

# COOL RUNNINGS

Hard and fast: taking sneakers from the runway to the pavement.

WORDS Jessica Power

Until recently, I advocated running only when late or frightened. Running will wear out your joints. It will inevitably leave your face jowly. You'll get sunburn. Worst of all, it's really hard.

Within a few minutes of meeting running coach Sean Williams, he has debunked every slanderous misconception I have about running. Joints don't wear out due to running. In fact, running may help strengthen them provided nutrition is sufficient. He recommends glucosamine and fish oil to support joints. I ask him if your face will sag. He explains that running is effective for weight loss, so you can look a little gaunt. His own lack of jowls is reassuring. I ask him about sunburn. He points to his hat.

As for my belief that running is unforgivably hard, he counters that running can be so joyous that it borders on the mystical. "Runners' highs happen when the endorphins kick in and you feel completely detached from the world and everything else around you. It's just you, body and spirit. You can get so high you forget you're running."

Before I get high, I have to learn how to go forward. As an absolute beginner, I have no idea what good running form looks like. My original method involves bracing my breasts in the crook of my coffee-holding arm. So I don't bend the heel of my shoe, I hit the ground with my whole foot at once. An exaggerated bend of my knees absorbs shock so I don't spill my coffee. The technique is designed to minimize bouncing, breakage, and spillage.

Williams is polite about it, but makes it clear that said technique is very bad. "Absolutely everyone should run with a forefoot strike." To practice forefoot running, he instructs me to skip on the balls of my feet, lifting my knees in turn so that my ankle is directly below my sit bone. Next, he gets me to run a little. He shows me that by lifting my knees higher, my stride lengthens. He advises I lean my upper body forward by a few degrees. In 15 minutes I have gone from running like a penguin to a natural.



That said, when I practice sprinting I am puffing, dizzy, and nauseated. He assures me that two months of consistent training on the right program is all it will take to run comfortably, and perhaps even hit a runners' high.

Two months seems like a long time. Thy Nguyen, a teacher at Sydney's Hom Yoga and avid runner, is refreshingly blunt about it. "It's going to be hard, and it's going to suck a lot of the time. Be realistic with yourself. Be happy with small wins." When ease eventually comes, it's meditative. "It's so physical that it gets you out of your head and that's what yoga does for a lot of people. It's a physical connection."

In Nguyen's workshop, we move through a sequence to address typical runners' problems; tight hamstrings, iliotibial bands, calves, and hips. She stresses how important it is to cherish your body. "You have to keep the mobility and flexibility so you can actually enjoy runs.

Not just for longer distances, but longer in terms of years. Yes, running will keep you fit, but if you aren't taking care of the muscles and ligaments it's not sustainable."

I start to fall in love with the idea of running. It's more than putting on shoes and shuffling. It demands that you nurture yourself. You must honour your body's needs of fuel and rest. You must be persistent, but also patient with yourself. Running is a commitment to your wellbeing, holistically and long term.

With newfound enthusiasm, I take my first solo run. I hit the pavement with the balls of my feet and lift my knees high. Everything jolts and bounces. My heart and lungs burn. Just as Nguyen warned, it sucks. Then I remember to lean forward. It's like changing gears. I gain speed, my shoulders fall away from my ears, and my body feels light on my legs. There is no transcendent high, but briefly I feel something almost as good. I am gliding. ☺