

GET STUCK IN »

With **OBSTACLE RACING** becoming more popular among everyday runners, we went behind the scenes and discovered that it's more than just mud and mayhem

Obstacle races are becoming more and more popular, with everyday runners taking the plunge into the weekend warrior territory and swapping their road runs for muddy bogs and 20ft obstacles. A recent report from www.active.com showed obstacle racing is a worldwide phenomenon, with an estimated 5000 events and as many as 10 million participants in more than 30 countries in 2014.

Since the start of Tough Guy in the UK, the first obstacle race to rise to fame back in 1987, individuals have become increasingly attracted to the challenges set by these courses, and are viewing them as

training playgrounds for their traditional running events. The large community that has built around these events has resulted in like-minded people competing all over the world, with events such as Tough Mudder boasting entry numbers in the region of two million at the end of 2014.

THE LURE OF OBSTACLES

With a large percentage of people taking part in these races worldwide, it begs the question what type of person takes part in these events, and what makes them want to throw themselves into cold water, scale high walls and crawl under barbed wire. The fact that the race is just that: a race, means that individuals who are used to taking part in endurance running events are instantly attracted to the time-based element, and the distance covered during the event. Runners are usually competitive, physically fit and strong.

The other factor to take into account is that those taking part in road races are potentially looking for another event that challenges their mental agility, and obstacle races do that by testing your ability to not only tackle the physical barriers, but also find the best path through each course, ultimately resulting in a faster time.

EXTRA BENEFITS

If you are currently taking part in endurance running events, and looking for something a bit different, then obstacle races can be a

Many obstacle races have a fun element, combining running with social interaction



great way to introduce variety into your training regime. Moreover, the events have extra benefits for runners:

Motivation. Signing up to an obstacle race means that you are committed to taking part in the event and many people take part with friends, which can help you to stay motivated during weeks of training.

Avoid injury. Training for an obstacle race can actually help you to stay injury-free and become a more well rounded athlete. You will need to increase your strength and circuit training work, and

reduce your overall mileage, which can assist any muscle imbalances and weaknesses that may cause running injuries.

Increase overall fitness. Obstacle racing requires a lot of stopping and starting, with strength movements thrown into the mix. Interval training should be incorporated into your weekly training to help your body recover quickly from sprinting.

Become stronger. Many of the races require crawling through tunnels and carrying sandbags. You can simulate these

The stats

A recent report from www.muddyrace.co.uk showed obstacle race events have soared with

205,000

entrants in 2013, up from 112,000 in 2012 and 40,000 in 2011

158 events

took place in 2013, with 70 new events across the UK UK obstacle race industry is now worth over

£12 million annually

exercises in your workouts by incorporating kettlebells, medicine balls and circuit-style training to subject your muscles to dynamic strength exercises.

Improves balance. Running through mud, jumping over obstacles and avoiding other competitors needs practice. Trail running on uneven surfaces in training will help you to develop your balance and improve your ability to conquer challenging terrains.

Encourages social interaction.

Scaling high walls and high ropes will be a challenge for most. When facing these obstacles with other like-minded people, competitors often give a helping hand to others on the course, encouraging social interaction.

The physical and mental nature of obstacle racing has a number of benefits, including boosting general good health and a sense of all round wellbeing. The extreme conditions that the individuals put themselves through on certain obstacles can also provide increased confidence – you'd be surprised what you can achieve!

KEY EXERCISES

So how can you prepare your body for the rigours of obstacle racing? "Climbing, jumping, crawling and hauling yourself over a range of obstacles requires a lot more upper body strength than normal running," explains personal trainer Paul Kenny (of Paul Kenny Fitness), "so it's important to vary your training accordingly." Below are four great exercises to challenge your current ability, and get you prepared for any obstacle race.



BEAR WALKS In order to tackle the lower obstacles, an element of crawling needs to be carried out. The best way to practice for this is doing bear walks; these will improve your upper body strength, especially your shoulders and core. The exercise uses the whole body in the movement, so all-over strength is achieved.

TRY IT! Start on all fours, with your hands underneath your hips. Keep your back flat and raise your knees off the ground. Move forwards on your hands and toes approximately 10 metres. Then turn around and crawl back. Repeat three times.



HILL SPRINTS Most obstacle races have sections with steep gradients, so getting this training done beforehand will pay dividends. Hill sprints are great for improving short bursts of stamina, cardiovascular fitness, leg strength and burning fat. Practising this exercise will also create mental toughness, making you a better competitor on race day.

TRY IT! Find the steepest hill you can, approximately 50-100 metres long. After a good 10-minute warm-up, sprint up the hill and jog back down. Aim to do this at least five times. You should try to do two weekly hill workouts a week, and build this to 4/5 per week over time. If you can do this then you will be in the best shape of your life!



Playful obstacle races can include crawling through foam and dodging paint

PLAYFUL RACES

With the growth of the obstacle race scene comes the growth of individuals sourcing the next punishing adrenaline fix and some events are introducing more extreme measures. Whilst extreme obstacles may well have been the reason you've been put off in the past, things are changing. The rise of 'playful' obstacle races are appearing with the likes of Water Wipeout, Mud N Madness and The Gauntlet Games, which focus more heavily on the fun, less-intimidating elements of a 5k run.

"I believe that there are a large number of people in the UK who fancy a challenge but don't want to get electrocuted or sprayed with tear gas," explained Sarah King, founder of The Gauntlet Games. "I wanted to create an event that catered for these people, and instead of barbed wire and burning charcoal we have foam, water guns, and a 50m slide. I want people to feel nostalgic and cross the line smiling like kids and feeling like they've just had fun in a purpose-built adult playground."

It's not about who gets round the quickest in these less competitive obstacle races, it's about having fun with your

friends. The growth in running events like The Electric Run and The Color Run (introduced in early 2011) highlighted this even more, with many groups of friends replacing a night out in the pub with an evening fun-run and live music.

Crawling through foam, being splattered by paint, and propelling yourself down a 50m water slide still provides an adrenaline rush. But having your friends alongside you makes it an even better experience, and can boost self-confidence.

"With The Gauntlet Games, you don't need to do a lot of training for the event, it's just about opening people's eyes to a new and really fun type of fitness they'd never thought of doing before. I want it to be open to everyone and ultimately see more people enjoying fitness," adds Sarah.

ARE YOU UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?

Over 200,000 people participated in obstacle races in 2014, and even Prime Minister David Cameron is signing up, so will you be going extreme this year or taking the more playful route? **RF**

THE GAUNTLET GAMES

The Gauntlet Games is the only obstacle race in the world, which is interactive. The course has no static obstacles, and the obstacles involve more friendly challenges involving foam, water guns, inflatables and a 50m slide.

Designed for those who might not have even completed a 5k run, let alone an obstacle course, the emphasis is on fun, lots of mud and the odd Gladiator to up the tempo.

This year's Gauntlet Games are being held on **18 April** at Hertford, Hertfordshire; **30 May** at Trent Park, London; **6 June** at Coedardhyglyn, Cardiff; **8 August** at Brighton (more info coming soon); and **5**

September at Hertford, Hertfordshire.

Prices start from **£29**, and include a free t-shirt and medal.

For more information visit: www.thegauntletgames.co.uk



BURPEES Obstacle races demand a basic level of fitness and a great exercise to achieve this is the burpee. It is definitely one of those exercises that everyone loves to hate, but it helps to improve the power in your muscles, which will assist you in jumping over high obstacles. Again like the bear crawls, burpees are a full-body exercise and functional, meaning that they can help you perform everyday activities like carrying groceries or lifting a suitcase.

TRY IT! Start in a standing position, squat down and put your hands on the ground in front of you. With a jump, extend both legs out behind you, very quickly bring them back in and jump into the air. Repeat at least 10-15 times.



BENCH JUMPS A brilliant exercise to help build a stronger upper body and create more powerful legs. The exercise is also a great way for improving jumping, which will assist to vault tricky areas on an obstacle course.

TRY IT! Find a bench or sturdy log, approximately 12 inches high. Place your hands together at one end and keep them there for the duration of the exercise. Put your feet together on one side, kick your heels and jump over the box, keeping both feet together. Repeat 20-30 times.



SINGLE LEG JUMPS Obstacle races require you to move in many planes of motion. Having a strong core, legs, and ankle joints, along with good balance will really help during the race. A great exercise to build this strength is a single leg jump, which builds leg strength and helps stabilise the hip and knee.

TRY IT! Stand on one leg raising the other knee, lean forwards straighten the leg out behind you and drive the 'free' leg back up in front of you and jump. Repeat this on both legs 15-20 times.