



TRIP

snowdonia

WALES

Sarah Stirling is on a three-day course to improve her off-road running and navigating. Don't ask her to show you where she is on the map...

WHAT:
Off-road running and navigating techniques

WHERE:
Snowdonia, Wales

HOW LONG:
A weekend, beginning with a run on the Friday evening

DIFFICULTY:
Tough

LOOK OUT FOR:
Landmarks to help you map read, stunning scenery, wet weather, a gazelle-like Sarah Stirling



It's raining torrentially in Snowdonia and I'm sprinting for the trees, gazelle-like. Or I would be if my legs didn't hurt so much and every step wasn't a choice between bottomless puddle or slippery stone. Hair plastered, trainers waterlogged, tights and socks too: OK, I'm basically stumbling along soaked to my pants.

Finally we reach the shelter of the forest. Paths off in every direction look the same and I'm just blindly following Iain, head down out of the onslaught. Then he stops.

"OK, where are we?"

Crap, I have no idea.

I open the map. We both lean over it to keep the rain off. I cup my chin thoughtfully, purse my lips and glance around, as if just getting my bearings. Then I stab a finger on the map at random.

"Here?" I ask hopefully.

"Nope."

"Here?"

"No." His expression is mostly neutral, but with shades of amusement.

"Next time, try thumbing the map," he suggests, which means keeping your thumb on your last location on the map while you run. And for his next trick he pulls out a little brightly coloured spinning gadget. "Have you ever seen one of these before?"

Well I never – it's a mini thumb compass! That would be ideal for orientating the map. Iain shows me where we are and we keep running, soon reaching a dam. He suggests that if I lose track of where I am again and can't see any features to help me relocate, I should keep going until I see something useful.

This why I've come on a course. I've been running off road for over 10

years without ever trying to improve my navigation at speed or in tricky locations. My home turf is the well-signposted Pembrokeshire Coast Path – I just hug the sea and keep going. Then I heard of Iain and Sarah Ridgway, two of the UK's pioneers of guided fell running. They both represent Wales at international level and are qualified mountain leaders. I wondered if it was time to learn some new skills...

Back in the forest, it's day three of my weekend of off-road race training and it's certainly been a steep learning curve. My quads are burnt out and it's an unfamiliar feeling to be digging this deep. I usually run for one to three hours a day at whatever pace I feel like without any aches.



A welcome break

I've got strong legs, or so I thought. Now I've realised it's all relative and I'm complacent. I'm not used to the steep pounding descents of Snowdonia, which kill your quads, and Iain is pushing my pace.

But I'm loving the challenge, it's invigorating and inspiring. We'd begun the weekend with a beautiful six miler on the Friday evening and then, bribing Iain with delicious lamb casserole at my hotel, I'd taken the opportunity to quiz him about running and racing.

I was interested in how elite racers organise their running. Iain runs around 80 miles a week. Most nights he does between eight and 12 miles, with morning runs a couple of days a week and longer at weekends. He built up progressively, hitting a steady 60 miles for two weeks a month, then 60 with races and speed work, then a steady 70. The main thing is month on month, year on year progression, he explained. Have a long-term outlook and aim for long periods of injury-free running.

Loving running rather than race times is important, he continued. It's easy to improve early on but that curve soon hits a plateau. It then

takes a lot of effort improve again. Iain logs everything on an excel spreadsheet, to keep focussed on mileage totals, and also so he knows when he has overdone it.

I ask if he has any advice for my weak ankle, probably from overdoing it. "Higher profile shoes can cause you to topple," Iain says. "I do almost all my running in flats, but they don't last long: about 300 miles. Do some one-legged balance exercises to strengthen your ankle, like brushing your teeth and washing up on one leg, and then do tiny one-legged squats, bending your knee slightly."

Next I asked about foot strike – should I hit the ground with the front, mid or heel of my foot? "Just run and you'll naturally get into an efficient stride to suit your body," says Iain. "They generally reckon 10,000 miles of running is needed for your body to basically run itself straight and run more efficiently. Track running helps form, and doing speed reps forces you to run better. However, for off-road runners this is all less of an issue, as where we land on our foot is so terrain dependent."

Iain recommends I read *Chi Running* by ultra-marathon runner Danny Dreyer, which contains good advice, like if your pace drops go back to basics. Head up, lift your feet, good stride, no reaching with your arms or legs, steady breathing, no clenching of hands. I've since found this basic advice very useful.

After dinner I'm sent home with the map and told I'll be navigating the next day. Unfortunately I fall asleep with it unravelled all over the old fashioned bedspread in my hotel room, but I'm sure it will be fine...

And it was fairly simple in the sunshine on day two. After running out the door and up Moel Hebog (782m), I'd clearly been able to see the smaller lumps of Moel yr Ogof (655m) and Moel Lefn (638m) ahead. We ran for a few hours (or walked the steep bits – Iain explained that it's often just as fast and therefore more efficient to walk when it gets really steep) and ended up at Ty Mawr – a cosy tea room in Rhyd Ddu. I had homemade soup, cheese and Dutch coffee, and then, refuelled, came up with the suggestion to run the four miles back to the hotel rather than get the train. Reader, I regretted it. Now to attempt to get out of this chair... ■

need more info?

» THE GUIDES

Run Snowdonia offers fell running camps, race-specific training camps, 24-hour challenge training (run or walk, it's up to you – just tell them your goal time and they'll train you in the months leading up to the event) and personal guiding and coaching.

Iain and Sarah Ridgway don't only guide runners around the most beautiful locations in Snowdonia, they also focus on how to enjoy the mountains safely and how to train to run fast through this stunning scenery. While out on a run they discuss fell running techniques and provide training tips, like how to handle a high training load and maintain injury avoidance (for many years they have both run 2,000+ miles per year in the hills of Snowdonia), how to structure your training to achieve the best results, how approaches vary between runners and how to prepare and then recover from long races or ultra-distance challenges. See www.runsnowdonia.co.uk.

» GET THERE

Iain and Sarah are based in Llanberis in Snowdonia. Take the A55 from northern England and Scotland, the A5 from the Midlands and southern England, and the A470 from south Wales. Or try Virgin Trains for services to Bangor from London and the West Midlands (www.virgintrains.co.uk).

» STAY THERE

I stayed at the Royal Goat Hotel, Beddgelert. It's a typical old-fashioned hotel, the kind with leather seats in the bar and prunes and grapefruit segments on the sideboard at breakfast (as well as a full Welsh breakfast!). My room was old fashioned but comfortable. The food is all homemade, locally sourced and very good. See www.royalgoathotel.co.uk or call 01766 890224.

» EAT THERE

We had lunch at Ty Mawr in Rhyd Ddu. The cosy tea room has four tables and seats 18 around a fireplace. It's open from 9.30am-5pm, serving all kinds of tea, coffee, hot chocolate, all day breakfast, sandwiches, paninis, homemade soups, Welsh Rarebit, Welsh cream cakes, ice cream and Dutch pancakes – all perfect after a long run. It's also a B&B. See www.snowdonaccommodation.co.uk or call 01766 890837.

» WHAT TO TAKE

I wore a long-sleeved wicking t-shirt, leggings and trail running shoes, although in winter you'll want more layers. A buff is useful for keeping your hair out of your face in the wind. I also carried a bum bag containing a Gore-Tex Active Shell jacket, hat, gloves, snacks for the day, money, camera, phone and water.

» FURTHER READING

Iain recommends *Chi Running* by ultra-marathon runner Danny Dreyer – see www.chirunning.com.