

Hokey Pokey

You put your left leg in
Your left leg out
In, out, in, out
Shake it all about
You do the hokey pokey
And you turn around
That's what it's all about

Running laterally towards my left away from the infield, tracking the ball's flight, sustaining my speed to catch the ball before it hit the outfield grass, I glimpsed out of the outer part of my right eye the goose just off the ball's flight. Maintaining my pursuit of the ball, the goose rising up out of the deep left center oversized puddle, instantly realizing the goose meant for the ball as well, digging my right foot spikes into the over-drenched sod, altering my angle to beat the goose to the ball. Reaching out my right arm, throwing my fielder's glove over the ball just as the goose put its beak into the back of my gloved right hand, I caught the ball. The goose caught my forearm and all hell broke loose after that.

Hanging onto my arm, the goose angrily shook its neck to force my arm to give up the ball that was in firmly in my glove. It's squawk muffled from its mouth cupped over my arm, its wings flapping wildly to stay in place, I shook with a sharp pulling and jerking motion. No luck. Then, I heard simultaneously, screams from the infield and from above me and the goose. Oh, shit! The goose's noise brought its friends. My yells brought my teammates. Ticked off, I dug hard into the grass, contorted my body and legs away from the bird, yanked my arm from the goose's grip, stole a glance at the phalanx about to descend, accelerating to the dugout.

I know how fast I was on that day. At that age, I was fast, covering centerfield like it was mine alone, covering more of left and right field than is normal. Outrunning a goose and the geese was a given. The flock took over the infield, I reached the dugout, the noise growing louder: them honking at me without harmony, and me yelling back in disgust. Neither the geese nor I heard the raucous laughter from both teams, the fans in the stands, and the passersby. The geese left, honking loudly in their flight. My left ankle hurt.

After a couple of hours having my ankle examined, twisted, poked, and seemingly dissected, the university's sports med staff informed me that I hadn't torn the ankle and that I didn't have a sprain. Instead, I was given the sole exercise of extending my left leg, lifting the foot slightly off the ground, and performing a mime routine of spelling the alphabet – capital letters – in the air. Daily accomplishing the task before I rose out of bed, while in each class, before, during, and after practice, during each meal, and at night before I fell asleep. Performing the exercise became such a habit, I didn't notice the ankle ache had disappeared. I also maintain that routine on a daily basis, now some 45 years later.

Ankle instability may result from weakening of the ankle, from age or from a fall, a twist, a misstep. That instability puts pressure on the body's natural biomechanics, forcing an eventual giving out in the ankle, or the knee, or the quadricep, or the hip, or the upper torso. Unaddressed for too long leads to the body rebelling on a run, leading to an altered gait or worse, a failed run. Can't run if the ankles don't hold up their end of the bargain.

Aging weakens the ankles: the older the runner, the less power the ankles deliver at impact from each foot's landing at the end of the stride. Knees and hips are bigger, more powerful, and obvious to the success of the run. The muscles associated with the ankles are smaller. The body is constantly adjusting the power necessary in each of the leg joints in the performing the run. Older runners lose the muscle, the power, they had when they were much younger. That power shows its reduction first in the ankles. Focusing on strengthening the ankles is the first, ahem, step to maintaining running speed through aging, or at least slowing that loss. Can't run if the ankle muscles have given out.

On the Saturday morning long run just after I turned 60, we were crossing a busy road with the light in our favor, the walk sign lit up. In front of us was the start of the path just past the slightly sloped curb. Nothing unique about that slope, a mindless continuation of the run. My right foot decided it didn't want to go up that gentle slope, the shoe catching an invisible boulder, forcing a forward lean leading into a fall, a face plant, the right knee and the right forearm bracing the fall, sparing the face. It's a handsome face and it's all mine. Lots of blood and bigtime scabs, but I survived that run. Not so much for my right ankle over the next few years leading to now.

Calf raises are a good start in revitalizing the ankle's strength. Simple: raise up to the balls of your feet, hold one second, gently return the heels to the floor. Repeat 10 times at first, then 15 times a few weeks later, then 20 times on a regular basis. All the little things around your ankles become stronger. Your calves aren't thrilled, but the ankles celebrate.

Came a day some months later when I noticed I wasn't holding my usual pace for one of my favorite runs. In fact, I wasn't holding pace for any of my runs, much less my races. I couldn't simulate even a smidgen of my prior training pacing, not even a smidgen. The big kids were now too far ahead. The stride had been altered: a higher stride, a shorter stride, always on the balls of my feet, even on steep downhills. No matter the altered training methods, the results were lost. I had slowed by almost two minutes in my per mile pace. Something was amiss.

Heel walks are next. Imagine playing toy soldier as a child: walking with stiff legs while touching only your heels with each stride. And, for gawd's sake, don't slam your heel into the floor. Instead, pretend your holding something fragile in your hands. 20 steps one way, turn around to come back to where you started. That's a set. Slowly build to completing enough sets to fill a minute. Toe walks are a natural companion to include with the heel walks. Balls of the feet is more accurate. Pretend you are performing ballet. Work with me, here.

A couple of years later, not from a run, but from walking with a box down a short flight of garage stairs, I forgot the last step down. The lead right leg buckled in my attempting to locate flat ground. The knee took the brunt of the fall, the hip holding out to the end. The ankle snapped. The marathon just a week away was a did not finish because the right ankle couldn't support the balance leading me into prickly bushes and a long walk to assistance to stem the bleeding while getting me back to the start/finish. It sucked.

Post turning 60, I have fallen or had an ankle give out on more occasions that I can recall or care to remember. Isolated, each time falling is not basis to be concerned; a slip, a mindless turn, attempting to act younger, can each be the excuse. By myself, with a spot of tea, or a cup of coffee, I do recall each one. I've read the factoid that falling is a major eliminator of an older person's life quality. I no longer need imagine what that reduced quality of life will do for a veteran runner. I see men my age walking unsteadily or stooped over. I don't need that in my life.

My favorite ankle-strengthening exercise is standing on one leg, the other leg dangling in front of the first, just above the floor. Hold that for one minute. If you touch the dangling leg, start over. I can do that now, having graduated from just five seconds. Switch legs. Then, find a ball, or a plastic bottle. While balanced on one leg, reach down, pick up the object, stand up, lean down, placing the object on the floor, upright. Graduate to smaller objects, like golf balls, or a cat's toy balls. Now, stand in a corner and perform the one-legged stand for at least 10 seconds. Yeah, I can't do it that long, either.

I'd run out of ideas. For my own sanity, I conned – convinced – my general practitioner for a scrip for physical therapy. Imagine being a well-educated PT, in both neurological and orthopedic therapies, and being compelled to offer physiological solutions to a mid-60's male distance runner, suffering from nothing more than a need to regain balance and his running ability. 12 weeks later, both the runner and the therapist having adjusted to one another, decreasing the weekly meetings from thrice each week down to one day each week, life has improved. I can put on my pants while standing on strong ankles. I can walk firmly forward. I am no longer scraping the inside of my running shoes.

Since the middle of my 60th year, my running pace having slowed so dramatically, I also witnessed first hand the slowing of my race results. There is no race day magic when your stride can no longer cash the checks your adrenaline wants to write. Training to run faster paces became race training to not overly embarrass myself to myself. Nobody pays attention to the old guy who is no longer running just in front of you; that guy is now just a race statistic, filling out the field.

Hold an object in your hands, say, a large ball or a small box. Stand on your bare feet or while wearing socks, on the blue, thick foam pad you purchased after your using one at PT. Find your balance, hold the ball out in front of you, arms semi-straight, twist your arms slowly to the right, return the arms to the in front position. Do the same to the left. 10 times. Graduate to doing this exercise on one leg, first off the foam pad. You should get the idea.

I raced in a 15km yesterday, full of long inclines, steep downhill, on wind-driven rain-slickened pavement, the cold north wind chilling the bones, the sun hiding, my ankles commanding the stage, pushing both up the hills and firmly downhill. They announced their presence with authority. A guy in his mid-60's placing in the top 15-

percent of the 1,000 runner field, third in his age division. I raced faster than I had in almost a year and a half, reminded that I could be faster, and again hang with the big kids on our Saturday runs. Another step in the process.

Quality of life can mean so many things to so many people. Though we make the attempt to make that which is simple complex, when reeled into its essence, quality of life is merely that which makes each of us happy. Being able to stand erect, to walk in similar fashion, to function, is enough for me. And, if I am able to add on the level of running I have come to expect and now appreciate, frosting on the cake comes to mind. I do the exercises. I do them with no one watching. I add to the repertoire of exercises. Little things add up to the biggest ones. Strong ankles means balance. Balance means quality running. Quality running means a return to Boston.

Now, let me tell you about strong hips and relearning how to jump.

Put your whole self in
take your whole self out
Put your whole self in
and you shake it all about
Do the Hokey and Pokey
and you turn yourself around
that's what it's all about!