Get off the roads.

For the past few years in the September issue of the Wingfoot I have written about taking time from the roads and running cross-country. Fall is a wonderful time to do this and it adds an exciting and new component to many individuals running repertoire. However, this year I would like to suggest something slightly different – trail running. At first glance, many of you may think these are races aimed more towards the Scott Jurek's (many time winner of the Badwater ultra run) of the world. Though it is true, if you want to run long, there are more than a few races to test your endurance (both mental and physical) as much as you desire. But you don't necessarily need a support crew to run a trail race. There are many local and regional races out there that take you off the roads and allow you to prance off into the wilderness at a variety of distances. These races also have the added benefit of food and drink and, if you prance fast enough, awards.

Now since this article is supposed to be about training and competing, so you may ask yourself – besides the benefits of being fed in a rural environment, why would I do such a thing? There are many good reasons from a training perspective. First off, I am a great believer that presenting runners with new and different challenges helps keep them fresh and improves their running performance in any environment. Every type of competition, whether it be on the roads, the track, or a mountain trail, presents different challenges to overcome. To adapt successfully to those new challenges a runner must focus on different components of their running, search out weaknesses and overcome them. The track puts everything under a microscope, cross country teaches a runner to maximize intense effort, trail running is different, as it is a much more sustained type of focus and teaches you patience. It also gets a runner into a new environment and reinforces some of the more basic psychological needs of a runner. There is something primal about running through the woods at a good clip, with only nature as company that gives us the opportunity to conceptualize just why we run. Put that in a competitive framework and you have a whole new chess match of running strategies. It is no mystery that trail races are often dominated by older runners. In a test of speed and strength on a flat fast course, these runners would be found nowhere near the front but when the strategy becomes more subtle and requires patience and supreme self knowledge, the playing field becomes far more level.

Preparation for trail runs is pretty simple – run on trails. Kennesaw Mountain gives our running community a great resource for off road efforts. Since these races do tend to take longer than the normal road race, learning to take in calories (much like you have to in a marathon) during your run is important. You also want to lengthen your long run a bit (depending on how long the trail race is) and make sure you incorporate a lot of hills for strength. In short, do your best to replicate the environment you will be running in during the race. Perhaps the most important aspect of trail racing is that it should be low pressure. Enjoy the run, don't approach it with the same intense competitive focus you might for a key road race. To find trail runs consult your local race calendar, for championship races you can consult the USATF website (www.usatf.org) and look under mountain, ultra and trails races (MUT). There are also some other trail websites, Google can probably help you out on that. Good luck and watch your footing.