

Jocks WIN OR LOSE by the FEET



By Joan Westlake

When push comes to shoving off, there's one part of a jock's body that takes the brunt of abuse—the feet.

"We use the analogy that every time your foot hits the ground, it strikes enough energy to light a 100-watt light bulb," says Tim Hawkins of the Windhawk Clinic in Mesa. "Your foot should get rid of 95 watts."

He explains that if the foot and arch aren't working properly, then the watts get pushed up the body hitting the ankles, knees, hips—which are not really designed to dissipate that energy—and end up in the disks of the lower back.

The majority of foot, knee and back problems are the result of weak feet structure that begins when you take your first steps, Hawkins asserts.

"At the age of 2 months, you've got your first pair of shoes on and the muscles in your feet just don't develop properly," he says. "People are buying \$200 shoes and expensive orthotics to try and make up for weak feet, when they should be walking barefoot on the beach."

Matt Kraemer, physical therapist and clinic director at Endurance Rehab Arcadia says that when athletes limp in with a seemingly wide range of

problems, it is often the result of overuse and/or mechanical problems in the foot structure.

"For endurance athletes, the second most common injury is to the ankle and foot," Kraemer states.

Plantar Fasciitis

Two words seem to be buzzing around where endurance athletes hang out—plantar fasciitis. Keith Pritchette, physical therapist at Rehab Plus in Phoenix, says it usually starts out as pain in the heel, especially when you first get out of bed. If the condition progresses untreated, pain will flare up after exercise. He adds that rest, icing and stretches can often alleviate symptoms in mild inflammations and if they are started when the pain first appears. An anti-inflammatory medicine such as Ibuprofen can also help.

For stubborn or advanced cases, Pritchette recommends a night splint or boot, which keeps the foot at 90 degrees, stretching the ankle ligaments and calf muscles.

Ronnie Buchanan of RunAZ says the runner's shop carries a wide range of products for foot pain, including IB-Relief, a homeopathic cream that is

rubbed directly into painful areas. Another popular foot pain alleviator available at both the Ahwatukee and Gilbert RunAZ stores is the Strassburg Sock, a similar solution to the boot. Nate Koch, director of rehabilitation at Endurance Rehab in Scottsdale, says that the compression sock is less expensive than the night splint and seems to be easier for people to tolerate at night.

According to Koch, poorly fitting shoes, an abrupt increase in training, a lack of correct stretching and poor foot mechanics are some of the origins of plantar fasciitis.

Stretch Away Pain

With all the surgical skills and technology at his fingertips, renowned orthopedic foot and ankle surgeon Dr. John A. Nassar recommends proper stretching as the first stage approach for plantar fasciitis.

"There are a lot of different treatments for plantar fasciitis," he says. "I usually start with stretching exercises, proper footwear with possibly a heel cushion, icing and massage. The second order of treatment might be cortisone injections and boots or braces."

Stretching is a key treatment modality at the Windhawk Clinic. Hawkins points out that plantar fasciitis is one of many painful conditions that result when the body is out of balance and one part (the connective tissue in the bottom of the foot) "is getting dragged through the mud kicking and screaming."

He asserts, "Stretching is the key to increasing your range of motion, strengthening your muscles and reducing the chance of injury. Most of us think we know how to stretch, but in reality, many people use incorrect techniques. You must work with the body's natural laws, not against them. Windhawk clients don't 'stretch through the pain' because pain only signals your body to tighten up to protect itself. Ignoring this natural defense mechanism is counterproductive and potentially harmful."

A difference between traditional techniques and Windhawk's Activated Isolated stretching is that each stretch is held for just two seconds. Clients say it is effective and less time consuming.

Getting hardcore runners and triathletes to see stretching as a vital training component can be quite a sell. When Ironman and marathoner Anne Dreier of Ahwatukee started developing foot problems after years of pounding the turf, she says stretching at the Windhawk Clinic was recommended by a number of multisport jocks in the Valley.

"But, stretching...it seemed too easy," she admits.

Dreier explains that her problems became noticeable when she was training for the 2007 Ironman AZ. When her training hit 22 hours a week, numbness began in her two middle toes on her left foot.

"It wasn't really painful so I thought, 'this can't be affecting my running.' But, during the marathon portion of the Ironman, I had to take off my shoes and wiggle my toes because there was this false feeling like my sock was bunched up. It definitely affected my time. I knew I had a marathon to run in August in Minnesota, so that's when I decided I had to try stretching."

"Very skeptical" is how Dreier says she was about stretching being a medical solution. After a consultation appointment with Hawkins' wife and business partner, Lisa, she decided to book a treatment.

"I was so happy after the first treatment," Dreier says. "It was like the muscles opened up and could breathe. I went back once a week for four weeks to learn the technique myself. They made it clear they were teaching me to help myself."

She adds that when she begins training for the 2008 Ironman, she's going back once a month for maintenance and for incentive.

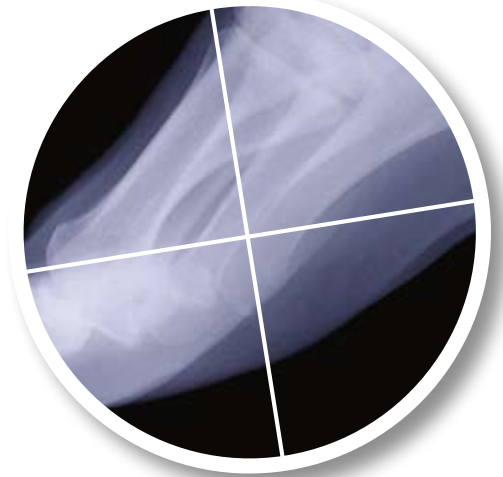
She advises, "When we are trying to fit in more than 20 hours a week training, especially those of us who work, stretching is so last on the list. My coach, Bill Wilson at Camelback Coaching, says that there are actually four Ironman disciplines: swim, bike, run and nutrition. There really should be a fifth: stretching."

Scott Gasineau, a runner who regularly competes in races from 10Ks to marathons, is another athlete for whom stretching was a key in recovering from foot problems. The Scottsdale CPA says his plantar fasciitis began with a rock to the arch while trail running. For four weeks, he kept running and the pain got worse. He went to a physician who also diagnosed Morton's Neuritis, a problem with nerves in foot. The treatment was steroids and no running for two weeks. He didn't improve at all.

"I was going to a sports medicine doctor and he referred me to Endurance Rehab," says Gasineau. "I went twice a week. They had me doing a lot of stretches and I started seeing positive results in just a few weeks."

Kraemer, Gasineau's therapist, says the rehab center treated his problems with therapeutic exercise, running gait analysis, iontophoresis drug administration, ice and high tech physical manipulation of soft tissue problems areas using the ASTYM system (available at only a few clinics and sports center in Arizona).

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Stretching twice a day and doing it correctly is now part of his training routine, says Gasineau. He's not only getting back in shape, he claims he is running stronger and better than before.

Achilles Tendonitis

Achilles tendonitis is another of the frequent problems that runners and multisport athletes suffer, according to Koch of Endurance Rehab Scottsdale.

"The symptoms of pain and swelling around the Achilles tendon typically come on gradually," says Koch.

The rehab therapist says that Achilles problems are usually sparked by changes that strain that part of the foot such as new shoes or switching to lots of hill running all at once.

"Why is the bigger question," he asserts.

Tim Hawkins of Windhawk agrees, explaining, "Boots, medicine, massage and icing may be necessary to get someone to the point where the real problem can be addressed. But these are Band-Aids®."

Loose Ligaments

Dr. Nassar says that strengthening muscles around joints can help solve problems such as loose ligaments. Frequent ankle sprains can be a symptom of this condition. Injury, over use and training errors can damage the connective tissue in the ankle, causing this problem.

If correcting the cause and stabilizing the joint area doesn't help, surgery might be the last resort solution.

Stress Fractures

"I can still walk so my foot can't be broken" is so wrong, asserts Koch. He points out that stress fractures can be difficult to diagnosis, sometimes not showing up even on X-rays.

He adds that a sudden change, such as moving from cycling to running or not warming up properly can contribute to these tiny breaks. They become a pain that just doesn't go away.

Dr. Nassar says that too much repetition in training and not enough rest contributes to stress fractures as well as other foot problems. Poorly fitting shoes are also the culprit.

"Go and get a professional assessment of what shoes you should be wearing," he says. "Forget looking at sizes, look at fit and your needs. Buying a shoe

over the internet in a style you've never worn before is not a good idea."

He adds, "Socks are a big deal, too. You don't want cotton socks that hold in the moisture. You want sock blends that wick away moisture."

Fungus Among Us

More of an annoyance than anything, fungus problems of the feet have plagued athletes since shoes were invented. Athlete's foot and toenail fungus are what Dr. Nassar calls "opportunistic" problems. The fungus is always in the environment, but it takes three things to allow it to bloom—trauma, moisture and darkness.

Unfortunately, the doctor points out that these are the daily foot conditions of most athletes. Proper rest and the right footwear helps reduce trauma. Good socks and changing them often, especially during long competitions, keeps moisture at a minimum. Going barefoot as much as possible also inhibits fungal growth.

Over-the-counter topical creams work for skin irritations. However, Dr. Nassar does not recommend oral medications for toe nail fungus. The meds must be taken for many, many months and have serious liver damaging potential. Plus, with the pounding that athletes give their toes, it is likely the meds won't work.

Preventing Problems

The goal for any athlete is to prevent problems. Dr. Nassar says that flexibility, proper training and rest are the keys to stopping foot and other injuries before they flare up.

"Stretching is important but don't cold stretch," Dr. Nassar warns. "Do a light jog for five to 10 minutes to get the blood flowing and then stretch before you work out. Cross train. Rest doesn't just mean sitting and doing nothing. You just work different muscle groups and parts of the body. Don't run seven days a week. Run three days and cycle three days."

Finding a good coach who can design a safe and effective program is also a vital weapon in your "not getting hurt" arsenal.

He adds, "Be careful when you increase the duration, intensity or type of training. Add increases at just 10 percent a week. It may seem like such a small change but if you double it, you are looking for an injury." ■