

Think and ye shall do

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If all of your training consists of long slow runs, your body will adjust and become good at doing long slow runs, but not much else. An Achievement, but possibly a bit of a dull one. If you finish this training with your feet dragging, style ragged and feeling absolutely “stuffed”, then these will be the things that your neuromuscular system will “remember” from that training session. Training does not just affect the muscles in the body, it also involves the brain. In a general sense, the things you do to promote a healthy body also assist in maintaining a healthy brain. Linking this specifically to the athletic skills of running, walking, jumping and throwing, means that the head must be trained as well as the body.

You could spend hours per day in a gym developing individual muscles without improving your athletic performance at all. In fact, your running performance would probably decline. To improve athletic performance you have to train movement, not just muscle. Strong, powerful muscles (remember that strength and power are not the same thing) will contribute to improved performance when appropriate muscle fibres are recruited in the most efficient sequence possible to contribute to movement of a limb. Getting the most out of your body requires an efficient neuromuscular pattern and this can be trained. In fact, to do as well as possible in your chosen events, it is essential that you do train the neuromuscular system. This is what is meant by training the movement, not just the muscle. I'll illustrate this with reference to running, but the principles apply to any athletic event.

Look at people who have an efficient, economical running style and fix this image in your head. This doesn't mean that you have to emulate the exact style of some elite young athlete. Try to extract the elements of the image and a feeling that you can associate with a smooth flowing style. Before a race or speed training session, think your way through what you are about to do. During the race, regularly monitor your body for muscle tightness, loud footstrike noise, unbalanced leg or arm movement, etc. Go back to your mental image of good technique and try to map your running to that style.

When you train, over a week or two weeks, try to run sessions at a range of speeds, not just the one speed. These speeds should range from short repetitions of 100% effort to your 5k/10k race speed. Even if you are not a sprinter, developing the fastest maximum speed possible is important - all your other speeds will be a fraction of this maximum. The aim of training at a range of paces is to improve your pace judgement by establishing a set of neuromuscular patterns in the brain, not just the one for long slow running. If you plan to run a set of repetitions of say 4 to 6 x 300m at your 800m race speed with 3 min recoveries, adjust your pace so that all of the 300m reps are done at the same speed and you maintain your style throughout the session. It is far better to imprint a correct pace and style in your brain from the last 300m than to run the session starting fast and finishing far slower. If your pace starts to fall off significantly, stop the session while you are still near the mark. Adjust your times and try again a few days later. If your training sessions include poor technique, rapid fall

off of pace, poor mental discipline, etc, that is what you will develop. The mind and body adapt to the demands we place on ourselves.

If your style has some obvious problems, develop a set of skills activities to improve the style. For example, incorporate high knee lift jogging, high back kicks etc into your warmup routine. Try hopping or skipping to improve the stabilising muscles and the elastic response of connective tissue. Stair running, taking them two at a time, or hills sprints may help to improve knee lift (you have to lift your foot higher or you will stub your toe). Set demanding, but achievable targets so that when you do achieve a goal you get a feeling of satisfaction that will motivate you to either improve or maintain your performance. Give yourself a reward when you achieve or exceed your goals - there is nothing like a bit of self-bribery to keep the head moving in the right direction!

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