

Coach's Corner, Buffalo Stampede

By Brendan Davies

Part 3: Getting your Technique in order

An efficient running technique is very important for all runners of all levels. Not only could it potential slice time off but it will help you avoid the injury rollercoaster that plagues many runners. In this article, I'll go through what I believe are the key technique principles of running form that I've tried to adhere to in my own running career. But before I start, I have to say that there is no such thing as a perfect (trail) running technique! You should run in a way that is the most comfortable and efficient for you. However, if we know the theory of good running form, we can use these to fine tune our style. Every runner should understand the basics like proper posture, arm swing and foot strike and know how to utilise the free energy (gravity) around you to maximal affect.

Posture

You all have probably heard of the expression 'running tall' and it means you need to stretch yourself up with your back comfortably straight and your chest up. Imagine someone was pulling you up by a string from you head. Running tall does not mean lifting up your shoulders though. Keep them relaxed. A couple of other coaching cues I use are 'open your hips' and 'tuck in your tail bone'. I use these when runners begin to slouch, or bend from the waist.



Lean

It's important to note that your lean comes from the ankles and not from your hips, head or your shoulders. Keep your head directly in line with your hips. But why do we slightly lean forward? We do it to capture and utilise as much gravity around us as free energy. It makes us run faster!



Head

Look ahead naturally, about 3 – 10 metres in front (according to the terrain) and not straight down at your feet, and scan the trail ahead allowing all the information to ‘wash’ over you. This will enable you to choose the smoothest, safest and most efficient way forward; the ‘line of least resistance’.

Arms

Even though running is primarily a lower-body activity, your arms play a very important role, especially in trail running. Your hands control the tension in your upper body, while your arm swing works together with your leg stride to drive you forward. Keep your hands in an unclenched fist, with your fingers lightly touching your palms and your thumbnails facing up. Your arms should swing mostly forward and back, not across the midline of your body, between waist and lower-chest level, your elbows should be bent at about a 90-degree angle. However, it’s not always this perfect! Trail runners in particular need to use their arms for balance laterally and for propulsion on big climbs.



Legs and Feet

This is an area that I have to stress is the biggest area of conjecture when it comes to technique. I will preface this by saying I have my groundings in the POSE running principals and further this influences my strong belief in minimalist footwear.

In summary, the key points are that:

- Feet land directly under hips with first contact point being in the midfoot.
- An emphasis on 'pull' stage of the gait cycle, so to minimise ground contact.
- Feet 'fall' back down naturally with gravity rather than being 'pushed'.
- Running cadence is 180 or greater.



Try not to over-stride by landing with the first point of contact being your heels as it will act as a braking force and stifle momentum. But it is fine to allow your heel to 'kiss' after initial contact and prior to the lift stage and this is a great prompt to get those heels up to start the swing stage!

However, it's not always this perfect! Trail runners in particular need to use their arms and legs in all manner of ways for balance laterally and for propulsion on big climbs. Do what comes instinctively, particularly on tricky and technical terrain, of which there is a lot of in the Buffalo Stampede races! Sometimes trail running requires us to contort, twist and use our body in unique ways to maintain balance and control. One analogy I like to remind myself of is 'flowing' over technical trail just as water would flow over rocks and pebbles in a stream. Relax, keep fluid and remember to bend your knees on impact with the ground to take away some of the shock.



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