

Top 5 New Training Tools 9/09

by Stride Longley

I'm a huge fan of shortcuts. Anything that theoretically makes my job, my life, or my passions easier or more fulfilling earns at least a sideways glance; were it not already considered painfully cliché, I'd write this article entirely in text-message acronyms from the comfort of my iPhone (don't worry, I'll spare you the obligatory smiley face).

That said, when it comes to running I'm no stranger to the myriad gadgets, gizmos, and old school witchcraft that all claim to give athletes a competitive edge. And you can trust me when I say I've experienced more than my fair share of duds (Reebok Pumps anyone?). As such, having waded through the mire of miscellanea for you, I'm here with 5 of the best new products to hit running in recent times.

Garmin Forerunner 310XT

Admittedly I have a strange fascination with any and all tech gadgets out there. Anything with a battery, a digital display, and a multitude of switches, buttons, and an expensive "optional accessory" list invariably wins top billing in my world. As such, it should be no surprise to my readership that a new beeping, blinking, and button-clad device has earned a spot in this column. Unlike the closetful of disused doohickeys totaling in the thousands of dollars, this one has earned my true respect: the brand new Garmin 310XT.

If you're a triathlete, you've likely had your eyes on this little technical marvel for several months or longer, eagerly anticipating a true multi-sport training tool long overdue. You can breathe a collective sigh of relief: this sucker is swimproof (mind you, not deep-sea-diving-proof or washing-machine-proof).

To the uninitiated, the Garmin 310XT is a GPS-based speed and distance training device (with optional heart rate functionality). The feature set alone leaves nothing to be desired, with so many data and display options to make even the most detail-oriented athlete whimper with indecision.

And the entire watch, slightly slimmer and sleeker than its predecessor (The Forerunner 205/305), features a case entirely devoid of leaky seams. The only places water could seep through, the buttons have been fitted with sturdy rubber gaskets, making the entire unit water resistant to 50m; not too shabby.

The real icing on the cake, though, is the immediate digestibility of any and all workout data thanks to the exceptional Garmin Connect online logging software and wireless data transfer courtesy ANT+. Simply finish a workout, walk through the front door, and as soon as you're within range (~30 feet) of your computer, your data is being wirelessly synced and your online profile updated. Handwritten training logs are a thing of the past.

The unit retails for \$349, or for \$399 you can get the optional heart rate monitor bundle. In either case it's worth every penny.

Nike Lunarglide+

Far be it from me to tout any one kind of footwear as “the right shoe for everyone,” but Nike has done an excellent job of creating a close approximation. Nostalgic readers may remember an Adidas offering called the Adidas One, an ambitiously high-tech shoe designed to, through the use of a microprocessor-powered actuator, provide variable levels of cushioning and support to suit a multitude of surfaces. Ultimately its price point proved too high for the market to bear, but its precedent – the catch all shoe – is its legacy.

To compare the Nike Lunarglide+ with the Adidas One would be unfair to both products, but as kindred spirits the lineage can't be overlooked. With Nike's offering, the microprocessors and actuators have been cast aside in favor of an alternately cushioned and supportive midsole composition that provides the neutral runner with a slightly firmer ride but little mechanical tradeoff, and the overpronator with a carefully designed wedge of support in a “there if you need it, unnoticeable if you don't” all-in-one package. Just give Google a whirl and you'll see all the press, praise, and pontification on the shoe; it even seems to have a life on Twitter.

To be fair, the shoe isn't without its shortcomings. For one, it is a relatively stiff shoe when compared to more typically neutral shoes like the Nike Vomero or Moto, lending itself to a somewhat heavier footfall in biomechanically efficient runners. Secondly, while purporting to be a good option for an overpronator, our experience has been such that it falls slightly short of the industry-leading Asics GT 2140 or Brooks Adrenaline GTS 9 in stability.

Despite this, if you're a neutral to slightly overpronated runner, this \$100 shoe deserves at the very least a quick 100 yard test ride. The Nike Lunarglide+ may not be for everyone, but it's certainly having a go at it.

Nike+ Sportband 2

To the careful readers who pick up the typographical errors my editing staff frequently overlook (and e-mail us about it), you may have your mouse pointer hovering over the “Reply” button due to the conspicuous and egregious use of the “+” sign in the past few paragraphs. Rest assured, despite the occasionally misplaced mathematical symbol, the plus sign is intentional.

Nike has cooped its symbol of choice to indicate products that are equipped to work with the Nike+ sensor, a small accelerometer in a thin elliptical chip which, when inserted into the appropriate footwear, allows the user to accurately (~97-98%) determine their speed and distance. Originally an exclusive partnership with Apple, utilizing the iPod Nano as a monitoring device, Nike has subsequently expanded their product line to include nearly all of their Bowerman Series shoes and has created its own wristwatch monitoring device. Twice.

The first edition of the Nike+ Sportband, a small, sleek, and innovative design which allowed the user to first train, and then by detaching the USB-sporting watch face transmit workout data, was introduced in April of 2008 to much fanfare. Unfortunately, quality control and reliability issues plagued the watch

within a matter of weeks and ultimately resulted in a complete product recall. Back to the drawing board.

In July of 2009, Nike finished its tweaks, updates, and durability testing and came back on the market with the Nike+ Sportband 2, a much improved design (no longer with the inverted white on black digits) ready to work out of the box.

While calibration is a necessary step in improving the product's accuracy, a few quick laps around a track can give the watch all the data it needs to surmise how fast you actually are, and from there accuracy is no longer a matter of concern.

For \$59 (sensor chip and watch), you'd be hard pressed to find a better value in the speed and distance monitoring market. It can have its finicky moments during the initial setup, but once up and running its reliability is par excellence.

Gu Roctane

In spite of a testimonial list a mile long featuring some of the more preeminent endurance athletes on the planet (Ironman multiple champions, grand tour cyclists, ultramarathoners, etc.), I found myself hemming and hawing over Gu's newest creation, Roctane.

For one, the flavors (Blueberry Pomegranate and Vanilla Orange), in gel form at least, sounded atrocious and vaguely like an industrial cleaner, respectively. Something about both of those gave me haunting visions of a complete and utter gastronomic breakdown somewhere very far away from home, and that is a less than comforting thought.

There's also the price, \$2.50, which, considering the frequency with which I consume gels would quickly surpass my weekly adult beverage budget.

And lastly there's the inclusion of the dubiously beneficial "Roctane Amino Blend," and Ornithine Alpha-Ketoglutarate (OKG, sounding more bird-derived than perhaps its creators would hope), a group of supplemental ingredients said to boost endurance, delay lactic acid buildup, aid in recovery, and reduce both mental and physical fatigue (all of which can be improved with actual training). Sheesh.

Long story short, I tried it and, believe it or not, I like it. The flavors were both sufficiently palatable (and much less synthetic tasting than some other fruity gels out there), and the consistency was much more like honey than toothpaste, a frequent battle I have with gels.

And the best part: it actually worked surprisingly well. Do I think the "Roctane Amino Blend" and OKG are a miracle of modern science? No. Do I think it's a substitute for actual smart training and physiological awareness? No. But if you ask whether or not I think it's a good supplement, I'll go all in.

I tried the gels in place of my usual Accel Gel (at the same intervals, in the same amounts) both on a 50-mile bike ride and a 13.1-mile run and felt (qualitatively) stronger in the last 30-45 minutes of each

workout than I typically do. My efforts were consistent with prior workouts based on heart rate data, and my overall fatigue level afterward was markedly improved.

In summation, I feel the \$2.50 price tag is a bit steep for my taste, but the performance benefits seem to be there. It's hard saying whether I will replace my much adored vanilla Accel Gel with a full-time Roctane regimen, but it's hard to ignore when a product –gasp- does what it says it will do.

Thera Roll

Despite my monthly pleas to the better sensibilities of my readership to always stretch, religiously, after a workout, I myself frequently ignore such advice. And no doubt as a direct result of my karmic disregard, I have IT bands that bounce back and forth from ludicrously tight to excruciatingly painful, only stopping briefly in between at sheer misery.

So my constant search for a solution (other than the obvious: stretching more frequently) has sent me down a multitude of misleading paths: electro-stim therapy, yoga, simple prayer to the running gods, etc. Having used foam rollers in college, I found their utility to be suitable, if not unnecessarily eye-watering. And once a typical foam roller had seen my 185 pound frame more than a few times, it would soon be put out to pasture, having little life left to give.

Fast forward several seasons and hundreds of dollars in foam rollers later, I've landed, sharp stabbing pain and all, squarely on a product that seeks to fix all that the foam roller does wrong: the Thera Roll.

At first glance, it's a pretty simple design (almost laughably so – you'll wish you invented it), comprised of a microcell high durometer foam with sine-wave ridges cut from end to end. It looks rather a lot like a long Play-Dough noodle pushed through a gear-shaped hole, and the theory is that these ridges help to both stimulate blood flow and decrease the surface area in contact with the muscle tissue, thereby concentrating its tension relieving power.

It hurts. A lot.

But it's probably the best tool I've ever used to assault my demoralized little IT bands, and it has paid dividends in just a short period. Within a matter of days after switching from a traditional medium density foam roller to the medium density Thera Roll (it comes in 3 densities and several sizes), I noticed a marked improvement in both my flexibility and overall pain relief.

And while its price point, \$60 for a medium density 3-footer, is on the upper end of what I feel most would be willing to pay, its construction boasts a sturdiness factor that puts the cheaper foam rollers to shame. Better yet, the denser you go, the longer the Thera Roll will last you. Take it from a formerly wounded sidewalk soldier: this thing is the real deal.

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