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by Chris Knutsen

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Vogue Senior Editor Chris Knutsen takes to the mountains to transform his running regime from street-smart to trail-blaze. I have no idea whether my own ancestors were anywhere near as robust as **Jan Baalsrud**, the death-defying Norwegian David Brooks paid tribute to in a recent *column*, but for whatever reason, this winter I've had an atavistic urge to take my workouts into the woods. Abandoning the car-choked streets has been a welcome change—it's a lot kinder on the knees, for one thing. But it's also brought new training challenges. And, as I would soon discover, the discipline attracts the kind of runner who might have looked at Baalsrud's ordeal as a cool way to get in shape. Knowing that I'd take to the workouts more vigorously with a goal in mind, I called my friend Tom in Philly, a die-hard trail guy, and asked him where I could turn for inspiration. "Come run the *Ugly Mudder* with me," he said, explaining that the seven-mile trail race, which climbs its way through picturesque Appalachian foothills near Reading, Pennsylvania, has become a cult favorite among East Coasters, given its grueling reputation. Even the race application seemed designed to intimidate beginners, with an extensive legal disclaimer warning of "rocks and roots . . . downed logs and probably downed runners . . . discarded sofas . . . and wildlife that is known to carry concealed weapons."

Whether or not the area's woodland creatures would be armed and dangerous, I figured I could use help, so I called a professional. **Dylan Schlott**, a triathlon coach and experienced trail runner, offered useful tips (see his workout below) and encouraged me to shed road-running habits that would only get in my way. One key piece of advice: On trails, you want to shorten your gait and create faster "leg turnover." Though it's tempting to lean back and take long, loping strides on the downhills, it's safer and more efficient to lean forward, scurry with quick steps, and avoid heavy landings. But his best advice was simply to do as much training as possible on actual trails. Though our area in Brooklyn had been blanketed by a series of snowstorms, I took to the hills and paths of Prospect Park and ran as though I were fleeing an angry deer packing a snub-nosed 45. The snowy workouts turned out to be a boon. When Tom and another friend Kevin and I showed up on race day, about a foot of recent powder covered the trails. Nearly 700 runners were on hand to compete, including a small platoon of very fit-looking Marines in fatigues and army boots, and one guy dressed head-to-toe as a Viking and wielding a homemade version of Thor's hammer. As we bolted off through the woods, it was quickly apparent that the trail—or the part of it that had been packed down by the leaders—was only wide enough for a single runner. Since the "passing lane" consisted of deep snow, advancing in the pack came at a price: a jolting spike in one's heart rate. But as we flew along the high ridges and steep switchbacks—and as I watched more than a few runners take epic spills worthy of **Lindsey Vonn**'s wipeout in the giant slalom—I kept Dylan's advice in mind and didn't push too hard on the ascents, waiting until the flats and downhills to make my move. After wisely avoiding the various alcoholic beverages being offered to racers at around mile five, I was able to make some headway in traffic and pulled out a strong finish. (For the record, I made it past all those Marines and the Viking dude, who good-naturedly did not take a swing at me with his hammer as I skirted around him.) With the spring thaw I've discovered another benefit from hitting the trails, one that Dylan told me to expect: The payoff from all this scrabbling over rocks and roots and up and down hills is huge when you return to the pavement. The shorter gait I've become accustomed to means I'm less likely to be injured. And my legs just feel stronger, more coordinated, and better equipped to handle whatever terrain I throw at them. With these kinds of benefits, I'm already looking for another race—another opportunity to try to live up to Baalsrud's legacy. **The Workout:** Apart from training on trails and adopting a shorter stride, Dylan suggested exercises that would strengthen my legs and increase balance and coordination (squats; lunges onto a Bosu ball; and one-legged drills, such as sitting in a chair and standing up using only one leg). To increase my explosive energy, I did intense cardio training—running sets of stairs in the park, or doing speed intervals on the StairMaster in the gym. And at the office, after lunch, I'd jog up the eight flights of stairs from the cafeteria. **The Gear:** The variable terrain of trails calls for shoes with a stiffer sole, a firmer toe, and a better tread. Two brands that Dylan recommends are Montrail (the "Mountain Masochist") and Innov-8. Because I would be running in wet wintry conditions, for the Ugly Mudder I chose Saucony's *ProGrid Razor*, a waterproof trail shoe specifically designed to protect feet from the elements. After seven hard miles in the snow, while others were cursing their soaked socks and blisters, my feet were bone dry. **Hitting the Trails:** There are lots of helpful resources for the recreational trail runner, such as *Trail Runner* magazine and the *American Trail Running Association*. And, more and more, the topic is being covered by *Runner's World*. For race information, you can also check the events pages on Web sites of sponsoring companies, such as *Montrail* and *Northface*.

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