

Former Swiss triathlete Irene Birrer of Powerhouse Personal Training in Collingwood, Ontario, has been hosting Deep Water Running (DWR) classes, sessions and clinics for years now. We hopped in the pool for a session so I could see how DWR worked, and if it could fit into my training. I was skeptical: I'd done it once before, when I was training while injured for an Ironman and didn't want to abandon running, but I hated it when I first tried it. But after splashing in the water for an hour, watching my heart rate skyrocket and coming out of the pool feeling like I'd done a fartlek set, I was a new convert. My knees—which had been a little grumpy due to an increase in hours spent running—thanked me, too.

You can always try DWR on your own, but if you have the chance to work with a coach who can help you master form and technique, it's a great investment. Run coaches often just produce training plans, but a good DWR coach will help focus on building form and efficiency.

But why should runners test out DWR? Let's dive in (pardon the pun).

#### Improve Your Form

When you're in the middle of a run outside, Birrer says, it can be tough to really focus on your form. But in the water, that's the perfect chance to dial in coordinating your arms and legs for max efficiency, and working on your strides. She focuses on three types of running in the water, mimicking downhill, endurance and uphill runs. Ankle flexion is key, and it only took one session for me to start seeing where I was losing efficiency. After she made some minor corrections, I took what she had told me onto the trail and immediately saw a difference, especially on the downhills. My upper body—who knew elbows mattered so much?—also got schooled.

#### Add Miles

So, you're trying to train for a marathon but you're worried about injury, only have time to run at night but hate treadmills, or just don't want to keep up-ing your mileage on pavement? There's an upper limit of how many miles us mortals can run outside during the week, but DWR can sneak in some extra run fitness plus a bit of resistance training with almost zero impact to your joints. So if you're already running, say, 50 miles a week, but you know going up to 55 starts hurting your knees, adding a DWR session might be the perfect solution: more time running, but no knee inflammation. It's a win-win-win.

#### Add Intensity

Running outside can feel brutal, but strangely enough, running hard in water doesn't feel quite as painful, even though my heart rate showed a whole lot of spiking during our sprints. I didn't seem to need the recovery time that I normally would after a hard effort or workout either, and my long run the next day actually felt better than usual. Birrer says that's not unusual: She finds that the more she gets in the water, the faster she is on land and the easier it feels to outrun her husband.

### Work Your Upper Body & Core

As runners, most of us tend to skip arm day at the gym. But with DWR, though you're still only mimicking the arm movements you would make on the trails, the resistance from the water provides a much more active workout for your upper body: it's not so much that you'll feel sore afterwards, but enough that you can certainly see some results and improvements in your upper body and core efficiency while running, and gain a bit of muscle tone as well.

### Recover Better

Whether you're recovering from injury or just need a recovery day in your week but don't want to skip a workout altogether, deep water running is a good alternative. It's super low-impact, but helps you maintain your running form and fitness. Birrer says that it's been shown to maintain fitness for six weeks—that's with no running outside—and she believes that it can help maintain your body for even longer than that if needed. She sees plenty of clients come in with an injury sustained from running, like a stress fracture, and use DWR as rehab... But then enjoy it so much that they keep coming to class long after they've healed!

### Have Fun

To be honest, sometimes running can feel like a bit of a drag—especially when you're putting in big hours, or doing lots of intensity. Doing DWR rather than an easy run, or even breaking up a longer run day into two workouts, one in water and one out, can make running fun again. And with music pumping in the pool, and while wearing a floatation belt, it honestly feels like you're just at a friend's pool party. Remember those when you were a kid? Think of this as a fitness-based game of Marco Polo and embrace your inner child. (It's also a sneaky way to get that friend who refuses to go running with you into running shape so he's willing to hit the trails in a few months.)

### Stay Cool (or Warm)

The last reason? It's getting sweltering hot out, and frankly, some pool time sounds a lot sweeter than another sweaty session of pounding the pavement. You can do deep water running in your own pool (or sneak into a neighbor's), since you don't necessarily need to be going long distance to reap the benefits. And for those in winter climates, it can be a better alternative to yet another hour logged on the treadmill or out in sub-zero temps.

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