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Here's the Rub: Purge your trail-running imbalances with Rolfing

By Dave Sheldon

We trail runners crave our fix, waking early to charge along a shaded path before the world crawls out of bed. But such indulgence can sometimes be too much of a good thing. Pounding away in the backcountry stresses the body's fascia—the connective tissue that surrounds joints and encases muscles. When this tissue is overworked, stressed or dehydrated, it becomes increasingly solid and rigid. With enough abuse, your body cries out for help, with soreness, decreased flexibility and an overall reduction in efficiency.

Common running-related structural problems are tight hamstrings, cable-like IT bands and sore hip flexors. Many folks learn to live with these common complaints, not realizing their body mechanics are being negatively impacted. The bodywork technique called Rolfing Structural Integration, commonly referred to as "Rolfing," provides trail runners relief from chronic aches, pains and injuries associated with the miles.

Linda Gill, a former UCLA cross-country and track athlete, tried Rolfing to recover from a nagging hamstring injury. After several sessions, she noticed that, "Rolfing really helped my overall body mechanics; the tension I historically carried in my shoulders was gone, my hamstrings felt great and breathing became easier as my chest opened up." Six months later, Linda won a Black Shirt (given to the first 35 finishers, out of the approximately 1000 runners) in the famous Dipsea, a cruel 7.1-mile race in Marin County, California, and the following year was the fastest female finisher.

What's a Rolf?

Created by Dr. Ida P. Rolf, Rolfing is a holistic system of soft tissue manipulation that strives to align and balance the body's components until the entire system is functioning as a coordinated whole. For example, the legs are aligned to the hips, knees to feet, shoulders to rib cage, and then all of these joints are integrated with each other to form a smoothly functioning body. A Rolfing practitioner uses direct pressure to "melt" connective tissue adhesions (tight or restricted areas of the body's soft tissue) and release energy trapped in an affected area.

The touch can range anywhere from light to very deep, and the speed of the strokes usually falls into the slow to very slow range. This unique combination of depth, speed and pressure allows a practitioner to contact the different layers and structures of a body with great exactness. And contrary to rumors, Rolfing does not hurt. It can at times deliver intense sensations, but the pressure stays under the painful red zone. Oil or lotion is rarely used, and the resulting light friction enhances the precision of the practice.

What Can it Repair?

Matt Nasta, a Rolfing practitioner in Boulder, Colorado, works regularly with members of the University of Colorado cross-country team. "I see many athletes with IT Band tendonitis, Achilles and plantar fasciitis, and sciatica-like symptoms due to tight hip rotators," says Nasta. "Rolfing addresses these symptoms, like a mechanic would realign your car tires, and this tune-up increases joint range of motion and running efficiency."

Rolfing is not simply the deep tissue or myofascial massage that many runners have tried. Rolfing looks beyond a sore muscle or joint and takes the whole system into account.

James Schwartz, an Advanced Rolfer with 20 years of experience working with runners around San Francisco, says, "When the joints of the ankle, knee and hip are synchronized with one another, and the muscles acting on them are properly toned, then the impact of running is evenly distributed, sparing any one part from abnormal wear and tear. Another plus is increased efficiency and training capacity."

Bonus Benefits

Another aspect unique to Rolfing is the effect it can have in reducing the tone of overly tight muscles and connective tissue. Rolfing's slow deep strokes, says current thinking, stimulate intra-fascial mechanoreceptors (sensory neurons of the muscle nerve), which in turn trigger the nervous system to reduce tension in related muscles and fascia. Many people experience the release of excess tension as heat or a slight vibration under the area being worked. Emotional discharge, laughing, crying or a temporary mood change is also not uncommon.

Put another way, Rolfing allows the brain and nervous system to "re-boot" areas of the body that are receiving too much electrical stimulation, which is manifested as chronic tightness, and reestablishes a healthy level of muscle contraction and relaxation. For the runner, such release around the hip and in any leg muscle can have an overwhelming effect.

Mike Fanelli, a running coach from Marin County, California, and competitive runner for 38 years, has worked extensively with Schwartz. "Rolfing has taken 10 years off my legs. Before Rolfing, I had to take four or five days off after a hard run," says Fanelli. "Now I am back up to running 50-mile weeks."

Such positive results don't surprise Schwartz. "Runners in their 40s and 50s get dramatic performance results from Rolfing," he says, "as their over-trained and muscle-bound bodies become more supple."

Foot Fixes

Since the feet are the body's base of support, foot mechanics are another important consideration when dealing with any running-related problem. Load an imbalance onto a system responsible for providing shock absorption and stability, while simultaneously streaming our gray matter with environmental

information-like how slippery a tree root may be or the incline of a hill-and you're asking for trouble.

"The feet are one of the most integral and complex parts of our body, especially for an athlete," says Nasta. "If they are not tracking properly, then the rest of the body must adjust. For a runner, this compensation regularly shows up as trouble in the knee, hip or back."

Again, when Rolfing's full-body approach is applied, positive benefits may reverberate throughout other structures, and can be expressed as increased range of motion in the hip, or reduced stress on a sore knee.

So, if your feet are begging for attention, a hamstring won't stop its nagging, or your body and mind need a thorough overhaul after years of neglect, consider the virtues of Rolfing. The work could very well reveal the key to rediscovering that forgotten spring in your step.

Rolfing Structural Integration appointments last between 60 and 90 minutes, and cost between \$80 and \$140. If considering a Ten Series, plan to schedule at least one session per month; many people sign up for a session every seven to 10 days. For more injury-specific concerns, strategize with a practitioner to devise a game plan. The Rolfing Institute of Structural Integration's website (www.rolf.org) is a great place to start your search, as everyone listed in its database has undergone rigorous training and is a certified or advanced practitioner.

Keep your appointment days in mind when training. In general, light, warming exercise before a session is fine, while intense exercise is best avoided, since it may strip your body of the energy it needs to accept the changes offered by the practitioner. And even if you feel like going on an exhausting mountain run after jumping off the table, remember that your body needs time to fully absorb the benefits of the work. Take a rest day on the same day of your Rolfing session.

The Complete Rolfing Package

The hallmark of Rolfing is the Ten Series, a group of 10 Rolfing sessions that each focuses on a particular region of connective tissue and structure. A Ten Series treatment is different from a few sessions to heal a specific complaint, as the entire body is systematically balanced. A good strategy is to try a single Rolfing session or two, see how your body responds, and then decide whether a Ten Series might be beneficial.

Sessions 1-3: These initial treatments strive to open up the breathing, give the body a stable foundation by addressing the lower extremities and feet and look at how the body stands in relation to gravity.

Sessions 4-7: The main focus is the core, or the internal components that support the body in the same way as the steel grid work supports a high-rise building.

Structures like the spine, abdominals and hips are addressed, as are the inner leg, head and neck.

Sessions 8-10: Here the practitioner works with the body's middle layer of connective tissue, and may ask for subtle movements to be done in coordination with the Rolfing strokes. The resulting combination educates the nervous system to the changes accomplished during the first several sessions.

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