



BACK TO BASICS

If anyone could do with some improved running technique or, let's call it what it is, lessons in running, it's me, says John Carroll

I've had a few what are called 'biomechanical issues', which is to say I have or have had a running style that has given rise, over the years, to Achilles tendonitis and tendonosis, and to what I described to one specialist as "a tremendous stabbing pain in my heel that makes me cry, or would if I weren't such a man, which I am". I've had my gait analysed, I've had physio sessions and I now have orthotic inserts in my shoes to – oh, the indignity – correct my actual walk. I also have a painful history of spraining my right ankle and once tore ligaments in it. To be honest, if I were a horse I'd have long ago been called into my stable for a "special chat".

So when my editor asked if I was interested in undergoing a six-week training programme with The Running School (www.runningschool.co.uk), I agreed with my biggest and therefore least convincing smile. Yes, I was interested in learning if my running style could be improved by mere mortals; no, I was not looking forward to the prospect of being watched, photographed and filmed while galumphing about on a treadmill.

The Running School was set up by Mike Antoniedes in 2008. He's been coaching at all levels – from Olympic athletes to eager but uncoordinated children and

complacent, even more uncoordinated adults – for 30 years. He sits in on my first hour-long session, which he says is the most important of the six. This is where Antoniedes and coach Emma Manaton will analyse my running style and identify my weaknesses.

AND SO IT BEGINS

After some preliminary questions about my running regime – three times a week, about 40 minutes a time – I step onto the treadmill and begin to first walk and then run in what I optimistically consider

[They almost clip each other.] It does not necessarily tell us there's something wrong with the foot. It tells us there is something wrong further up the chain, up here." She indicates my backside and hips.

Antoniedes adds, "There's a lot of movement around your waist, which is compensation movement, and that's what's causing the problem."

And on it goes, and deeper becomes my mortification. I know I can't lay claim to anything approaching an elegant running style, but having my clomping gait analysed with such precision is not a

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a normal manner. There is a mirror in front of me and another on my left: I don't know whether to look at my movement or at Antoniedes and Manaton, who are observing with intent. They also film me from behind and from the side as I run short intervals at various speeds and inclines – there is nothing like an incline to show up weakness, I am told. Then we sit and watch the video nasty.

"Your right foot is landing pretty much near the centre of the treadmill, so is your left," says Manaton "So as you run your feet are crossing over at the back.

comfortable experience. There's no hope for me, I think; they're going to send me home. But both look as if they have seen it all before. My problems are common.

"Look, there, the faster you go, the more that right foot is beginning to flick across at the back of the step," says Antoniedes. And you're not using your hamstrings or glutes, two of the most powerful muscles in the body."

"Look at how your core is twisting. Your lower back muscles are twisting from side to side in compensation. All the stress is on your lower back. That tells me you »

have lower back pain.” I do, occasionally, but this is a far more painful experience. The analysis continues – the video is slowed down, speeded up, lines are drawn from one point on my frame to another, and while the coaches seem neither fazed nor surprised, it’s clear there is work to be done.

BABY STEPS

Here’s the breakdown: I overstride (putting pressure on my Achilles tendons and my calves); my right foot lands flatter than my left; I’m twisting from the lower back; my arms are coming back and to the side, but there is no driving motion, so they are not helping at all; and my heels are not coming up enough – almost all the work is being done by my hip flexors. Oh, and my right stride is shorter than my left. It’s a wonder I can run for a bus without falling on my face or going into spasm.

“You’re mostly a shuffler, but you’re also a bit of a twister,” is how Antoniedes sums me up. I’ve been called many things in my time, but this is just cruel.

Having been comprehensively broken down, it’s time to put my running back together again. Antoniedes begins with the eminently sensible notion that no one is taught how to run. We just begin to do it as soon as we escape from the pram, but never stop to think if we are doing it right. So we develop bad habits and unconsciously introduce all sorts of compensations to make running as comfortable as possible and to protect ourselves from injury. But all we’re really doing is storing up trouble.

The first step on my road to adequacy is to develop a cycling motion with my legs, which will bring in my glutes and allow me to land lightly. As it is, the sound I make when my feet hit the treadmill is that of a fat man dancing a jig on a tin floor.

Each brief run begins with me stepping onto a treadmill whizzing around at 7mph. The idea behind this is that it stimulates the nervous system – I can attest to that – and the fast-twitch muscles. At first I run while holding on to the bar in front of me, to concentrate on the cycling motion.

Bringing my heels back so far, almost to my backside, seems unnatural, as does driving the knee forward, but I note that already I am landing more lightly. On the other hand, I am tiring quickly, and that’s even before the arm motion is added. Arm motion is vital to efficient technique, says Antoniedes. He utilises an exaggerated style to teach proper arm movement – the elbows are locked at 90 degrees and the arms driven to a ‘back-pocket’ position and then forward up to the chin. Concentrating on the leg motion is hard enough; marrying it with the exaggerated arm motion is like rubbing your tummy and patting your head at the same time, while reciting *The Waste Land*. In Flemish. I feel ridiculous, too. Who runs like this?

The exaggerated style and accelerated learning techniques have a purpose. They are designed to create what Antoniedes calls “a new map in the brain.”

“It’s called a motor engram. You are creating a map of the movement. You are

re-teaching your nervous system.” I am relearning – in fact, ‘learning’ for the first time – how to run. And it drains me. I try to maintain the correct arm and leg motion, but I soon tire and slip back into old habits, to preserve energy. Manaton calls encouragement and draws attention to my lapses in technique – the arms stop moving and they drift outward, the shuffle motion threatens to return, I begin to lean rather than keeping my body straight, my chest high. Concentrating on so many aspects of technique is akin to balancing plates on sticks – if one goes, they all do.

FAR FROM THE ZONE

At the end of the session I have not run far, but I am exhausted. I’m running, thinking, adjusting, taking mental notes and using muscles that aren’t at all happy about being woken up.

“We all go through the same learning process,” says Antoniedes. “First, we don’t know what we don’t know – unconscious incompetence. Then we have conscious incompetence – we know we’re not doing it right, and that’s frustrating. That’s the hardest part to get past. Then there is conscious competence – if you think about something, you can do it. The point we all want to reach is unconscious competence.” This is the place elite athletes are referring to when they say they were in ‘the zone’. You’re performing beautifully and you’re not even thinking about it. You are at one with the run. As I leave on the first day I am, at best, at sixes and sevens with mine.

Two days later I try to use the technique on a treadmill in my gym. I become tired very quickly and so the session is a stop-start affair. There are many curious glances, but I’m not bothered – most of them come from those unfortunate men who can neither perform a one-handed press-up nor towel themselves dry after a shower without using a mirror for, I have to assume, visual clues.

RAPID IMPROVEMENT

Over the next few weeks, watched, cajoled encouraged and corrected by Manaton or fellow trainers Teri Knight and Lyndsey Cannon, something happens. It becomes easier, and eventually much easier, to perform and then to maintain a more fluid, efficient running technique. In week two, I am still flicking out my right foot and I have a tendency to lean over, which means my glutes are not being used and my core muscles are doing nothing. I am forced to work hard, the idea being that repetition helps the brain and body remember the movements so they become automatic. After each burst, I leap off the treadmill and listen to Knight’s advice. She tells me that I seem to be concentrating so much on the arm movement that I’m neglecting the leg motion, or vice versa. I nod and occasionally say “OK” because it’s only two letters. At one point I am running with thick rubber bands hooked around my elbows and thumbs. The idea is that they force me to maintain the correct arm angle without giving myself an embolism thinking

about what I’m doing. After the run session I am given some exercises to strengthen my core, glutes and hamstrings. They all hurt.

“We get you running faster than you are used to, purely to get the exaggerated movement, to get the hamstrings and the glutes working, and the full motion of the arms,” says Knight. “Then, in the later sessions, we take it down to race pace and develop a more natural feeling.”

“OK,” I say.

CORE OF THE PROBLEM

The following week – after practising outdoors – my form has improved further, but my technique slips as my time on the treadmill increases – I am up to a minute. It doesn’t sound like a lot, but with the concentration involved, my comparative lack of familiarity with the running style, the incline of the treadmill and, frankly, a desire to do it right, I finish the session drenched in sweat and out of breath. But I feel better, too. The new running style feels easier, more natural, although I notice, as do the coaches, that when the speed is slowed down, I revert to a loping style of running. I am told that some core work should correct this. Goody.

On week four Knight takes a new video and plays it alongside the footage from week one. The difference is astonishing. In the first my running style suggests I should be wearing a house coat and slippers and talking about the Blitz. The new video shows a man with a strong, upright, powerful running style. There are

still some imperfections – I have a tendency to stick out my backside a little when tiredness creeps in – but this is nonetheless the run of a man going somewhere, albeit on a treadmill going nowhere. I have learnt the technique; now it’s all about maintaining it.

REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT

Between sessions I continue to practise and to do the strength work that should ensure that my glutes and hamstrings are not in perpetual rebellion, and agony, when I run. Session five is all about reinforcing technique through harder and longer intervals on the treadmill.

The final session is again given over to reinforcement of technique. It is the most physically demanding hour of running I can recall but as I recover between intervals I watch another client running at faster speeds and at a greater incline than I am. In between his intervals he does plyometrics. I wonder if they’ve brought him in on purpose. I draw on the reserves I use for basic brain function and finish the final run with greater ease than I would have thought possible. And that’s it. I have a new running style. I do wonder if I will be able to maintain the technique over long distances, but so far, so very good. I’m no thoroughbred, but neither am I in danger of being sent away to a very special retirement home that no one can visit.

For information on *The Running School*, call 0208 563 0007 or email run@runningschool.co.uk. ■

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