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How to run, meditate, and not get hurt

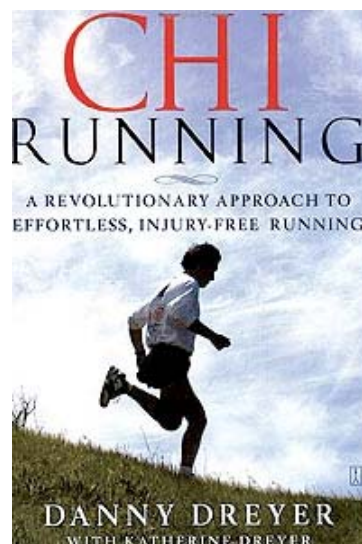
It's a brisk Saturday afternoon in San Francisco, and I'm standing outside of [Sports Basement](#) with a metronome in my hand. Several hundred feet away, a guy in a funny hat is running around the empty parking lot at a consistent 85 steps per minute. His upper body angles forward as his legs cycle backwards to the beat... beep beep beep. It looks kind of ridiculous, but the guy is actually demonstrating an innovative exercise regime that combines the concepts of Tai Chi and mindfulness meditation with athletic techniques used by Kenyan Olympic sprinters. It's called [Chi Running](#), and it's directly related to recent debates around natural vs power running and the [case against heavy-duty sneakers](#).

Most conventional athletic coaches and sports apparel companies advocate power running — running for max speed, personal records, high performance, lots of muscle (think European sprinters with giant legs surging forward and arms pumping furiously). Chi Running takes advantage of a force that comes naturally to all of us — gravity.

The funny runner guy is Chris Griffin; he's my instructor. I'm training for my [first half-marathon](#) right now, so I figured now would be a good a time as ever to learn good form and try to stay pain-free. Earlier, lying on the floor of the Triathlon department on a gaudy red carpet, me and a dozen others — including an injury-prone high school track star and a 60-year old grandma — learned the basic tenets of this unique running philosophy. By using what Griffin calls "the lean," we create momentum through gravitational pull, using the arms as levers and the legs as wheels revolve naturally behind us. "If you ever watch the Kenyans running in the Olympics," he says, "they're practicing Chi Running. It's the most natural way to run." There are some simple rules to follow — core tight, butt relaxed, calves relaxed, head straight, feet straight (a lot of people run with their feet pointed slightly outward, which causes stress on the knees and toes), weight balanced in the middle of the feet, cadence consistent no matter what the speed. And it works.

One of Chi Running founder Danny Dreyer's first group of clients in 1999 was a group of rocket scientists at NASA's Ames campus in Silicon Valley. "One physicist came up to me after class and said, 'I don't believe in Tai Chi woo woo stuff, but what you're teaching is straight down the line good physics,'" Dreyer recalls. "Nobody had applied physics to running before, but this made sense to them."

In 1972, American marathoner Frank Shorter won a gold at the Olympics and started advocating the idea that anybody could run for exercise. This led to the dawn of the running sneaker industry — by the end of that decade, the first Nike Air product had hit the market, New Balance had earned a reputation as the best running shoe ever, and UK



company Reebok entered the US market with the most expensive running shoe to date.

The problem is that most running shoes are designed with a half-inch heel lift. "George Sheehan, a cardiologist who wrote for Runner's World in the 70s, proposed quite correctly that by increasing the height of the shoe, you could increase stride length," Ian Adamson, a world champion adventure racer who now directs product development at [running shoe company Newton](#), tells me. "But this can cause a couple of unfortunate results. Changing the biomechanical ratio between the fibula, tibia, and femur causes you to strike the ground too soon. Also, the 1/2 inch lift means you're effectively always running down a 15-degree slope. So you end up constantly over-striding; your joints lock out and it causes immense shock on the body." These performance-enhancing shoes have played a tangible role in the number of injuries caused by running. This has also inadvertently led to the rise of the running injury treatment industry — think braces and surgery and PT.

The sneaker industry, though, has been showing signs of change. Newton currently sells about [a dozen running shoe models](#) exclusively designed for a mid- and forefoot strike. [New Balance's 800s](#) are made specifically for Chi Running, with shock absorption cushioning at the midfoot. [Nike's Frees](#), though still with the half inch heel lift, are designed to mimic the sensation of barefoot running. And if you really want to get close to running with no shoes on there's [Vibram Five Fingers](#). "There are a lot of options out there," Griffin, the instructor, tells our class. "But remember, technique has to precede gear."

It's been about a month since I took the Chi Running workshop, and I'm happy to report that the 100+ miles that I've run since then have been injury-free. The hardest thing for me to incorporate was the mindfulness aspect. Most of us have gotten accustomed to listening to music or podcasts while running, so when Griffin suggested we ditch the iPod and treat running as a practice like yoga or meditation, I was hesitant. The whole reason I'd been able to start running distances in the first place was [thanks to Nike Plus](#), so I just wasn't sure how I'd feel to run without knowing how fast and how long. One day, though, I forgot my iPod at home and was forced to run without metrics or music — it ended up being one of my most refreshing runs ever. I just listened to the wind and focused on my breathing. It reminded me of a passage I read in novelist and runner Haruki Murakami's memoir, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*:

I just run. I run in a void. Or maybe I should put it the other way: I run in order to *acquire* a void... The thoughts that occur to me while I'm running are like clouds in the sky. Clouds of all different sizes. They come and they go, while the sky remains the same sky as always.

I still like to run with my iPod when I remember it, but I think that's okay. Like with any practice, it's important to be comfortable where you are while acknowledging that you're on the road to improvement. That's how I feel about my running now.