Be a Boy Scout – Be Prepared!

By Michael Jacques

"Be Prepared"… That time-honoured Boy Scout motto could also be the adage for trail runners worldwide. In fact it should be. Trail running by definition takes people into the back and beyond, often a long way from help. And with trail running being one of world's fastest growing sports, many of those heading into the back and beyond are lacking the skills and experience that make any outdoors person truly "prepared". No, you don't need to be a conqueror of Cook or Everest, but being a bit of a Boy Scout will help.

Almost every weekend around New Zealand there are reports of trail runners coming unstuck. The worst stories make the media, the funniest become fisherman-like tall-tales of the run that got away. Most are people taking wrong turns, some are injuries, some are weather worries, some are lack of clothing, some are simply lack of food, fluids or fitness, and often all three. But all have the potential to lead to a trail running tragedy, and all are due to lack of experience.

When I was growing up in Marlborough every tramping book I read talked about basic safety measures. I remember also being taught those basics at school. Today I have two kids in school and they've never been instructed as to those basics, and as a keen trail runner it bemuses me that the dedicated magazines and websites rarely lend much space to these issues. I also do a lot of coaching, and from training to basic outdoor preparation and safety, I'm often intrigued by how little the modern trail running rookie knows or thinks about these things.

Ask Yourself

Of course, not every trail run presents danger or requires huge planning. But if you are running for more than two hours and/or will be more than 30min from civilisation, you need to plan for problems. Even more so in winter, or if weather is likely to be dicey.

Ask yourself… If I am caught out overnight in bad weather and maybe in an exposed situation, will I still be ok?

Every trail runner should ask themselves this question and a few others. Think about the following:

- Is there an easy retreat option if the weather packs in?
- Are there huts to stop at if the route takes longer than anticipated?
- Is there a well formed track and bridges over rivers and creeks?
- Could there be delays due to navigation issues, rivers, bush bashing detours or tricky bits?
- Is the group reasonably similar in pace and experience?
- Checking the weather forecast is vital, but NZ weather is never a sure thing. Patterns change quickly and in higher areas low cloud often surprises and is rarely forecast.

Pack for Problems

By necessity, and because most runs are day trips, trail runners almost always travel lightly compared to trampers. But again, if you're more than 30min from human help you need to think about food, fluids, clothing and communication as per the following:

- A proper water and windproof shell (jacket)
- Two warm top layers as well as skin layer
- Leggings – thermals if in bush, rain leggings if in high country or when rain forecast
- Gloves and hat
- Survival blanket
- High energy food and enough for twice the time you expect/hope to be out (bars, gels, nuts, jet planes and a sandwich or two)
- A drink system is handy
- A light head torch (or at least a couple between the group)
- Basic first aid – e.g: sticking plasters, a crepe bandage, tape, basic pain medication, a pocket knife can be handy
- A cell phone and maybe even locator beacon –In remote areas cell phones often don't get coverage. Locator beacons are for serious emergencies only
- a topo map (not a brochure with a few dots and lines on it)
- Put everything in plastic bags to keep things dry in flooded rivers etc.

Obviously this is an extensive list. But even in local bush tracks or farmland, most of the above still applies. A cell phone and making sure someone knows where you're running and what time to expect you back might replace the

locator beacon. I've been caught in the dark a few times on local Wellington runs from my back door, and while I had a jacket & food, and wasn't lost as such, a head lamp would have got me home much faster and a cell phone would have helped avoid a tongue-lashing from the worried wife.

Training
Being fit enough for what you're taking on is a good way to avoid problems, especially if you do get caught out by a wrong turn or bad weather. Most people can handle a run that is up to three times longer than what they trained for. So the more training you're willing to do, the more you have in the tank for an unexpectedly long day.

If you expect the race or run to take you four hours, then ideally you need to gradually build up to something close to fours in training. You can't handle that amount of running often, but a long run of at least two hours every week or two weeks will get you through four hours, and also set you up for any issues that have you out there longer than planned.

Training effectively, however, isn't just about going the distance. I once took a very fit triathlete across the Speight's Coast to Coast run and he hated it. He was more than fit enough, but didn't have the specific skills for rugged trail running. The key word here is "specific". Whether trying to get better race results or simply preparing yourself to enjoy your trail running more, you need to be capable of handling whatever a typical trail run will throw at you. In short, hills, mud, tree roots, rocky river beds, boulder-strewn mountain rivers, scree slopes and river crossing.

Hills work is pretty straight forward. A run on hilly terrain every two or three days will make you stronger, but also faster. Handling rough terrain is a matter of spending more time running on it, but a good tip to get you started is to shorten your stride and speed up your arm action a bit. River crossing are have simple rules; cross diagonally following the flow, learn how to link up with others, and if the first crossing of the day is dicey then consider calling it a day because the higher you go, the faster the rivers usually are. Scree slopes can be treacherous, and you can usually tell if it's a good idea or not, but it helps to stay high on the slope and never get above others. If you're coming down a scree slope don't rush, just lean back slightly and let the scree move each foot fall and be ready to sit back to stop if you have to.

Work with the Weather
Part of training is making sure you are capable of running long distances in all weathers. But knowing what to do in all weather and how to predict the weather is just as important.

Long back country runs need a certain amount of respect. Look at weather for 24 hours either side of your run and then pack accordingly. It helps to know how different weather patterns effect where you plan to run too; in the Arthur's Pass area, for example, the Nor'wester almost always brings low cloud and rain. Around the Kaikoura's and lower North Island, the Southerly can be turn a nice day in freezing rain and wind within an hour.

In the mid-80s two young Wellington runners died just an hour from civilization after starting a trail run in t-shirts on a perfect day during spring. They got lost late in the day as a Southerly struck and were found the next day within a kilometre of each other. Knowing what to expect, regardless of where you're headed, and planning accordingly is important. Even a jacket, topo map and weather report might have made the difference.

Cold is usually the biggest evil for the trail runner, especially in mountain conditions. But for performance the extremes of both cold and heat can ruin a good run for different reasons. Heat is mostly about dehydration, but in the cold your body diverts blood away from working muscles to try & protect the extremities and vital organs, and also burns more energy trying to generate heat. This means energy levels get depleted earlier, so long runs in cold conditions, especially cold, windy conditions, need care, both in regard to clothing and food.

You Are What You Eat (& Drink)
Everyone knows that low energy and fluid levels affects performance, so people generally pay some attention to nutrition during races. But you should pay attention to it in every trail run, and especially if you're heading out into the back country. Glycogen depletion and dehydration impact your decision making, so if a big days ends in issues you're more likely to make the right decisions if you've looked after your food and fluid needs.

It's generally accepted that you burn up to 100g of carbohydrate per hour during aerobic exercise, but that the body can only store enough glycogen from carbohydrate sources to last around three or four hours. So trail runs beyond two hours require some food planning. Many popular energy food items (banana's, energy bars, muesli bars, energy gels) contain approx 30-50g of carbohydrate, so really it's as simple as allowing one to two of this type of food item for every hour you plan to be running, then packing more for emergency; up to twice as much if you are out for a long time in remote surroundings and/or bad weather.

To avoid carrying half the pantry, some of your carbohydrate needs can be satisfied via energy drink, which can be taken as powder and added to water. This is especially important on hot days and ultra-distance runs.

Heat, while less likely to cause true safety issues, can turn a good run to custard much quicker. Under exercise most people lose approx 500ml to 750ml of fluid per hour to sweat, and more if conditions are hot. Replacing this much during long trail runs can be challenging, because there is only so much you can carry and you can be away from drinkable water for long periods. But if you can't get at least 300ml per hour, you can strike dehydration within three to four hours, earlier if it is hot.

In especially long runs, however, avoid drinking too much plain water. A condition called hyponatremia, where too much plain water dilutes your body's essential sodium levels, can cause collapse and even death. It is very common in ultra-distance events lasting more than six hours, where most people understand they need to drink a lot but sometimes take that too far. It often presents with similar symptoms to dehydration, except drinking more water will make it worse. So in long runs, energy drink is best, and if water is the only option limit your intake to that 500ml to 700ml per hour and eat at the same time.

Route Planning
In classic fashion, one of the best ways to avoid safety issues is to know "exactly" where you're going. That's a lot different to knowing where you want to go.

Any run of more than a few hours should include a proper topographical map, and a runner who knows how to read that map. Topo maps, not tourist brochures or even event maps, tell you all sorts of things that will help avoid trouble. If you lose your way, the map will show you where you are roughly, which means you can work out the most likely way to retrace your steps. If you strike high rivers or bad weather, the map might show other options, and if you know how to read it, the map will tell you if those options are useless because of bluffs or steep creeks or no tracks, or at least indicate the nearest bush line so you can try and see where the hell you might be. And if you're really in the shit and daylight is disappearing, a map will usually show you the nearest road-end or hut.

As an event organiser I've had a few calls over the years from worried wives because their husband isn't home from a pre-race recce yet. In one case, a week prior to Wellington's annual Crazyman multisport race, Police Search and Rescue spent half the night looking for guy who was lost in dense bush only 15 minutes from a residential area. There's only one place on this run that you can get truly lost, so they knew where he'd be. Sure enough, he'd missed the turn, come to a dead end and decided he would bush-bash his way back to the track, or rather, where he thought the track should be. It was May in Wellington; dark and cold at 5:00pm and he'd started at 3:00pm on a run that takes most people one and a half to two hours. He had a jacket, but no food, no map, no phone… And apparently no brains.