

Unlearning to Run

From barely running to racing barefoot

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Why unlearn?

For them, running was a miserable two miles motivated solely by size 6 jeans: get on the scale, get depressed, get your headphones on, and get it over with.

- Ann Trason

My decision to start running didn't happen over night. It kind of built up over a period of 6 months starting with me turning 40 and tearing my ankle ligament while playing soccer with the kids. After limping around for a few months, I started noticing something interesting. The lower my feet were to the ground, the stabler my ankle felt. The moment I put on sneakers or boots, it would take no more than an hour before my ankle would feel terribly sore.

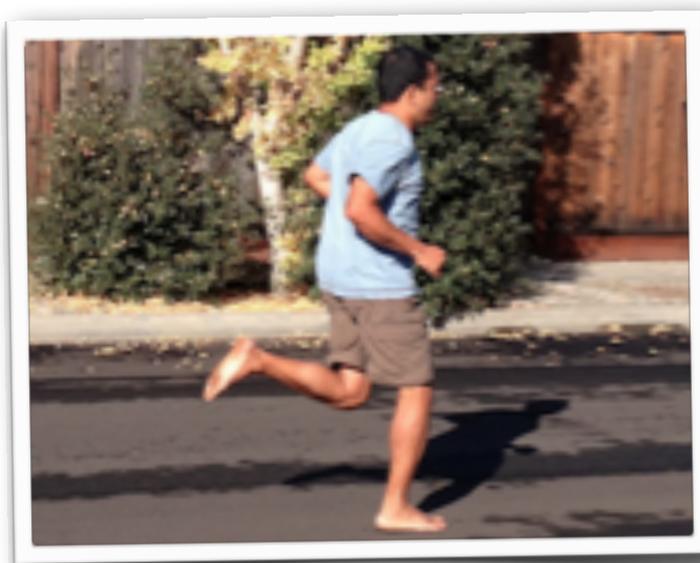
As the months wore on, I stumbled across [Born to Run](#), an amazing book by Christopher McDougall that would change me forever. Despite copious amount of poetic license in the book, I couldn't stop romanticizing running free through the redwoods. I wasn't necessarily thinking of running 100 miles or breaking records. I simply wanted to get out, move, work up a sweat and feel connected to the world around me and come back home without injuries.

The final straw came after seven long, sedentary years, in my startup. During these years, I had almost completely neglected my health, my cholesterol level was at an all-time high and I was overweight with bad eating habits. I wanted a release valve, something to quiet my mind and help me get back time lost with sustained 60-80 hour weeks for many years.



Technique: Forefoot or mid-foot strike

Quick, take off your socks and shoes and run on asphalt or any other hard surface for 10 to 20 yards. Just a quick short sprint. For that brief duration, your body will temporarily unlearn years of bad habit and you'll notice something interesting. No matter how much you want to, you **cannot** land on your heels naturally, because it hurts like crazy! If you were to take a [video of yourself](#) (this one's mine) you'll also find that your strides would've suddenly gotten shorter with your feet landing automatically under your body.



Most runners that try out on [Vibram Five Fingers](#) or other minimalist shoes run with heel strike. Result? Plantar Fascitis, knee and back pain, etc. My experience has been that if you are starting out or transitioning into minimalist shoes, go barefoot completely at least until you learn the proper technique. Once you've mastered that, you can run a marathon in rain boots and you'll still do okay.

Getting Started

I walk slowly, but I never walk backward.

- Abraham Lincoln

When you are ready to run, start by simply walking around your house barefoot for 10 or 15 minutes at a time. Your calf muscles and your Achilles tendon⁴ (amongst other things) are key to running successfully and the goal here is to stretch them out and strengthen them and have them work for you again. To quote Da Vinci, “The human foot is a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art.”



Most beginners complain about sore or tight calves and pain around the Achilles. The reason is simple. When you wear shoes without zero drop, your heel is higher than your toes and over many years your Achilles have shortened. Proper running technique requires that you don't heel strike. Instead you choose either mid-foot strike or forefoot

⁴ Photo courtesy [Osteoarthritis Blog](#)



Posture: Wall Push Offs

Remember the running technique where you have to lean forward on your ankle? This drill helps your body to unlearn this to see how it feels to have that little stretch on your ankle.



Stand tall facing a wall, arms length from it. Now lean forward and fall into the wall with your feet planted firmly on the floor. Do you feel your Achilles stretching as well as that tightening on the top of your feet between the ankles? Internalize that since you'll need to feel that very same sensation when you are running. Use your hands to break the fall, hold for a second and push the wall to return to first position.

This drill is much more about unlearning than strengthening. Do sets of 10 and increase as you get more comfortable.

Proprioception

Proprioception, from Latin proprius, meaning “one’s own,” “individual” and perception, is the sense of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement. Knowing the limits of your body and the spatial awareness and biofeedback they generate, is imperative to make movement a subconscious action.

Proprioception is what allows us to learn to walk in complete darkness without losing balance. Without the appropriate integration of proprioceptive input, an artist would not be able to brush paint onto a canvas without looking at the hand as it moved the brush over the canvas; it would be impossible to drive an automobile because a motorist would not be able to steer or use the foot pedals while looking at the road ahead; a person could not type or perform ballet; and people would not even be able to walk without watching where they put their feet.

The next few drills are all teaching proprioception to your feet, ankles, calves and lower limbs so they relearn what it feels like run again.

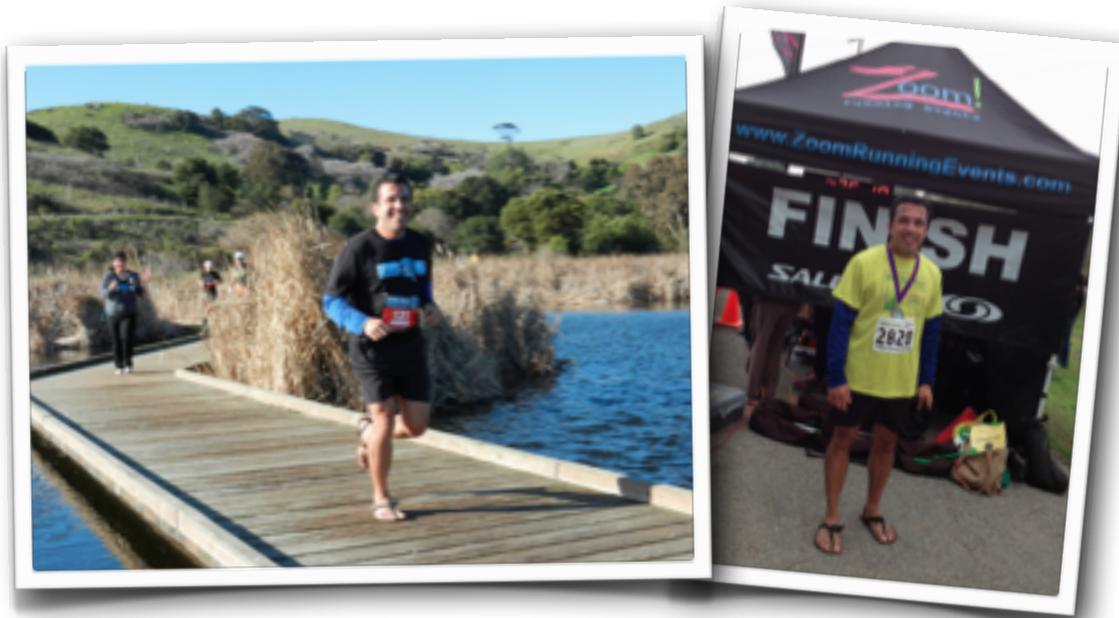
- One Legged Balance
- Balanced Toe Touches
- Balancing Act

Onward and Upward

You don't stop running because you get old, you get old because you stop running

- Jack Kirk, running his last race when he was 96

Just one year after I began my adventure, I've ran six half marathons and have been steadily increasing my distances. My injuries either seemed to have taken a backstage or I'm getting better at knowing how to cure them before they get worse. I will be running the [Big Basin 50K](#), my first ultra marathon, exactly 18 months after I began



this journey. I'm still an enthusiastic beginner in many ways, but that makes every step, every run exciting because I'm always learning something new about my body and running. I can hardly let a week go by before endorphin withdrawal and the smell of fresh air force me out for a run. My [race calendar](#) now has at least one race every month of varying distances. Races have become a way of getting me out to try new trails, meeting other runners and exploring the