

The Summertime Blues

Contributed by Allan Besselink, PT, Dip.MDT
Thursday, 12 July 2007
Last Updated Friday, 29 February 2008

I am a blues lover ... sing the blues, play the blues, either way I enjoy it. Austin's a great place for live blues music - and admittedly one of my original reasons for moving here. But there is another type of blues that I don't enjoy quite so much - let's call that the summertime blues. When I think of summer in Austin, I think of the heat.

In order to survive a summer of training in the heat, you've got to have some strategies. We all know that training in the heat can become a real challenge. It seems harder to maintain your training pace – if anything, you may feel like you're running slower. You're lethargic. Perhaps it just seems like a lot of work. You can't go out early enough in the morning to avoid it. You feel like you can't drink enough to make up for it. So training in the heat is tough - that's a given. But what can be done to make the situation as good as possible?

Human physiology is designed to accommodate fluctuations in temperature. There are 4 primary mechanisms of cooling the body. Of these, two account for more than 80% of the heat loss capacity of the body. These are radiation (or "heat waves") and evaporation (water leaving the skin surface as a vapor).

Being active in hot conditions provides a "heat challenge" for the body to overcome. The heat challenge must be offset by heat loss, otherwise heat injury will occur. It is not only the temperature that is important – the humidity plays an important role. When both elements are factored in, we call it the heat index. For example, the heat index when it is 100 degrees air temperature and 20% humidity is 99 degrees. But if the air temperature is only 85 degrees, there will be a similar heat index if the humidity is 80%.

So if the ambient temperature is elevated, we have a greater heat challenge. I can't get rid of heat via radiation because the atmosphere is as hot (or hotter) than my body temperature. If the humidity is increased, then the "wetness" of the air more closely matches the "wetness" of my skin - making it harder for me to use evaporation as a means of cooling. Add to that the fact that most people start off being dehydrated (with less water to lose). You won't notice you're thirsty until you are about 3% dehydrated - which by that time can amount to a 20% loss of power output!

I would suggest that running in the heat will account for a 5-10% decrease in per mile pace - so for a 9:00 per mile runner, the same level of effort now gets you a 9:26 - 9:54 per mile. This is a huge difference in running pace!! That being the case, you either work harder for your same pace, or go slower for the same effort. In many ways, I would liken it to the effects of driving your car with the air conditioner on - there goes your gas mileage!!!

If we can regulate the heat challenge, and find better ways to foster heat loss, then we can be more successful in training through the summer. How do we do so? I am so glad you asked! You can refer to the handy "Training In The Heat" notes in the Downloads section.

If you're in Austin, then you can attend the "Training In The Heat" session at RunTex on Thursday August 2 at 7:00 pm (pre-registration is required - see the events calendar for further details).

Either way ... stay cool ... and stay safe!

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