

Upper-Body Flexibility for Runners

Since the leg bone is connected to the neck bone, everything in between is important too

By Matt Pulle

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Unless they pay the rent as Cirque du Soleil performers, most runners don't think too much about their upper-body flexibility. After all, while runners may complain about how their legs seemed tight during a disappointing race, few ever wonder if they lost time because their neck, shoulders and torso were stiff and prevented them from lengthening their stride. But though it's an often-neglected part of a runner's regimen, upper-body flexibility can make a difference in how you train, run and ultimately race. Best of all, it's an easy area to address.

First, though, a few caveats: Upper-body flexibility isn't about impressing everyone at your yoga class, nor is it about being able to escape out of a padlocked cabinet flooded with water. For our purposes, adequate upper-body flexibility means whether the muscles above your waist can work effectively with the muscles below your waist. Are your arms going through their proper rotation, or do they move like thick branches in a dull wind? Are your back muscles strong enough to absorb the pounding from a hilly, twisty trail run? More generally, is your running posture tall and flowing?

Terrence Mahon, coach of the Mammoth Track Club, says that runners need to emphasize flexibility of their entire body.

"Of course as a runner the main areas that get tight are calf muscles, quadriceps group and the gluteal muscles, and these will need greater emphasis than other muscles," he says. "However, power and efficiency in the running stride comes through total body movement and communication. Tight shoulders, chest muscles and the upper back muscles can all significantly decrease running potential if they are not attended to on a regular basis."

It may seem surprising that a world-class coach pays so much attention to whether his runners have loose torsos. But the body isn't a random collection of moving parts. Instead, muscles and limbs work like oars on a boat, effectively when in unison, at cross purposes when not.

"Most runners don't stretch their upper bodies because they have yet to connect the dots with how it affects their overall movement," Mahon says, before listing a few examples. "We must remember that the left arm works in harmony with the right leg and vice versa. If there is a dysfunction in the shoulders then it is often compensated through the spine and hips."

FLEX TIME

Working on your upper-body flexibility isn't particularly complicated. In fact, often it entails some of the same exercises many runners already do. The difference is that when you work on your flexibility -- as opposed to your strength -- you want to work on moving more muscles through a wider range of motion than you might, say, on a Nautilus machine.

Anna Pierce, who's coached by Mahon and was the 2010 national 1500m champion, says that she'll often use 5- to 8-pound weights to help loosen up her pectoral muscles. When she works on the bench press, she doesn't necessarily find the heaviest set of dumbbells she can power over the bar, but will instead settle on a weight light enough to allow her to extend her muscles to the deepest point. Pierce will also do rowing exercises -- again at a low weight -- to mimic the trajectory of her arms as they pump back and forth while she's sprinting.

Interestingly, despite the attention she pays to upper-body flexibility, Pierce often doesn't

recognize when her arms and chest are tight. Normally, Mahon will pick up on some of the telltale signs during sprint drills. Now she knows them well, even if she can't always recognize them herself.

"A few things to look for: Are the arms swinging in front of the body instead of pumping in a forward-back motion?" she says. "Is the forearm releasing past 90 degrees when pumping back?"

Pierce adds that if you're pressed for time or equipment, try body weight squats or air hurdles after a run, both of which help loosen and strengthen your lower back and hips. She also recommends swinging your arms from the top of your head to your knees, another simple drill that will go a long way toward ensuring that your arms are doing all they can do to propel your legs during your runs.

BACK TO BACK

Mike Smith, coach of the Kansas State University men's and women's cross country teams, emphasizes trunk workouts to help his runners maintain good, upright form. These exercises include leg and arm raises while lying on your stomach and holding your leg straight while perched on the knee of your opposite leg. Smith's athletes also focus on trunk twists (with and without a medicine ball), back-arching exercises and neck and arm circles. Finally, for runners trying to get the most out of their gym membership, Smith says that swimming can also help improve upper-body strength and flexibility.

Like Mahon, Smith says that the goal with these exercises isn't to segregate the upper body but to consider the entire body as one functioning unit. The effects of a run don't stop at the legs, nor do you run with your legs alone. If any part of your upper body is particularly stiff or weak, your legs naturally will become stiff and weak.

"In simple terms, the flexibility of the back, spine, shoulders, arms and neck is critical to the movement of the runner," Smith says.

STAY LOOSE WHILE STAYING CONNECTED

That upper-body flexibility can improve your mechanics and posture is especially crucial given that the routines of modern life tend to have the opposite effect. As Terrence Mahon notes, sitting in front of a computer all day, or obsessively checking your iPhone, can affect how you feel when you're offline and running.

"As these devices get smaller and smaller, we inevitably shorten up the muscles in the front of our torso to make this activity easier," Mahon notes. "Once this happens this becomes a chronic state of tightness that will inevitably affect standing, walking and running posture."

HELP YOUR BACK, HELP YOUR RUNNING

Here are a few lower-back exercises that Mike Smith's runners at Kansas State perform regularly. Start with one set of 10 repetitions of each a few times a week. When you can do that easily, progress to two sets of 10 reps.

OPPOSITE ARM/OPPOSITE LEG



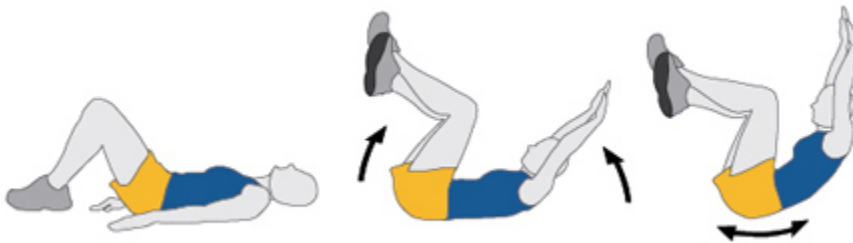
Lie on your stomach. Lift your right arm and left leg, and then vice versa.

SITTING BICYCLE



With your hands clasped behind your head, perform a cycling motion with the legs. Do 10 reps forward, then 10 reps backwards.

ROCKERS



Lie on your back. Roll your legs/knees toward your chest and roll your torso toward your knees. Then rock forward and backward.

LOWER BODY CRAWL



Lie on your stomach. Bring one leg forward along the ground, leading with the knee (thigh perpendicular to body) and opposite arm, and then reverse.

DOUBLE ARM AND LEG RAISE



Lie on your stomach. Raise upper torso and legs at the same time, and then lower.