All accidents & incidents should be reported to UK Athletics via the online 'Accident and Incident Reporting Form'
- Have emergency contacts for those in the group and Coach/ Run Leader to have access to mobile phone (where applicable) for emergency situations
- Make sure those training remotely are aware that they should let others know their proposed route and timeline (with parental permission if U18).

Manual handling

- Seek athletes permission before any help is provided for obstacles such as stiles, terrain for example by asking “do you need assistance, are you comfortable with me placing my hand on your back / arm to help you over this obstacle?”.

Safeguarding

- Coaches must always consider runner welfare and wellbeing in line with the Coaches Code of Conduct and Safeguarding Training
- Ensure training is supervised by a qualified professional (qualified and licensed coach)
- Training prescription should be age-related and not age- determined. Prescription should be based according to biological status, training age, motor skill competency, technical proficiency, existing strength levels, and psychosocial maturity
- Anticipate potential risks of injury or harm, taking measures to eliminate or reduce them, and alert participants to these risks, including recommended coach : runner ratios
- Be appropriately First Aid Trained for the environment you are coaching in
- In the event of an incident consider the entire groups safety and well-being
- Ensure runners can hear instructions (use of headphones whilst training)
- Collate a register of attendees on arrival and check on conclusion of session
- Ensure that any equipment not being taken on the run is safely stowed and that all runners feel safe meeting at the agreed start location
- Be aware of additional reliance on the coach/leader for safety in unknown terrain for athletes, especially inexperienced, younger or disabled athletes.

Other

- Coaches shall achieve and maintain professional certification(s) with continuing education requirements and code of conduct
- Coaches must operate within their scope of practice; responsibilities and knowledge and understanding of off-road running and associated risks
- Runners must be made aware of etiquette when using environments shared with other members of the public
- Ensure no litter is left behind
- In the event that a runner wishes to wear different clothing in accordance with their religion or cultural traditions, this should be discussed and a suitable outcome agreed on, resulting in maintaining respect for the individual's beliefs at the same time as enabling safe participation.