

What is Backward Running?

Reverse running, also known as retro-running and backward running, is gaining credence as an alternative form of exercise and is described in some circles as a super-exercise for its potential to turn mediocre sportsmen and women into outstanding athletes. Reverse running offers an incredible workout, restores balance to the leg muscles, burns more calories than normal running, forces a healthier posture and is the ideal rehabilitative exercise. It also places less stress on the knee and therefore reduces the likelihood of future injuries. Furthermore, it's fun and the perfect psychological lift for anyone in the running doldrums. Include reverse running into your fitness regime, and you will never look back again (or should that be forward).

Running backwards gives the body a fabulous cardiovascular workout and demands far higher levels of stamina. There is common consensus amongst retro-runners that one lap of backward running is the equivalent to six laps forward running. Try it and see how soon you feel tired. The benefits to the lower body cannot be understated. Running forwards over many years creates over-tight hamstrings, whilst failing to work the other leg muscles, especially the front quad muscles (runners with knee problems almost inevitably demonstrate over-tight hamstrings and weak muscles on the front of the legs). Conversely running backwards involves running on your toes and brings into play the quads, calves and shin muscles. This in time reduces the discrepancy between the hamstrings and quads, which are active for longer in reverse running, and therefore lessens the potential for knee injuries owing to an imbalance.

Benefits of reverse running are not restricted to the lower body. Running backwards forces the body to adopt an upright posture and over time can lead to realigned vertebrae and relieve pressure on the nerves. This is the opposite effect to forward running where runners often end up with a hunched posture with off angle head and protruding abdomen.

If you play team sports such as football, basketball or cricket, then look no further than reverse running to improve your ability to track backwards and back pedal at speed with control. Similarly, boxers and tennis players will benefit from adding backward running into their training programme.

Finally, running backwards is fun, and adds an exciting element to a runner's workout. Of course, the obvious disadvantage to reverse running is lack of vision and the potential for running into lampposts or people. However with sensible progress and selection of suitable venues, this need not be an issue. Serious backward running athletes customise baseball caps with mirrors to avoid excessive neck twisting. There is also the inevitable reaction from the passers by. Expect the odd taunt and gibe. It's a small price to pay when you consider the advantages.

Read 'Backwards Running' by Dr Robert K Stevenson, for much more information on why we all should take up the sport.

See also www.backwardrunningbackward.com for the main global website on backward running.

Beginner's Guide to Backward Running:

12 Week Program

Running backward for one mile is within everyone's ability. Follow this twelve-week plan and arrive at Heaton Park with the confidence to tackle the course and who knows, you may even win. Being a decent forward runner does not necessarily mean you can excel in reverse. When training, please stick to off-road routes, ideally a flat grassy park, athletics track (keep to the outside lane) gently shelving beach (at low tide and watch out for sandcastles) or a large open space until you are comfortable with moving backwards. Avoid cars, bikes, crowded places and definitely do not run backwards down a hill. Make sure you also check the route for mole-hills, boulders, ditches etc... prior to running backwards

Stretching: Backward running targets different muscle groups so make sure you stretch all your lower leg muscles - quads, calves, shins. Don't forget to stretch the neck muscles too.

Start off slowly with short strides and get to grips with the unusual feeling and different foot strike, as you almost tip toe backwards. Also, avoid running backwards on two consecutive days - muscles you never knew you had will suddenly wake up, requiring plenty of rest in between your sessions.

Week 1: Start to walk backwards - whenever you have an opportunity, just turn around and try a few steps backwards. Learn to look behind without straining your neck and alternate between looking left and right, so that you don't over stretch one side. Maintain this technique when you start running.

Described below is the basic technique for running backwards, but you will probably tweak it to suit your own particular running style. You will soon notice how running backwards feels so much more healthy for the whole body.

1. Bend forward at the waist.
2. Keep your shoulders directly over your feet.
3. Keep your feet close to the ground-just skim over the surface.
4. Push off the balls of your feet.
5. Hold your arms low and very close to your body.
6. Carry your elbows right at your hips.

Weeks 2 to 4: Now you've got the hang of walking backwards, find a safe spot and run forwards 50 metres and backwards for 50 metres. Repeat several times. YOU WILL INEVITABLY FALL OVER A FEW TIMES. JUST LAUGH, GET UP AND CARRY ON. Note that running backwards will make you work a lot harder, leaving you out of breath sooner. Your shins may also feel a bit sore. Remember to take it very slowly at first. After a few 50 metre sessions, increase to 100 metres forwards and backwards.

Work first on technique, adjusting to the different foot strike - landing on the ball of the foot. Then slowly build in some speed.

TAKE CARE TO EASE YOURSELF INTO BACKWARD RUNNING. SHOULD YOU FEEL ANY ADVERSE SIDE EFFECTS, STOP. IT MAY BE THAT YOU NEED TO STRETCH MORE OR JUST THROW IN MORE REST DAYS TO LET YOUR BODY ADJUST. REMEMBER THAT BACKWARD RUNNING BRINGS INTO PLAY THE QUADS, CALVES AND SHINS - MUSCLES YOU DON'T NORMALLY USE AT ANY SIGNICANT INTENSITY. IT MAY ALSO BE WORTHWHILE SEEING YOUR PHYSIO FOR SOME ADVICE.

Weeks 5-6: Add some 400 metres alongside the 100 and 200m reps. You can start to cut back on the forward running and concentrate on running backwards.

Weeks 7-10: Keep performing the shorter reps, but now add at least one run of increasing distance. For example: 600 metre - 800 metre - 1km.

Week 11-12: Build up to one mile

You should now be able to run backwards quite easily and hopefully without too much mishap. Continue to perform plenty of short distance runs and aim to fit in a one-mile run. As an optional extra, why not add some short hill work (up hill only) or find a soft sandy beach and really punish your quads.

Race Day: Arrive at Heaton Park after a few days rest from backward running, but brimming with confidence.

Good luck!