

Newsletter

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Running Form Is A Skill To Be Learned

Bruce Deacon – Times Colonist March 3, 2007

Most of us got our first introduction to running in gym class. If your experience was like mine, this involved the teacher telling you to run around prior to the games of kick ball, dodge ball or soccer. It was assumed that everyone could run if they tried hard enough.

Some kids instinctively knew how to run. They looked smooth and coordinated and didn't tire. Others appeared to be swimming more than running and really needed the teacher to offer some instruction on how to run. This coaching was rare.

Perhaps the teacher didn't notice or know what to say. Maybe they just figured that if these kids did enough running that they would catch on. However, most of these children never did. They either grew up to hate the activity that nobody ever taught them how to do, or were plagued by injuries caused by poor running form.

Running form is a comprised of learned skill and individual biomechanics. As symmetrical as we would all like to think that we are, few of us are without our own quirks. For instance, it is not uncommon to have a small leg length difference. Your foot plant might be slightly different on one foot than on the other due to a myriad of anatomical differences. We each come in different shapes and sizes, but making our running styles a little bit unique.

That said there are certain elements of form that are common to us all. These can be taught, practiced and improved. The end result is not only more efficient running, but also fewer injuries, fatigue and discomfort.

The first key to good form is proper posture. If that school teacher had known what to say, they would have told you to run tall. In other words, imagine that you are like a puppet suspended by a string. Your head is high and you are upright. Your shoulders are back and your chin isn't too far forward. Gone is the slouch in your back.

You might find that keeping this posture is difficult. This is a good indication that you need a bit of core stability work. Some work on an exercise ball will help strengthen your core muscles. But even without additional strength work, your ability to run more upright will improve with continued focus and practice.

Next, relax your upper body. A lot of people carry unnecessary tension in their shoulders, neck and face. If you find your shoulders creeping up to meet your ears, then it is time to concentrate on loosening up. Shake out your shoulders and keep them low and loose. Relax your neck and let your cheeks bounce as you stride.

Your arms should swing forward and not from your side. Bend your elbows at a 90-degree angle and cup your hands into a loose fist. Your hands should come up to nipple level and swing back level with your hips. Practice your arm motion in front of a mirror, looking for wasted motions that are not helping to propel you forward.

Work with gravity. This is done mostly by ensuring that your centre of gravity is not too far back and not excessively forward.

Think of your centre of gravity as being your sternum. Ideally, it should be ever so slightly ahead of your hips, giving you a bit of forward lean. This allows you to use gravity to propel you forward.

However, if your lean is too pronounced, you will start to notice tightness or soreness in your lower back.

A quick leg turn-over is more efficient than over-striding. Ideally, your foot should contact the ground only slightly ahead of your body. Your foot strike should not make a slapping sound, but should be quiet and springy.

It is worth asking a friend to video tape your running style from a variety of angles.

Notice any areas of tightness, wasted motions and posture. Getting some coaching from experienced runners will also help you to refine your form through helpful tips and form drills.

It is never too late to learn how to run or improve your running form. It will yield faster times, fewer aches and pains and more enjoyable runs.