

Balancing Act



Many runners live in fear of becoming an “I-used-to” runner. You know those people who, upon learning that you run, sadly tell you they “used to” run but had to quit because of an injury.

Shin splints, ACL tears, plantar fasciitis...the list is long and the possibilities endless. Stress during running is considerable — each step reverberating with a force up to three times your body weight.

However, while common, stress injuries are not necessarily a given. Researchers working with elite athletes have found that injuries may be preventable by incorporating balance training into your regular workout routine.

Findings indicate that better balance improves coordination and body awareness, strengthens core muscles, and increases joint stability and range of motion — all of which can help prevent an injury. Best of all, performing conditioning exercises on balance equipment is fun.

Gerard Recio, a sports performance specialist at Vancouver’s Twist Conditioning, works with elite and recreational athletes and says, “Any improvement in balance can help prevent injury.” Balance training exercises your stabilizer muscles and improves body awareness by challenging the body with what Recio calls “multi-directional movement” — an element lacking in the linear repetitive motion of running.

This kind of conditioning can not only make your time/distance runs easier, but will have you outmaneuvering concrete curbs and trail potholes with grace and power. Over time, balance training may even turn you into a “going-to-be” runner—as in, going to run a 10k in under 45 minutes, or going to run your first marathon.

INJURY-PROOF YOUR BODY BY ADDING BALANCE EXERCISES TO YOUR RUNNING PROGRAM. » JANICE BENNETT



Recio offers three exercises with equipment that can be found in most gyms — the foam roller, wobble board and BOSU balance trainer. The first step is to practice getting on and off safely. Hold your arms out for balance, use ski poles or place your hand against a wall.

FOAM ROLLER

Flat-side-up Split Squat
Focus: hamstrings/glutes

With the roller flat-side-up and lengthwise in front of you, place one foot on the flat side and the other behind with the heel off the ground. Slowly lower your back knee toward the floor; pause when both knees are at 90° angles with your front knee over your ankle. Return to the starting position by pressing your heel into the roller and lifting slowly. Work up to 10 repetitions on each leg. It's shaky at first; don't worry about keeping the roller still — allow your muscles to make adjustments to keep your foot on the roller. Fear trail-run ankle-rolls no more!



WOBBLE BOARD

Squat & Hold

Focus: core/glutes/quadriceps

Stand on the platform with feet shoulder-width apart, toes pointed slightly outward. Bend slowly at the ankles, knees and hips. Keep your back straight, bending from the hips to a 45° angle as you lower your hips. Hold for 10 seconds, keeping the platform edge off the ground for as long as you can. Slowly return to the starting position. Use your arms for balance and pull your abdominals in. Allow your weight to shift from foot to foot to control the board, and watch that your knees don't go past your ankles.



BOSU BALANCE TRAINER

Calf Raises

Focus: core/calves

With the BOSU dome-side up, place your toes near the centre of the dome, allowing heels to rest near the edge of the platform. Slowly lift your heels. Pause at the top — don't lock your knees — and slowly lower your heels. Keep shoulders, back and abdominal muscles contracted. Build to 12 to 20 repetitions. For a real calf-cruncher, do one foot at a time, keeping the non-active leg bent and lifted with the foot tucked behind the knee of the working leg. Who says the Achilles has to be a weak spot?

