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RW March 2013

## Find Your Chi (Running)

Effortless running takes some effort—and other lessons learned by a chronically injured runner at an alternative running school.

By Dimity McDowell  
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On a sunny Saturday morning in Carbondale, Colorado, nine runners, including me, were hungry for happy miles. We were an injured lot—with a combined medical history that included countless hamstring strains, beat-up knees, tweaked backs, and cortisone shots. For the past four years, my training had become a delicate dance of getting in enough miles to complete a marathon or half-marathon but not enough miles to end up hurt. I usually crossed the finish line, but some part of me—feet, hips, or back—suffered excessively for it.

I gathered with this hobbled but hopeful group for a daylong seminar on Chi Running. We were drawn by the promise offered in the very title of the movement's bible, *ChiRunning: A Revolutionary Approach to Effortless, Injury-Free Running*, by Danny and Katherine Dreyer. If effortless and injury-free were too idealistic, we were willing to settle for the premise on instructor Mary Lindahl's shirt: "Love running forever." Lindahl, who has been a Chi practitioner since 2004, was assisted by Ed Cotgageorge, who took a 12-year break from running due to nagging injuries before finding Chi. Together, they would lead us through a day of drills to teach us how to run with maximum efficiency and minimal impact, and ultimately enjoy our running more.

Chi Running is inspired by Tai Chi, the Chinese martial art that purports to generate the life energy (chi) flowing throughout your body. Practitioners of Tai Chi aim to train their bodies to stay centered and calm, which leads to efficient yet powerful movement. Similarly, Chi Runners are taught to focus: Engage your core, maintain a forward-leaning posture, relax your limbs, and take plentiful, light steps, landing midfoot. The theory is that by directing your attention to the process of running (form and technique), you'll reduce stress on the body, which will lead to fewer injuries, improved speed, and more pleasurable, relaxing runs.

This is all spelled out in *ChiRunning*, the 320-page book that includes 10 lessons, four chi skills, three developmental stages, form focuses, plus pre- and post-run mind-sets. (Phew.) But attempting—let alone mastering—this with the book alone had proven to be a challenge for someone who prefers to be distracted midrun (thank you, Peter Sagal) rather than tuned in to body mechanics. After a year of dog-eared pages of the book, I realized I needed hands-on training.

At the workshop, Cotgageorge filmed our "before Chi" running technique. Then we spent the day falling into a wall to learn the forward lean, cupping imaginary butterflies in our hands to relax our upper body, attaching our head to clouds to reinforce posture, and matching our footfalls to the beeps of the instructors' metronomes to quicken our cadence. At one point, I visualized an image Lindahl referenced: riding a unicycle with your feet strapped to the pedals. To get going, I needed a forward lean; then I lifted—not jammed on—each pedal to move. "If it feels normal," says Lindahl, only half-kidding, "you're not doing it right."

In 1997, Danny Dreyer, then a fine-furniture maker who'd been running for more than 25 years, had a lightbulb moment. After finishing his first ultra, he met Zhu Xilin, a Tai Chi Master in Boulder, Colorado, where Dreyer lived, and was intrigued by the powerful, effortless way Zhu moved his body. Dreyer

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worked with Zhu to apply Tai Chi to his running. "I would feel better at the end of a run than I did when I started," Dreyer writes in his book. "I could go out for a 30-mile run and come back without any major discomfort: an exhilarating realization."

Dreyer moved to San Francisco in 1998, and found his next mentor, Tai Chi Grandmaster George Xu, who helped Dreyer solidify the tenets of Chi Running. After teaching lessons in the Bay Area for a few years, Dreyer and his wife wrote *ChiRunning*, which was released in 2004. Since then it has reportedly sold 350,000 copies and spawned a family of other guides, including *ChiWalking*, *Chi Marathon*, DVDs, and online training plans. Testimonials on the Web site represent a large percentage of Chi Running's core consumers: injured runners and triathletes.

"It makes you think about your form, and how to relax during a run," concludes Anthony Luke, M.D., a sports-medicine specialist at the University of California at San Francisco. Dr. Luke collaborated with two researchers who completed a 12-week study of relatively unfit, beginning runners. One group ran on their own; another ran with a coach without running-form instruction; and a third worked with a Chi Running coach. "The Chi Runners complained less about joint pain," Dr. Luke reports.

In Dreyer's own survey of over 2,500 people who have tried Chi Running, he found that most are between ages 40 and 60, and more than half of them were dealing with injury (most had knee issues). "People are just hungry for an easier way to run," Dreyer says when I call him in California.

Easy running may be the ultimate goal, but getting there isn't necessarily easy, especially for impatient runners. Dreyer is a big fan of the phrase "gradual progress." When a runner tells him he wants to run a marathon, Dreyer asks him how long his current run is. If it's under 10-K, Dreyer's next question is, "In what year do you want to safely run a marathon?"

**At the end** of the day-long seminar in Carbondale, we watched our "after Chi" videos. I couldn't see drastic physical changes. But inwardly, there was a revolution going on. Throughout the day, after each form drill, we circled the parking lot. The difference was apparent: My steps were effortless; I felt 50 pounds lighter; my legs seemed relaxed and springy.

I drove back home excited, if overwhelmed. On my passenger seat lay a handout titled "Now what was I supposed to remember?" with, oh, only 32 things to keep in mind. It would be my companion guide as I undertook a 10-week Chi Running 10-K beginner program. The "workout" for day one, a Monday—*Rest. Get a good night's sleep*—reinforced the idea that I would have to adjust my idea of training. "Start where you are," Dreyer says, "not where you want to be."

For run/walk intervals on Tuesday, I left my Garmin and tunes at home and carried my own handheld metronome to help me monitor my cadence, a key principle of Chi Running. "If your cadence is too slow, your stride is too long, and you're working too hard," says Dreyer, who recommends 170 to 180 steps a minute.

I found a slice of transcendent Chi for probably about 20 percent of my first run, and that's being generous. I felt self-conscious of my metronome's constant beeping. When I saw other runners approaching, I turned it off so they wouldn't brand me as a total geek (or worry that a bomb was about to explode).

A runner from my clinic, Jill Burchmore, was also frustrated initially. But she kept working at it, and eventually embraced the method as a lifelong practice (not a quick injury fix or a means to a PR). It took, she would tell me later, and in a big way: Nine months after our clinic, she became a certified Chi Running instructor. "It's a continual practice; I still have work to do," says Burchmore, who now leads clinics in Telluride and Aspen, Colorado. "But my runs are more efficient and injury-preventive than they were prior to the workshop."

Because of my limited time and patience, I focused on the broad strokes of Chi Running, namely cadence and posture. (I just didn't have it in me to do knee and hip circles before every run.) I upped my cadence by one beat each week (because my starting point was fewer than 170 steps per minute). When I wanted to challenge myself, I set the metronome on a waltz beat—right, left, beep; left, right, beep—and tried to pretend I was on a dance floor. By week seven, I was able to match the metronome beat for most runs—when I didn't get distracted. Over time, I found that when I was "on the beat," I felt as solid and relaxed as I've ever felt running. My core felt strong, my spine held straight, and my feet, formerly hooves, were surprisingly light. But when I fell off the beat, I reverted back to old habits quickly: clomping, limbs splaying, back aching.

By the end of the 10-week program, I can't say I set a PR or felt like my running was effortless, exactly; but I stood taller, my formerly sore spots (lower back, IT bands) didn't whine as much, and I didn't cause further damage—all big changes for me. Now a year since the workshop, my galumphing stride has permanently morphed into mincing, midfoot landings. When I'm struggling during a run, I don't force it, I tell myself to relax and let it come. Best of all, I haven't had to take an injury-induced break from running, which is a victory worth every beep of a metronome.