

RUNNING SPARKS CREATIVITY LEADS TO INVENTION

To be a great athlete, you must have the right technique. Tennis players practice their strokes over and over, baseball players take batting practice to perfect their swings, and basketball players take thousands of shots. Repetition leads to muscle memory, and the memory of the skill leads to success. As a competitive runner, **Joe Sparks '74** believes he has found the correct technique for success in his sport, and he has invented a device to help perfect that technique.

On Your Mark

Sparks works as a massage therapist and yoga instructor in Perrysburg. He began competing in triathlons in the 1990s, but he suffered a knee injury that required surgery. He did not want to give up running and competing, so he felt he needed to find a better way to run. At a coaches' clinic, he met Dr. Nicholas Romanov, a Russian sports scientist involved with the U.S.A. Triathlon Committee, who introduced him to the "pose method" of running.

"In every sport there are certain poses," Sparks explains. "Running has the running pose, but it's something that is never taught. Everything that you do involves certain movements, and to be the best at any sport requires a certain skill, a way of perfecting that movement. There's a way to run correctly that uses gravity, but it's never taught."

Sparks began studying all the drills created by Dr. Romanov and practiced the drills for six months, only actually running when he competed in races. Surprisingly, he found that his running times kept getting faster even though he wasn't even running during training. That convinced him that Dr. Romanov's technique had merit.

Sparks invited Dr. Romanov to Toledo in 2001 to present a clinic, and then he began doing his own clinics throughout the Midwest to train people in this technique. "People have spent so much time doing it wrong that changing their running technique is not easy," Sparks says. "Running shoes are even designed around bad running habits because they guard against impact, which goes against gravity. Your heel doesn't touch the ground when you run. You run on the balls of your feet. You just need to lift your legs upward and lean forward to use gravity instead of extraneous energy."

Get Set

As Sparks continued to present his clinics, he found that most people don't want to do just the drills. They want to go out and run, to train by running instead of just learning how to run. "I wanted to figure out how to solve this, to find a way to teach people how to run while they're running," he recalls. "I came up with my EZ Run Belt so they would have to do the running drill while they're running. The belt forces you to run with your feet coming up underneath and it won't let you take long strides."

The EZ Run Belt fastens around a person's waist and rubber tubing attaches it to the ankles. The tubing comes in different resistance levels based on speed and strength. The tubing mimics the hamstring and can be hooked at various levels on the belt to adjust to the height of the user. Sparks says he got the idea from a friend's mountain climbing belt. He made his first belt in February 2005 and sold the first one the following December after refining the design. He has since sold about 400 belts worldwide, the furthest one going to Australia.



Last year, encouraged by several of his clients, Sparks auditioned for the ABC television show *American Inventor*. He was one of about 3,000 people auditioning in Chicago, and he made it to the third round of 70 who were able to present their inventions to the celebrity judges. Unfortunately, Sparks did not make the cut when only one inventor was chosen from that group. However, he did receive strong praise from George Foreman, who was one of the celebrity judges. Foreman encouraged him to continue promoting his product.

Go!

Sparks hopes to continue traveling around the world, presenting clinics and making connections with people. He is planning a marketing campaign in the Toledo area for the EZ Run Belt, and he has been approached to do an infomercial about the product.

“I’m doing this because I believe in it and I love doing it,” Sparks says. “It’s fun for me. I want to teach people that running is fun and that you can do it without getting hurt. This is something that I really believe in that can really make a difference in millions of people’s lives. It’s made such a difference in my life and I’m learning so much about myself. I would have kicked myself if I didn’t follow through on this.”

For more information about the EZ Run Belt or to make a purchase, visit www.fitnesswithjoe.com.

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