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Mt. Ashland Uphill Run (From ChiRunning.com Blog)

I appreciate Danny's invitation to me to share my experience and knowledge about running hills, both uphill and downhill. In the current blog entry, I'll focus on the uphill as I have just finished a serious uphill race and thought I would use that experience to present what I have learned over the years about uphill running. I'm scheduled to do a downhill marathon next month (near Mt Hood, Oregon) and will provide a blog entry on downhill running at that time.

To clarify what I mean by "running" when I talk about uphill running, I would like to underscore that many times in a "running" race, it is to a runner's advantage to walk parts of the uphills. As I noted in my recent article about a hilly, 50K, trail run in the ChiLiving eNewsletter, the "marriage" between ChiRunning and ChiWalking is an efficient and successful one whenever hills are involved.

On August 1st, I completed the Mt. Ashland Half Marathon (actually 13.3 miles) a race in Ashland, Oregon that starts at 1,900 ft and finishes at 7,500 ft for an increase in altitude of well over a mile. The course is almost totally uphill with rare moments of level trail and one teasing, short stretch of slightly downhill. What a perfect venue to test out my uphill ChiRunning/ChiWalking knowledge and skills.

Prior to the race, I had been practicing my uphill forms and building up a solid base of uphill running and walking at the local hills near where I live in Eugene, Oregon. I knew that I would need all of my uphill "bag of tricks" as the traditional focuses for "runnable" hills would not be enough in this event. Given the steepness of parts of the course, I also had to fine tune my "non-runnable" uphill techniques, such as the lateral running form, which technically may still be running but is similar to fast walking in that one foot is always touching the ground. In addition to my preparation with the physical form focuses, I also refreshed my memory regarding the mental and energy based tools that could assist me when the steepness and my fading energy might combine to try to stop me in my tracks.

In light of the searing heat earlier that week (temperatures reached 107 degrees at times), the 250 of us were happy to get underway at 7:30 in the morning when it was still refreshingly cool. Off we went, cameras flashing and supporters cheering us on. Little did I know that I was about to be tested with one of the most challenging and tiring athletic undertakings I had ever experienced.

Although the early phase of the race was not as steep as the final phase, it wasn't long before I found myself alternating between running and walking. If you have not yet taken a ChiRunning workshop or studied the DVD closely, my descriptions may not make a lot of sense but, hang in there; I'm sure you'll get the idea. When I was able to comfortably run, I implemented the standard uphill focuses and form adjustments—relaxing my legs (heels still down), reducing the length of my stride and focusing on my upper body as I increased my lean and the forward zip in my arm swing while reducing the angle of the swing at the elbow from 90 degrees towards 45 degrees so that my hands began to move in an upward, upper-cut like motion (a shift from the circle of arm motion going out and returning lower to a circle of arm motion going out and then returning higher). In terms of my “gears”, I down shifted to a lower one so that I could keep my steps short, retain my standard cadence (approximately 90) and keep my feet landing under my leading upper body. In a sense, I was leaning like 4th gear but I was taking strides more like I was in 1st gear, interesting and effective team work between upper and lower body. Periodically, I also found myself using the power of my pelvic rotation to assist in the uphill motion although that form was constrained when the stride length became very short. Overall, I seemed to be able to keep my effort level fairly constant as I adjusted to the variations of grade of the uphill dirt road; this was helped by keeping in mind that I was simply falling up the hills.

As we moved into the middle phase of the race, my ChiWalking identity began to take over as the majority player in this uphill collaboration with its sibling, ChiRunning. It was not the case that the hills became so much steeper, but rather it seemed a rational strategy to conserve energy for the many miles ahead by ChiWalking at a fast pace rather than ChiRunning at a slow pace. Overall, for me, that seemed to be the way I could cover the distance in the least time—and isn't that one of the primary goals of a “race”!

So, there I went, switching into ChiWalking form, having one foot in touch with the ground at all times, landing in front of the heel and peeling the foot, relaxing my lower body with legs in a support role, using my upper body focus with a reduced arm swing angle as needed, retaining an overall increased lean from the ankles into the hills, and increasing my cadence as I could without increasing my perceived effort too much. With this ChiWalking form, I was able to retain a good pace and found myself both passing and being passed by some runners (usually much younger ones). At this point, I was still feeling pretty energetic but the best, i.e., the steepest, was yet to come.

As a brief tangent, I'd like to comment on another run/walk strategy that I saw along the way. Right from the beginning, I noticed that a father and his teen age son were doing some sort of run/walk combination in their joint attempt to conquer Mt Ashland. It seemed that they frequently switched from running to walking no matter what the grade of the road and when I inquired as to their plan, I learned that, indeed, they were doing a 4 minutes run:1 minute walk set of repeats. Eventually they pulled ahead of me so I did not see if they kept up this routine all the way to the top as the father had said they were “conserving energy this way, at least for now”. From my perspective, they might have been more energy efficient if they had made their decision to run or walk based more on the road's grade and the corresponding effort needed to move along it most effortlessly—but, to each his own. They were having fun and were sharing an exciting and meaningful father/son bonding experience.

Somewhere about mile 10, the dirt road became a single, winding and steep trail. At this point, whether I was running or, more often, walking, I started to draw upon my lateral running/walking form in which I turned my body to about 2 o'clock or 10 o'clock as I continued with my small running or walking steps, feet still landing flat on the ground, and used my lower arm swing towards the uphill midline to help me up the hill. This was very helpful in allowing me to keep my effort level under control and I found myself going back and forth from this lateral form to the regular uphill forms over the next 2 miles. It was also during this phase that I drew upon the y'chi exercise that we teach in our ChiRunning classes as I focused on an object up the trail and then let the energy from it pull me forward and upward. I think it helped! At this point, the views were getting incredible and the big "ball" at the summit of Mt Ashland had now come into tantalizing view.

Approaching the ski area's parking lot and the ski lodge at mile 12, I paused long enough at this the final aid station to drink some water and sport drink to help prepare me for the final push. Just over a mile to go. I was also happy to see my lady friend, Kathy, with a big encouraging smile as she walked/ran with me into the approaching trail—she had driven up to that level so she had lots of energy as we took off together. I, on the other hand, was very tired and I was starting to experience some cramping along the outside of my lower right leg and right ankle joint. For a minute, the muscles simply locked so that I was immobilized. It took an adjustment in my form to free up the muscles and from then on, I had to stay aware of the angle and specific use I was making of that muscle group. One change I made was to use the "hands on quads and push on legs" approach as it seemed the only way I could keep progressing up this final part of the course. In so doing, I could keep my full body lean with core engaged and a pretty decent column and make steady, albeit very slow, progress again.

But there was even more of an uphill challenge ahead as with a half mile to go, we saw a fork in the trail which had two signs directing us to the summit: 1). "Shorter, steeper, very hard", and 2). "Longer, steep, hard". I took number 2 as I wasn't sure what would happen if I took the steepest of the options and I wanted to be sure to make it to the top. Kathy was still with me as she had decided do the final ascent too and I sure was happy to have her support, not exactly a "rabbit" but better than the tortoise I had become as I leaned into those final challenging steps up the pathless path to the summit. One of the few form focuses I could still successfully implement at this point was my cadence so I found myself increasing the turnover rate of my very short strides, surging toward the top which was now just yards away—and then I was there. Whew!

Not that I was too concerned about my finishing time or position but I did notice that two men of about my age (60s) who had been ahead of me at that final half mile choice point, had made it to the top slightly after me so I guess my decision to take the longer, slightly less difficult option had paid off. Maybe my final uphill push, form or no form, was not so bad after all as I made it to the top, I had conquered Mt Ashland—well, sort of—and now I could let it all out. What a relief—to laugh, cry and catch my breath. Let's hear it for uphill running—and ChiRunning—and ChiWalking! Bring on the downhills!

Postscript: As it turned out, about a quarter of the starters stopped at the ski area parking lot, mile 12. I finished a respectable 110th overall, 4th in my 60 – 69 age group, with a time of 3 hrs 48 minutes.