

CROSS COUNTRY RUNNING¹

ORIGINS OF CROSS COUNTRY

Cross country is perhaps the most basic form of a running race. Races are held over all types of terrain but especially on natural surfaces such as grass, heathland or rough tracks.

The origins of the sport are lost in history although it is clear that men (and women) have enjoyed competitive running for centuries. The ability to run fast also leads to a natural advantage when hunting, escaping from predators and during combat. Messengers during wartime needed to run fast as well.

References to running races held across open country have been found in 14th century texts and there is some evidence to suggest the sport in part came about from simple games based on hunting.

"Hunt The Fox" was a popular game where one person, the "fox", set off while the competitors made chase after a predetermined delay. The winner was the person who caught the "fox" first. Such games seem to have begun in medieval times.

By the 18th century a new sport had emerged in some parts of the country, particularly the north, based on the steeplechase. In its original form two or more horse riders would race each other to a distant church steeple. But by the beginning of the 19th century, simple foot races were being organised along the same lines. By their very nature the races were held over courses that forced the runners to negotiate fences, ditches, brooks and even small rivers.

¹ Taken from the Milton Keynes Museum website. Author and date unknown but apparently post 2000.

See <http://www.mkmuseum.org.uk/history/xcount/xchist.htm>.

The evolving sport grew in popularity, especially at the increasing number of public schools in Britain and by the 1840s there were two steeplechase clubs at Oxford University.

In the middle of the 19th century a new form of the race was invented known as the paperchase. In this, two "hares" would set off and leave a trail of paper, one of which was false. After a period of (usually) ten minutes the "hounds" would set off in pursuit. As with "hunt the fox" the winner was the first hound to catch the correct "hare".

ORGANISATION AND RULES OF CROSS COUNTRY

The Victorian era saw the formalisation of the rules of most of the major sports enjoyed to the present day and cross-country (and more widely athletics) was no exception. Many of these rules were drawn up at the public schools or Universities where there was an emphasis on gentlemanly conduct rather than competing for money.

One result of this was that the concept of amateur participation was enshrined in many of these sports. In some cases, most notably running/athletics and rugby union, this has only changed in the last two decades.

The rules for cross country were formalised with the formation of the English Cross Country Union (ECCU) in 1883. This was just three years after the AAA was founded in Oxford.

The ECCU (now known as the English Cross Country Association) held the first men's English National Cross Country Championship in 1876. It is the oldest event of its kind in the world.

Known among athletics fans as "The National", it is still held and has always visited a different venue each year. Towns in the middle of country were a popular choice because they were easily accessible for many of the athletes.

The team trophy for the National is known as the Frank Wynne Cup. This has been awarded to winning teams since 1905. A centenary trophy has been awarded since 1984 to the best team of the 11 still extant from the formation of the ECCU.

Each club can now enter a team of no fewer than six and no more than nine. Team scoring is very simple: each member of the team is given an individual score that is equal to their position in the race. The scores of the first six finishers are added together and the team with the lowest total score wins the trophy.

Another major event in the sporting calendar was the International Cross Country race. This was held between 1929 and 1972 with teams representing a number of countries taking part. To be selected was a great honour and the "National" was often used as a trial to choose the team. England, Scotland and Wales all entered teams for the event over the years.

Cross country was also an Olympic sport in 1912, 1920 and 1924.

Women started to run cross country races, in the form of hare and hounds, during the 1870s but it was not until 1927 that the first national championships were held. These were organised by the Women's Cross Country (& Road Running) Association and the Women's Amateur Athletic Association..

In fact, the men's and women's sports were controlled by separate bodies for many years. It is only since 1995 that the men's and women's events have been held in the same place on the same day.

WHY DO RUNNING CLUBS HAVE STRANGE NAMES?

Many running clubs have names that include "Harriers" or "Hares & Hounds".

The reason is that many of these clubs were formed in the 19th century to organise and hold the forms of cross country based on the traditional games of "hunt the fox" and "hare and hounds".

This was an era before track running was widely enjoyed because there were so few tracks. It was simply easier to organise races over open country. Many of the oldest clubs have retained their original names to provide perhaps their only remaining link with the Victorian era. Founding clubs of the English Cross Country Union included the Thames Hare & Hounds, Blackheath Harriers, Cheshire Tally Ho Hare & Hounds and Birchfield Harriers, all of which are still in existence.

WHAT WERE THE COURSES LIKE?

The first cross country races were held over relatively rough terrain compared with the modern events. Until comparatively recently the rules for cross country stipulated that the course had to include a section of ploughed field. The aim was to make the course a proper test for the true cross country runner and less easy for the (generally) faster track runners. For this reason it was quite common for the best cross country runners to be also-rans on the track and for the track stars of the day to be left at the back of the field "over the country".

For many years the race was held over a ten mile course. Later the distance for the National was standardised at nine miles for men, almost three miles longer than the longest normal track race, the 10,000m. Obstacles en-route often included brooks or streams that the runners either jumped over or waded through and fences that had to be climbed over.

The men's National is currently run over 12km and the women's over 8km. International events such as the World Cross Country Championship tend to be over 10km or less.

Modern events are run over terrain where the going is better than in the past and obstacles are unheard of. For these reasons, modern cross country races at the highest level are far removed from the mud-ridden slogs of the old days. But there are plenty of events at a local and regional level for runners who prefer, or cannot avoid, the true test of the cross country run.

CROSS COUNTRY EQUIPMENT

THE BASICS

Running is one of the simplest sports and requires little or no specialist equipment.

Most competitive runners will wear a vest, some shorts and a pair of shoes. Despite this an athlete will occasionally compete with great success running barefoot. In the fairly recent past, athletes such as Abebe Bekele (dual Olympic Marathon Champion) and Zola Budd (multiple records at middle and long distance) have been successful while running with no shoes.

Although running wear is relatively basic there have been some major changes over the years.

Early running wear was manufactured from natural fibres such as cotton, wool or silk. The garments were similar to, if not the same as, everyday clothing. Styles were basic and variation in colour was limited. Although vests were worn for track running, cross country runners often wore polo-style shirts. In competitions runners would have worn garments in their clubs' colours but for the solo competitor a plain white vest or polo short was often the only choice.

Modern clothing tends to be made from synthetic fibres which are lighter and stronger and provide better ventilation to allow the evaporation of perspiration. The style is also matched to the use of the garment. For example, shorts are designed to allow free movement of the legs and vests have large arm holes to allow free movement and provide more ventilation. Garments

are also more colourful, perhaps because of changing tastes in fashion. Many runners (especially in road races) now participate on their own rather than with a club and can choose their own clothing.

Despite this, many clubs still run in the same colours that they adopted in the Victorian era. This is a big part of the tradition of athletics and cross country.

Although the clothing has adapted it is still possible to get out and run with ordinary clothing, with one exceptions. The biggest advances over the years have been made in footwear.

THE 1920s

Cross country runners discovered early on that having the right shoes provided an advantage.

In the early years of organised competitive running, shoes were very basic. They were made from leather and offered only minimal improvements in grip and support over conventional shoes.



Runners soon realised that adding studs (like on football boots) or spikes would provide better grip, especially when running over soft grass. Specialist companies began to make these shoes. Many of these companies were located in Northamptonshire, then as now one of the major footwear producing areas.



The shoes were hand made from leather, just like ordinary shoes. The uppers (top part of the shoe) was leather and the sole was leather (for spikes) or rubber (for studs). They were heavy compared with modern shoes and became even heavier in the wet. But they were an improvement over ordinary shoes.



In the early designs the studs or spike could not be removed (unlike today). The trend from the earliest days of specialist running shoes was towards lighter designs using the minimum of materials. Top runners would have their shoes made specially although the vast majority of athletes (as today) would buy their equipment from a specialist shop or mail order company if they could afford to.



Runners that could not afford the specialist running shoes or spike would probably have worn plimsolls, the real predecessor or the modern running shoe. These were originally made for wearing on board boats and ships. They had a canvas upper and a rubber sole which made them light and flexible, both useful when running. They were also mass produced which made them cheap.

Footwear progressed as new design ideas and materials were incorporated in to the running shoes. Since the 1960s the availability of synthetic materials and new design and manufacturing techniques have led to many advances.

TODAY

Modern running shoes are a very sophisticated items. There is probably a different type of shoe for each race and field event. They are manufactured from synthetic components that are lightweight and durable to provide comfort and support for the foot while also giving the best possible grip to the runner.

There are two basic types of shoe used in cross country. Some runners prefer to wear spiked shoes because these give the best possible grip on grassy and muddy courses.



Others prefer a spike-less shoe which has a prominent tread (like an off-road vehicle tyre) to provide the optimum grip. These shoes are popular for situations where the course is partly on harder surfaces where spikes would not function properly because they could not penetrate the surface.



Choosing the right running shoe can be very tricky. There are lots of different designs and styles and it always makes sense for aspiring runners to obtain advice from specialist sports shoe shops.

We should like to thank Northampton Museum for granting permission to photograph and use images of old running shoes from their collection.