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ChiRunning® & ChiWalking®

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Running Form and Longevity: The ChiRunning® Approach

If you are like most runners, you probably would like to be able to run for the rest of your life. That is certainly a goal for me—but is it realistic or even possible? Aren't injuries, ongoing wear and tear and, ultimately, physical limitations and break down just a natural process for runners? Aren't Masters runners destined to have to stop running long before the lights are out? In light of existing data regarding the percentage of runners who are injured during a given year (over 60%), it would seem inevitable that physical problems will make the lifelong running dream just a dream. But does it have to be that way? I think not.

In my view, running itself is not the problem in terms of so many people getting running injuries and having to give up running—it's how people run. Considering the widely held belief that running is an activity that almost all people can do reasonably well just because they are humans, it is not surprising that running form varies so much and is so problematic in its effect on the well being of runners. Unlike most sports and fitness activities where taking lessons is quite common, it is a rare runner who seeks any input on running, let alone on the form or technique of running. Running classes that do exist, and running coaches for the most part, tend to focus on training regimens, distance, speed, technical details and the like; they spend little time on running form and the consequences of poor form. Fortunately, the times, they are a changin'—running form (technique) is gaining more and more attention in the running community, and the implications are profound.

Over a half century or so of running, I have experimented with my running and my running form in varied ways—alignment, stride length, turnover, breathing patterns, etc. but it has only been in the past several years that I have found a coherent system to guide me in such critical aspects of my running, and it goes by the name of ChiRunning. ChiRunning is a new, holistic and natural approach to running that has quickly moved to center stage in the discussion of running injuries and running longevity and the possible role that running form plays in the equation. ChiRunning was developed by Danny Dreyer, a successful ultra marathoner who used his own running experience (including multiple injuries) and his experience and understanding of Tai Chi ("chi" meaning energy or life force) to articulate and implement the principles that have evolved. By paying attention to such basic elements as posture, gravity, relaxation and the importance of working with nature, he created a powerful, straight forward approach to running. With its emphasis on energy efficiency, ease and injury prevention, ChiRunning is dramatically altering the landscape of running.

Since ChiRunning is the model I know best, I'll describe a couple of the elements of this model to give the reader an idea of how it works and how it differs from more traditional approaches (for more information, see *ChiRunning*® by Danny & Katherine Dreyer, Simon & Schuster, 2004). At the foundation of ChiRunning is its emphasis on posture—poor posture makes it impossible to have efficient running form whereas good posture opens the door to running with relaxed muscles while using a natural lean of the body for propulsion rather than relying on the legs to make forward motion happen (an approach common to most traditional running styles). Good posture and good form rely heavily on alignment and balance in all directions of the body so that there is no unnecessary motion be it up/down, side/side or front/back. What results is a running style that has the body aligned in motion, like a column, from shoulders to hips to ankles. The runner's feet are never in front of the body while the legs, and the running stride, move effortlessly behind the runner. Posture, form, alignment, core strength and relaxed peripheral muscles—all of these elements help create the desired conditions for the runner's energy to flow with the greatest of ease. In terms of training approaches, in the ChiRunning model, the focus is always on form no matter what goals may exist in such areas as distance and speed. With good form, increased distance and increased speed will follow.

Many runners have experimented with stride length, cadence and position of foot strike as they seek an efficient running style. Likewise, in the ChiRunning model, these are important variables which, in brief, result in the feet remaining under the runner's "column" so that the contact point of the feet will be at the mid-foot rather than near the heel or the ball of the foot. Likewise, consistent with the ease and efficiency goals, stride length increases with body lean while cadence stays constant while running.

So, as far as life long running and running form are concerned, let me briefly share how my own running experience relates to this topic. Although I have always tried to run with awareness, I was not always successful in avoiding running injuries. After completing a dozen marathons in the late '70s and early '80s, I pulled back from distance running—I just didn't need the aches and pains that seemed to come with that level of running. After 22 years of no marathons, however, I came upon the ChiRunning approach and found that new possibilities had opened up for me. This led to my becoming a Certified ChiRunning® Instructor but it also led to my running a few more marathons to see what difference my new running form would make—and to see if I could meet my (previously discarded) lifelong goal of qualifying for, and running in, the Boston Marathon.

Long story short, I qualified for Boston on my third attempt and ran it in 2006—not quite as fast as my last few marathons in 1982 but quite respectable for my age group. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of my re-entry to marathons at this stage of my life and my adoption of the ChiRunning form was the short recovery time that was now required after a marathon. With better form and a more "ease-ful" running style, I found that I recovered in very little time—a welcome consequence of running with good form and minimal use of leg muscles. Most certainly, my experience has been a validation that running form is directly related to longevity of running. Masters runner? Run for life? Check your form and go for it!