Running Tips from Don White

Beginning Runner: Why we can run long distances and how.

Humans, as animals, evolved to be distance runners. A combination of foot structure, muscle and tendons, and our ability to sweat for cooling all add to this natural ability.

 “We evolved to run,” says Dr. Irene Davis, director of the Spaulding National Running Centre and a professor in the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the Harvard Medical School in Boston. “Running is in our genes.”

Why the human foot was made for running – even without shoes

By: Doug Williams, Special to ESPN.com Nov 3, 2017

In his article, Williams reinforces Davis by pointing out the flexible, longitudinal arch that bears body force; our long Achilles tendons that store and return energy; the padded ball on the forefoot that gives us a natural landing spot. Add to these features the ligaments that keep our heads from falling forward, our glutes which help provide balance, and our slender forearms that provide balance as we run and we can begin to realise that although we may not like to run, we are built to run.

Landing on the ball of the foot is probably the most contentious issue that I, as a coach, have to deal with. The fallacy is that shoe manufacturers have designed running shoes for people who walk – not run – and because of this those shoes tend to lead to injury.

In 1960, Ethiopian Abebe Bikila, won the mens Olympic marathon barefooted. Running barefooted is practiced by many runners for a number of reasons: improving foot strength, getting a better feel for the surface being run on, being a gentler runner. Todays running shoes are designed to do what our feet have been genetically designed to do. Long story short, wearing todays running shoes, as designed, often weakens our foot strength and can lead to both short- and long-term injury.

So, as a runner, how do I go about landing on the ball of my foot, that part of my body designed for me to land on? Think “stand tall”: your body will align so your shoulders are above your hips which are above your feet – you are standing in a vertical line. Engage your glutes, think “squeeze your bum”. If you do this properly you will feel your lower back muscles engage.

As you run, your stride will shorten so that your foot plant is close to your body, just in front of your hips. You should feel the first point of pressure as your foot strikes under the ball of each foot. Your heel will drop and contact the ground before you take your next stride. This will tend to make you take your next stride more quickly, you will feel slightly off balance going forward.

Keep your head up and look to where you are going. Looking at the ground to make sure you don’t trip throws off your stride, prevents you from seeing dangers ahead and limits your opportunities of seeing the world around you.

Swing your arms easily back and forth with comfortably bent elbows, hands open. Think of your arms as the driving arms of a steam locomotive moving back and forth in the direction that you are travelling. Don’t swing your arms in front of your body, or at least try to limit this. Your arms are doing two things: first, they provide balance for your body much as a dogs swinging tail provides balance and second, they provide momentum to your forward movement. Sprinting and running up hill become more effective (by up to 30% for sprinters) by swinging the arms powerfully.

Start slowly. Run with a partner with whom you can carry on a conversation. Talk. The most common practice and biggest reason for quitting is that a novice runner will run too fast, get injured and quit. Talk, talk, talk. You can’t run fast and chat. If you are running with several friends and one of the group is not talking, it’s because the pace is too fast -- they are concentrating on breathing and can’t join in. Slow down! You will all enjoy the run that much more. You will enjoy the company. And chances are you will see more of the world around you.