

Fleet Feet

Footwork Series

By **Miranda Esmonde-White**

ALL MOVEMENT BEGINS AND ENDS with our feet, the foundation of our body. A runner's feet need to be strong and flexible enough to supply a powerful takeoff and withstand the impact of each landing. As a repetitive-motion sport, running often results in aches, pains and chronic injuries, many of which could be diminished or better controlled simply by increasing the strength and flexibility of the feet.

As a former professional ballet dancer and now sports trainer, I turned my focus on developing an exercise program to help high-performance athletes and marathon runners improve their performance and remain injury-free. Hubert Lacroix, president and CFO of the CBC, is an avid marathoner and has been using the program for five years. Lacroix has won his age category in the Boston Marathon several times. "I come into the studio in pain and leave pain-free," he says.

Proper conditioning requires an equal dose of strength and flexibility in every joint. The strength and flexibility of a runner's feet will influence the ankles, calves, knees, hips and back. When working with runners, I start with their feet and move upwards, strengthening and stretching one joint at a time, working systematically to improve the full articulation of the joints. The workout will boost power to the muscles, preparing them to withstand repetitive contractions from the impact of running by remaining elongated as long as possible. A powerful, elongated muscle is less prone to spasm, injury and pain. The trick is to strengthen the muscles as they're being elongated.

The following sequence should give you more power, relieve pain and prevent injuries, so you'll feel great on your next run. These conditioning exercises should take about 10 to 15 minutes. Done daily, they will change the strength and health of your feet and make running even more enjoyable.



Stretches and strengthens the shins, toes, ankles and calves (short muscles). Repeat 8 times per foot, slowly.

- 1 >> Lift heel up: isolates and forces maximum flexibility of the toes and shins.
- 2 >> Push away from the floor with your toes: deepens flexibility and strength of the shin and toes.



Straight leg stretches and strengthens the shins, ankles, toes and calves (long muscles). Repeat 8 times per foot, slowly.

- 1 >> Extend leg in front, knee straight. Point foot as hard as you can for a count of 3.
- 2 >> Flex foot as hard as you can for a count of 3.

INCORRECT POSITIONS

Poor ankle alignment will weaken stabilizer ligaments leading to ankle sprains and injury.



Tip for correct positioning: make sure your weight is centred through the ball of your foot, going through your big toe.

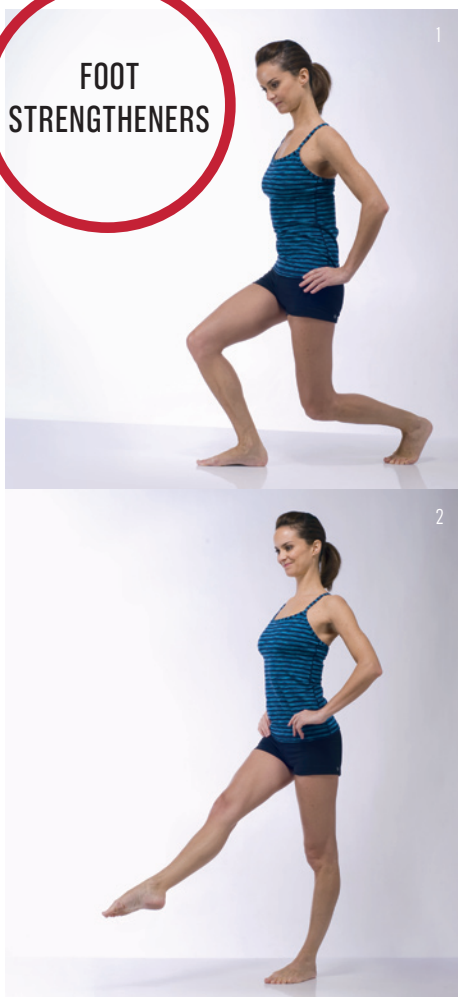
SHIN STRETCH: PARALLEL FEET

Repeat 3 times, slowly.

- 1 >> Bend both knees to stretch the Achilles.
- 2 >> Raise both heels as high as possible, maintaining clean alignment.
- 3 >> Slowly straighten your legs to get a maximum stretch and strengthening of the shins.



FOOT STRENGTHENERS



Repeat 4 times, slowly.

- >> Start in a lunge with your back straight. Push away from the floor using full articulation of the foot and ending in a point position with a straight knee.

This is a slow, controlled movement that enhances power in your takeoff and landing.



SHIN STRETCH: OPEN STANCE

Feet apart is a deeper shin stretch and should only be done in sequence with the previous shin stretch (parallel feet). Repeat 3 times, slowly.

- 1 >> Feet apart and turned outwards. Bend both knees to stretch the Achilles.
- 2 >> Raise both heels as high as possible, maintaining clean alignment.
- 3 >> Slowly straighten your legs to get a maximum stretch and to strengthen the shins. **R**

Miranda Esmonde-White is a former dancer with the National Ballet of Canada and developer of the Essentrics flexibility program (www.essentrics.com). She lives in Montreal.