



# Helping runners to get the balance right

**Fitness** Humans evolved to run, so how is it that many adults don't find it natural at all? According to Bristol Alexander technique teacher Susie Baker, the key is to re-learn correct balance and posture

It seems that, if you've taken up running as an adult, chances are your technique isn't terribly efficient, even if you're pretty quick, and it may even feel uncomfortable. Children, on the other hand, have a much more natural ability, says Susie Baker, who's adapted her status as an Alexander technique teacher to help runners.

Commonly, people come to her because they want to know if employing the Alexander technique – concerned with posture and balance – can help prevent physical issues they've developed, such as aching knees, or shin splints, and to improve comfort and speed.

A typical case (I gather), I started running in my 30s but have always suffered with shin splints. Susie starts by taking a quick physical history and asking about my fitness, then she takes me out on to a flat area where she whips out an iPad and films me in action.

Showing me the slow-motion playback, and freezing it frame by frame, she immediately spots a number of issues, but there are positive points too. "There are lots of good things about your running – your head is nicely balanced and you're relaxed. The key thing, and it's the same for about nine out of ten people, is that you do what I call a walk-run hybrid," Susie explains.

"It happens with most people who come to running later in life because walking is their dominate form of locomotion and the neuro-muscular pattern is set up for that.

"When you start to run you bring your leg out in front and land on it when it's almost straight, with the heel first, which is more akin to walking, and that might account for your shin splints. Effectively you are over striding.

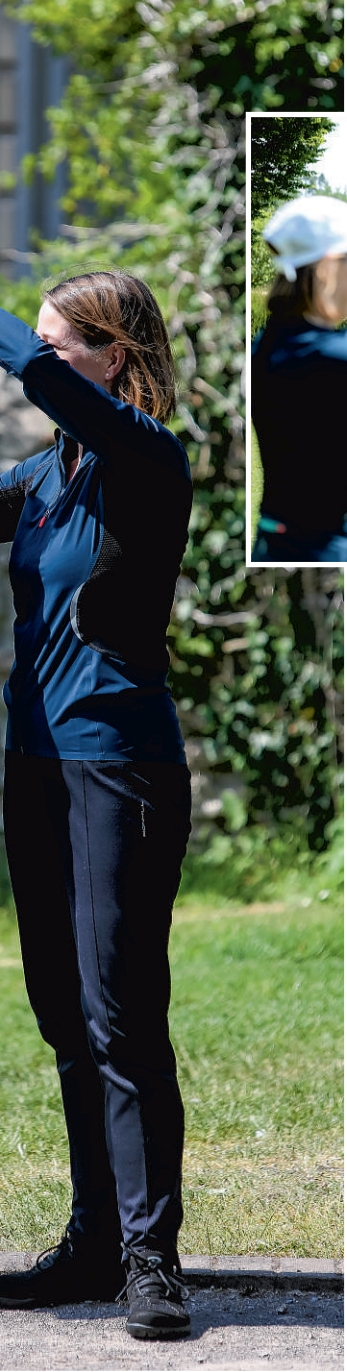
"The leg keeps coming forward and when it finally touches down you are ahead of your centre of mass. You'd need to land so the foot is closer to under the hip to benefit from elastic recoil, which is free energy, so more efficient. At the moment you are having to recreate the momentum every stride."

Susie also notices that my arms tend to swing across my body, rather than forward and back, which also wastes energy, and that my head is ever so slightly tilted backwards, which again inhibits a natural, forward momentum and makes for a heavier feel to each stride. Lots to work on then!

Achieving optimum balance for the whole body, without tension, is the ethos of the Alexander technique and Susie begins my lesson with the basics – at a standstill. I'm asked to notice how my head sits on my neck and how much more difficult it is to walk, or even to stand on one leg, when it's off kilter.







Clockwise from top left: feeling how the head should sit; filming the action on an iPad; drills to improve technique; how not to do it and, finally, not quite perfect, but showing an improvement. Right, Susie Baker

Susie takes me to a nearby park and spends the next hour putting me through various drills, which I'm advised to repeat often because breaking the (bad) habits of a lifetime isn't going to be quick or easy.

Feeling slightly like a performing pony, first I'm bouncing on the spot, on one leg and two, then I'm kicking up behind me, heel to butt, and allowing that movement to travel forward before I break into a bouncy run, keeping in my consciousness the idea that on each stride the heel comes up and back rather than lagging down.

There are drills for arms too, which are easy to master, and by the end of the session I'm finding that my body is responding without too much conscious effort. I'm tilting my whole body forward a little from the ankles (that's good), I feel freer and I realise that generating propulsion is less of an effort.

All the while Susie is painting pictures in my mind and continually asking for feedback to keep me in touch with my body. She's also encouraging me to "allow" movement; this is not at all about force, or control, or power.

At the end of my lesson she takes out the iPad again and I'm pleased to see a small, though noticeable improvement.

The video is a vital teaching tool, says Susie, because people are often unaware of their body, how it moves and what it feels like at any given moment.

For the purposes of this feature, Susie has condensed the lesson somewhat, but she would normally see people two or three times to ensure they're making worthwhile changes, and sometimes for refresher sessions.

And, of course, she practices what she preaches. In fact, going through this process herself is what inspired Susie to train in the Alexander technique. She explains: "I was coming back to running having taken a break and I got hold of a book called *Master The Art Of Running* co-authored by Malcolm Balk [athlete, coach and Alexander technique teacher]. I had already heard of the Alexander technique and it appealed, so I had a session with him and was quite impressed so I started to take Alexander lessons.

"When I moved to Bristol I thought I'd quite like to train to be a teacher because I really loved what it did for me. I would get all sorts of strains and pains that would get fixed by various therapists, but the Alexander technique is a skill for life and with it I can now take care of myself."

Having graduated in 2011, most of Susie's clients are, like herself, keen recreational runners, but she loves working with competitive runners and has also worked with tennis players and musicians.

■ If you'd like Susie's help, call 07919 333388, email [sb@learningthealexandertechnique.com](mailto:sb@learningthealexandertechnique.com), or visit [www.learningthealexandertechnique.com](http://www.learningthealexandertechnique.com).