



BALANCED RUNNING.

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Aside from everything else runners and triathletes need to build - strength, power, endurance, flexibility, they also need to improve their balance and functional stability and nowhere is this more important than out on the run when you're already tired from the previous two disciplines. Think of running as a one-footed balancing act. Unless you're well balanced and in control when you're running you are (i) lowering your performance potential and (ii) increasing your chance of injury. For any runner or triathlete being steady on your feet means you can more efficiently transfer propulsive forces into the ground - driving you along the road faster, while at the same time absorbing ground force reaction impact more effectively, hence lowering the chance of injury from each foot-strike.

Unfortunately, like any other skill "balance" declines with age if you don't work at it or if you've had a debilitating injury. So what exactly is "balance" in relation to the triathlete when running? It is all about a process called "proprioception" - in other words knowing precisely where your body is in space.

Running, particularly when fatigued off the bike really inhibits this process whereas improving your balance can increase your proprioceptive abilities helping you to run smoother and faster.

To train this proprioceptive ability you literally have to work from the ground up.

Try standing barefoot on one leg and focus on how your foot feels on the ground and what its natural inclination is. Most people tend to shift their weight to the centre of their foot. When you do this you become more stable and agile and less likely to become injured, however when you run, repeating this process, in motion is about the last thing on your mind. As your weight is shifted around, literally thousands of times every kilometre you run your body is forced to compensate and overuse injuries result.

To improve your balance when running start by getting comfortable being on one foot, after all, when you run only one foot is in contact with the ground at any one time. Activities like yoga and Page 2 of 2 Pilates can be ideal in helping you achieve this objective as they are "functional" activities, in other words, exercises that work multiple muscle groups as you move, rather than isolating a muscle in a static position such as you do when undertaking traditional strength training (e.g. Weight exercises like a squat). Consequently you'll get much better "carry over" from such functional exercises to your running, as running is a dynamic activity requiring the integration of multiple muscle groups in rapid fire succession.

At the end of the day, balance training is about improving your running. A stable body moves more efficiently, allowing you to run faster and longer with less effort.

Some suggested exercises:

(i) Stand barefoot on a stable surface. Lift one leg and bring the bent knee toward the chest while maintaining an upright stance (don't move your hips). Balance on one leg for 15 to 20 seconds then change legs. You can make this exercise more difficult as you master the basic movement by (a) closing your eyes, (b) raising and lowering your arms and (c) standing on an unstable surface (e.g. An almost completely deflated basketball).

(ii) Stand on one leg on a slightly elevated, stable surface. Bend your knee and swing your leg forward while maintaining an upright stance. Control the momentum by holding each end position for one second. Keep your knee bent throughout the swing. Do 10 reps on each side.

(iii) Use a "wobble" deck. Stand on top of a wobble deck and try to extend the period of time you are able to hold the wobble deck in a balanced position. To make it harder juggle two tennis balls whilst you're doing it or try closing your eyes to remove your visual reference points.

(iv) Balance on your left leg; lift your right leg behind you. Lean forward; reach your right hand to your left toe. Return to an upright stance, staying on the left leg. Do 10 reps on each leg, then build to 20 reps. To make it harder close your eyes.

(v) See-saw balance board. Stand on a balance board built over the top of some PVC piping secured underneath the board and work in the same manner as per the wobble deck. (vi) Swiss ball exercises - there are literally hundreds of functional stability exercises that can be done from a Swiss ball that'll help to improve your dynamic balance and hence your functional stability for running.