

Run Tall

The simplest, most effective running form cue. BY GREG MCMILLAN, M.S.

I was lucky to run at a high school where the coach and the upperclassmen focused on proper running form. It was something we worked on frequently. As a result, nearly every runner leaving the program had very good form. Notice that I didn't say "the same form." We all had differences in our body structure and function, so we had variations in our form. We all, however, looked good running.

The first lesson that our coach taught us was to "run tall." It's the easiest cue to use for runners and will clear up about 90 percent of form issues. It's a simple idea that when consistently implemented results in significant improvements in running form.

Here's the idea: Your head should be balanced over your shoulders. Your shoulders should be balanced over your hips, and your hips should be balanced over your legs. No slouching your shoulders (a common problem since most of us are hunched over a computer all day). No head in front of your body (more thanks to the computer). No butt sticking out. Since I've coached high-schoolers up to senior citizens, I know that just by telling them to run tall, their running technique improves greatly no matter how experienced of a runner they are.

We can debate footwear (from "normal" shoes to minimal shoes and even to bare feet), foot plant (heel strike, midfoot strike and toe strike) as well as any of the other biomechanical theories/opinions that are gaining popularity. But if you focus just on running tall, you'll run better. You'll have better technique. You'll create less stress on your body. And you'll counteract the gradual return to a hunched-over caveman that our everyday lives encourage.

Your task, then, isn't to spend hours reading opinions on running form and footwear. Your task is just to think about running tall over the next week. This doesn't mean running stiff. It means simply holding your body in a relaxed yet balanced position. Once you achieve this relaxed, balanced position with your body, then the rest of good form is pretty easy to correct.

Watch Yourself

In high school, we watched ourselves run past store windows, car windows or any other reflective surface we ran by. This visual feedback will help you find and perfect your best running form. Take a peek the next time you have the opportunity.

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I'm indifferent when it comes to all of the hullabaloo about running form and footwear. I see successful runners with all types of running form and types of foot plant. While I think we should all work to gain or maintain good running form, my opinion on running form and foot plant is that the most important running form/foot plant for you is the one that keeps you healthy. I was a mid-foot striker (often considered to be a more "correct" foot strike) but was hurt all the time. Now I'm a heel-striker and am healthy. Many people are the opposite. It doesn't matter as long as you stay healthy. A healthy runner can train more consistently over time, which is a key to realizing your potential. Running tall encourages the foot to land more under the body (instead of in front of the body) no matter which part of the foot is touching down first.

The second consideration is that your best running form/foot plant should make you efficient. Since most of us run races of 5K to the marathon, efficiency (running economy) is more important than pure speed. We need to be able to run as economically as possible. This will keep lactic acid levels under control and lead to fast times.

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The third consideration is that your best running form/foot plant should make you fast. While I've heard far too many biomechanists try to get distance runners to run like sprinters, we know that running this way is too energy costly, which is why efficiency is ranked second in this list. But we all like to sprint at the end, and good running form and foot plant should allow us to do this. Having powerful technique can also help us avoid injury because of the way our bodies recruit muscles when running in our most powerful position.

A few years ago — since my form was changing anyway — I developed two running styles. One is my heel-strike, super-efficient form that keeps me healthy and racing economically. The other is my up-on-my-forefoot sprint technique. Having both techniques in my arsenal means I can stay healthy and run efficiently, but I can also sprint when necessary. Learn to run tall first, then experiment to find your best technique for whatever type of running you do. ■



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