

TOPIC OF THE MONTH FOR MARCH 2007

FORM RUNNING

Practicing kicking, punting, or snapping alone will not necessarily lead to improved performance. Unless the body is mechanically prepared to function efficiently, repeating the kicking, punting, or snapping process may produce little gain and may lead to injury. On the other hand, improving the body without practicing kicking, punting, or snapping almost always produces improved performance upon return to practice. Also, as the body grows, what worked well in the past will cease to be the perfect balance of body motion unless attention is given to the following activities.

- FORM RUNNING > BALANCE, BODY CONTROL, STEP CONTROL
- STRETCHING > FLEXIBILITY, RANGE OF MOTION
- STRENGTH TRAINING > POWER POTENTIAL
- PLYOMETRICS > MUSCLE SPEED

Prior to taking any swing, golfers and baseball batters establish a stance which allows for body weight shift during the swinging motion. They stand a proper distance from the "strike zone" for the club or bat to make sound contact with the ball. Yet, batters frequently fail to hit the baseball, and golfers often drive the ball wide of the intended path. Aside from eye-hand coordination, they cannot keep the swing path level/straight when the body weight shifts away from the initial stance, pulling the hands out of alignment. They are standing on two feet and holding the hitting implement in an adjustable position in both hands, and they still get it wrong frequently.

Kickers and punters stand on one foot, and the hitting implement (the other foot) is attached to the body, not held in the hands. Moreover, they must take steps to arrive at the plant spot while the leg is in the process of swinging. (Imagine the baseball batter outside the batter's box until the pitcher releases the ball. A right-handed batter would step in on his left foot only, right foot tucked up behind him, while attempting to swing the bat with speed and precision. It would soon become apparent that the quality of the step would dictate the quality of the bat swing.) With kickers and punters, balance on the last step (or lack of any consistent balance) dictates the quality of the kicking leg swing. The "smart" foot is the one on the ground while the "stupid" foot is making contact. Unfortunately, most

kickers and punters try to train the kicking foot without paying enough attention to the location and balance of the plant foot. They also learn to kick and punt before they reach body maturity, so they fail to adjust smoothly when the body grows. Focus on proper running form contributes to development of consistent body control during the kicking/punting process and simplifies the selection of kicking or punting form suited to the individual's body type.

Form running aims to train the head and torso (shoulders to hips) to remain as still as possible while the body makes forward progress straight ahead. Because the kicking/punting leg is attached to the body, any shift of the torso in the two or three steps prior to kicking or punting will automatically change the swing path and the contact with the football. Learning to run correctly eventually becomes part of balanced kicking/punting form. To balance on one foot while swinging the other leg with the toe pointed and locked, both hips must be upright and square, and the weight must land in the instep (not on the heel) of the plant foot. The following descriptions help players picture the position of the hips during form running and balanced kicking.

- If a kicker or punter is wearing a shirt loose enough to hang free when that player is standing still, the shirt should never get stuck on the player's butt during the start or any of the form running steps. If the shirt catches on the hips, the hips are in the wrong position!
- If the shirt worn by a kicker or punter had on the back a picture of a playing card (king, jack, queen, etc.), the card should remain flat during form running. The body under the shirt should not twist, bend, or rotate. Although the arms and legs are moving, the torso should stay still enough that the "card" is never shuffled or bent. If the "card" changes shapes, the torso is out of control.

Form running also benefits snappers. Snappers must keep their shoulder pads square to the line of scrimmage. The hands delivering the ball must exit straight back to send the snap accurately to punter or holder. Keeping snapper shoulders square on field goals and points after touchdown (PAT's) assists the guards in blocking the gaps next to the snapper. Square posture also helps the snapper secure his stance and block. On punt snaps, the snapper is often expected to explode from the line and run down field (ahead of other players) to cover the punt.

Practice form running every day as circuit training to teach the body how to start forward on a real kicking or punting play. Wear shoes with good arch and ankle support, preferably not kicking or cleated shoes. Although this is a good warm-up activity at any athletic practice, it can happen anywhere and in any clothing. Space required is 10 to 15 yards of level surface, indoors or outside, preferably with surrounding objects to make the athlete aware of head and body shifts. The mirrors in the weight room help, but patterns of floor tile in a hall or wall bricks in a gym or door frames in the garage provide adequate guidance. Facing into the squares of a soccer or volleyball net also gives perspective on head movement. The least helpful site is the middle of an empty field, even though watching objects in the distance gives some sense of body movement. After several sets of starts, move into controlled sets of "butt kick" running.

Several vocabulary words describe correct form running.

TRANSFER

All weight is balanced and evenly distributed in the new foot as that foot lands, removing all weight from the previous foot. (The body must be upright, without the hips protruding behind, for transfer to happen.)

SEPARATION

When standing still at "attention," with feet inside the framework of the body, each person still has a space of several inches between the feet. (LF [] RF) Footprints during running should preserve the width of that separation.

CORRECT RF INCORRECT RF

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LF

LF

If the footprints are one in front of the other, hip weight is shifting side-to-side, and shoulders are twisting as the hands cross the chest.

BILATERAL

The human is a bilateral animal. The right arm works with the left leg, and the left arm moves with the right leg. (Only Popeye walks left arm-left foot and then right arm-right foot.)

ALIGNMENT

The torso should remain square, as if belted into the seat of an automobile. The arms should track toward the shoulders, with hands never crossing the chest. The heels should track toward the hip to which the leg is attached, not crossing toward the mid-seam of the pants.

WHAT MUST THE ATHLETE REMEMBER WHEN WORKING ON FORM RUNNING?

1. Focus on an object in the distance while running, trying to keep the head up and motionless during steps. The goal is to keep the on-board computer in the brain just as still as the head of a driver remains while steering an automobile.
2. Get a good start. Never step back to start.
 - To prevent the head and body from shifting sideways on the first step, narrow the base between the feet before the start. In front of a pole or mirror, practice lifting either foot without allowing the head to move right or left. (Spread each foot wide within the shoe, pushing weight into the arch and away from the outside of the foot.)
 - Start with both feet flat on the ground. If one heel is raised in the initial stance, that heel will usually drop back to the ground when the other foot is raised for the first step. The hip weight shifts back instead of moving the body forward.
 - The first step forward should be small. With a long first step, the back foot is stuck in the ground pushing the weight forward. The hips cannot move far enough forward, the head drops, and the chest slants over the grass.
3. Arch the hips forward. Never lead with the head or drop the chest over the grass. Each time a foot hits the ground the hips should already be over that ankle. Hip weight should be far enough forward that the previous foot is no longer stuck on the ground and is free to move into the next step. Hips should never bend or swivel. Forward motion comes from allowing the torso weight to pull the body forward, not from using the toes to push the weight out of the ground.
4. With elbows bent and in toward the waist, make the hands swing up toward the shoulders, not diagonally across the body. Perfect alignment would have the arm swing headed toward the ear lobe. The hands should never be visible across the front of the shirt. Forcing the arms to swing correctly will straighten the back swing of the legs.
5. When working on "butt kick" form running, increase speed of movements without losing alignment. Have someone in front of the athlete back up very slowly, constantly telling the runner to pump arms and keep knees to ground.

- Start with a regular step before pulling heels high.
 - Knees should never come forward of hips. Point knees straight to the ground. Side stripes on the pants should remain straight up-and-down, not slant forward from the top to the knee.
 - Keep step sizes very small. Within each 5-yard space, take at least 20 steps.
6. Always wear well-padded, well-structured shoes that will give the feet and legs support and stability.

HOW WILL IMPROVING FORM RUNNING ENHANCE KICKING/PUNTING/SNAPPING?

1. Learning to carry weight straight forward on first (and all) steps eliminates variation in approaching a kick or punt.
2. The expectation of landing a perfect plant rises with the mastery of body control on starts and previous steps.
3. Correct body alignment improves the swing path of the leg that kicks or punts.
4. Carrying body weight forward on all steps frees the kicking leg for maximum speed and range of motion on the final step.
5. Educating the plant leg to capture the weight removes other tasks from the kicking leg and allows it to tuck tighter and higher behind the body.

HOW MUCH TIME SHOULD BE SPENT ON FORM RUNNING?

1. Whenever warming up for any athletic activity, always devote time for focused form running.
2. Form running is not practiced for speed or distance or for cardiovascular endurance, so it cannot be defined as so many sprints or so many miles. It is a discipline. For it to become a habit, form running should be included in the daily routine in segments of only several minutes.
3. Think about form every time before starting across a field to retrieve footballs. Think about form when walking down a hall. Think about form when walking down the block to exercise the family dog. PRACTICE CONTROL FREQUENTLY BUT NOT FOR EXTENDED PERIODS.
4. Even two minutes each day in front of a mirror would produce significant impact on starts and alignments.