
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Lessons From a Pose Seminar

Think Olympic lifts and gymnastics are important fitness tools?
Paul Eich says running benefits athletes more.

By Paul Eich

December 2011



All images: Mindy Bush

Fascinated by the idea of the Pose Method of running since I first was exposed to it on CrossFit.com, I finally attended a training seminar with Pose Method creator Dr. Nicholas Romanov on Sept. 17. What I learned is that without Pose training, I am an inadequate coach, and I'm just begging for injury as a runner.

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Notice the difference in timing. In the photo on the left, the athlete is reaching the pose as the support foot touches down, making the subsequent fall more efficient. In the picture on the right, the athlete is reaching the pose long after his center of gravity has passed the point of support.

If you run, you are moving through what Romanov calls “the running pose.” There is simply no other way to run. Romanov did not invent Pose running; he realized it was a defining element of running. Gravity frames all human action; it isn’t optional.

Therefore, passing from pose to pose in running is not optional. What is optional is whether you move from pose to pose with skill and whether you learn to move with efficiency. You don’t have to notice wasteful effort, destructive effort. You can run without an accurate concept of what running is or where your body is in relation to itself. But gravity rules human movement nonetheless because the human form was designed and optimized for the constraints, demands and benefits of gravity.

Running is a cycle of three things: pose, fall, pull. That sounds easy, and it is. You could say it is as easy as falling off a log. But it is also much more difficult because to run

well you must sustain and embrace the falling. The pose is how you transition from one foot to the other. If you stand on one foot, bend the supporting knee and pull the other foot up under your hip, you’re in the runner’s pose.

Falling is just what it sounds like: allowing your center of gravity to move ahead of your support point. The pull means pulling the supporting foot from the ground up under the hip to return to the pose, now supported by the other foot. You don’t have to think of putting the other foot down when you pull the supporting foot to your hip; the body will take care of that for you. The cycle of pose-fall-pull is running reduced to its most basic elements. In aviation, we like to joke that flying is as simple as pushing forward on the stick to make houses “get larger” and pulling back on the stick to make houses “get smaller.” Learning to skillfully execute running or flying, however, is much more complex than those basic elements imply.

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The best runners in the world—during the seminar, we watched footage of Usain Bolt—are running from pose to pose with precise timing such that their supporting foot contacts the ground directly under their center of gravity. When watching the slow-motion review of the seminar participants, though, it was clear we were running from pose to pose with poor timing. We were moving slower, with less efficiency because we were using muscles to do what gravity could do for us. We were running with fear, running with a desire to be in control, running with the equivalent of one foot on the brake and one on the gas. The good news was we could all be taught to see the waste in our movement in just one session of “coached watching.”

The question is not whether you will pass through the pose; the question is when you will pass through the pose.

Gaining Efficiency

In any endeavor, reducing waste improves quality. Running is no different. Correct timing is necessary for reduction of waste in running. The slow-motion video review of our running showed all of our deviations from the Pose Method. Just a rudimentary understanding of physics made it clear that if your lead foot reaches the ground before you pull your rear leg into the running pose, your ability to fall forward is compromised.



Poor running technique results in athletes who reach ahead in dorsiflexion and create a heel strike.

If you step forward—the foot meets the ground ahead of the athlete’s center of gravity—to meet the ground, you consciously or unconsciously create a braking effect. The risk of injury increases and efficiency in running decreases to the degree that your footfall is forward of your center of gravity.

Accurate perception and the skill to apply it are required for a runner to be in the pose with the right timing.

The question is not whether you will pass through the pose; the question is when you will pass through the pose. The Pose Method allows a runner/coach to identify and reduce wasted work in the pose-fall-pull cycle, primarily by correcting the timing by which he or she moves from pose to pose.



Here, the support leg is clearly in front of rather than under the athlete, creating a braking effect.



The leg is fully extended behind the athlete as a result of a late pull and serves as a brake against falling forward.

The challenge is you can't improve your timing by willpower. Instead, you must understand the Pose Method, then learn more accurate perception of your body positioning, and then conduct drills designed to allow you to apply the new concept and perception and run with skill.

What is meant by "concept," "perception" and "skill"? Think of your first experience trying or perhaps teaching the kipping pull-up. How long did it take to get the concept in your head that you had to throw the hip or push the bar away from your face? How long did it take until you could do that, once, at the right time? How long until you could get the timing right for both parts—the kip and the push-away—so that you could do several pull-ups in a row? How long did it then take until you had complete confidence that you could do kipping pull-ups one after the other until your grip failed?

After that milestone, how long until you discovered a flaw in your movement that, although not an impediment to doing kipping pull-ups, was wasteful, thus making pull-ups harder? After correcting that flaw, how long until you noticed that, when fatigued, you were likely to

revert to the corrected flaw? I suspect that anyone who's paying close attention will notice a similar progression in application of the Pose Method to running.

More Than Running

Pose methodology isn't limited to running. It can be applied to any human movement. In Romanov's concept, "body weight is the common denominator of movement." If we can understand body weight and accurately perceive it, we can move better—for any purpose.

To put the Pose concept into a CrossFit perspective, consider two poses that define the squat: top and bottom. Any error in squatting could easily be attributed to an error in either the squatter's concept of what squatting is (knee vs. hip flexion) or an error in the squatter's perception of where the body is in relationship to gravity or itself (heel weighting vs. forefoot weighting). With a new concept of what squatting is, feedback to help perceive where body weight is ("wobble your toes to prove to yourself you are heel-weighted") and adequate repetition, athletes begin to squat fluidly.

In performing Pose Method drills at the seminar, I relearned that human movement well executed is sheer delight. I could see the pleasure on the faces of my fellow trainees as we felt—if perhaps for only a few strides—what it is like to let gravity carry us along. The experience of being in that moment without trying to control it was sublime and reminiscent of my first fear-free snowboard ride. You think hitting a big snatch feels good? Of course it does. Imagine hitting 20 or 30 in a row at a tempo of 180 reps per second.

To a large degree, discussions of the relative virtues of heel striking vs. forefoot or mid-foot striking miss the point. If you stay in the framework of pose-fall-pull with accurate perception and correct timing, you will contact the ground primarily with the ball of the foot. It is the only possible way. You don't have to decide to use the forefoot. It happens as an inevitable result of skilled use of the Pose Method framework and accurate perception. A brief review of running with a slow-motion camera reveals this.



In Pose running, a more erect torso is preferred than is shown here. Think of leaning forward “at the ankles,” not the waist.

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Heel-wedged running shoes designed to cushion the impact of the athlete with the ground are symbolic of a complete misunderstanding of what running is and are unnecessary. However, I was surprised to find that they do not make skilled running impossible. Bare feet, or minimalist shoes, are no guarantee of skilled running. As Romanov put it, “If bare feet make you a good runner, getting naked will make you a good swimmer.” Watching video of ourselves, it was clear that those of us with minimalist shoes were no better at perception of our movement and those with ugly, heel-wedged monstrosities could improve as rapidly as those of us clad in INOV-8s or foot gloves.



Poor positions, like this one, prevent the efficient use of gravity and require the athlete to work harder for less forward movement.

Speed for Endurance

Over the weekend, it became evident the traditional concept of increasing mileage and aerobic capacity to be a “good runner” is completely backward and the likely reason the American College of Sports Medicine assesses that 85 percent of runners are injured annually. If we believe the base of endurance is speed, the maximum speed of any runner results from skilled movement from pose to pose.

Once you see what running is, you will be horrified at the idea of sending a person out to build an aerobic base before verifying the future runner can run with requisite skill. You should be as horrified by that concept as you would be by the idea of telling a newbie lifter to head off to the corner of the box by himself and figure out how to squat 500 lb. In either event injury is a near certainty, but we have been fooled by how long it takes to injure oneself with unskilled running.

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As Romanov reviewed the science of running, it appeared to me that the science of exercise, exercise physiology or sport is lacking a unifying concept. Thus, like the science of diet and human health, it largely has been misleading and confusing.

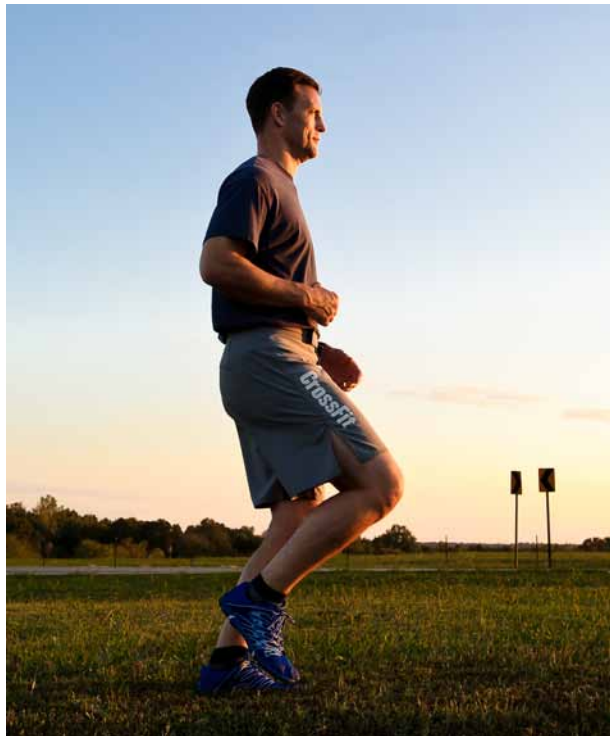
The seminar had three elements: classroom instruction, video review of our running, and coaching through the Pose drills. Day 2 added the complexity of students coaching each other. The last portion of Day 2 was a final video review that showed clear progress for all, with some participants reaching a very well-timed pose-fall-pull. If some were discouraged to discover how far from perfect our technique was, most left the class excited for the potential improvement we could attain.

I have read about Pose, watched the *CrossFit Journal* videos about Pose and viewed Dr. Romanov’s DVD several times. The takeaway from the seminar—and I don’t think I would ever have picked this up on my own—was threefold:

- First, it was important to learn how to see what good Pose Method running looks like.
- Second, we began to understand that “falling” doesn’t mean leaning over and falling like a tree; rather, it is letting one’s hips push forward with the torso erect until one’s center of gravity is ahead of one’s point of support (balls of the feet). In other words, it is “leaning from the ankles.”
- Third, and most subtle, is that “pulling the foot to the hip” has to happen while the leg is still weighted and largely underneath the athlete. The best way to experience this for yourself would be to use a few of the most basic Pose drills, such as “change of support” and “the pony.” When on the supporting foot, pull that foot to the hip without dipping to load the quads and then using the quads to bounce you up. Just pull the foot to the hip using the hamstrings. What you should feel is that the “pulling” sequentially lifts your center of gravity and then pulls the foot. You may be able to feel for an instant that you are being raised from the ground, even though you are thinking only of pulling your foot to your hip. In short, if you extend your leg behind you to push yourself forward, it is already too late to “pull.” If you can see an extended leg and fully open knee joint at any time on video review, the athlete is probably pulling too late.

Once Injured

In the name of full disclosure, I have a huge stake in Dr. Romanov being right. I ruptured an ACL in Aviation Officer Candidate School and then wrecked the meniscus trying to ski on the knee with the undiagnosed ACL tear. I did another two years of damage to my unstable knee joint before convincing doctors to rebuild the ACL. Over the following 20 years, I recovered and then re-lost the ability to get out and enjoy running.



With efficient mechanics, you might find a renewed love of running.

With sufficient mastery of what I learned from Romanov and his staff, I hope I can again enjoy the simple pleasure of an easy 5K. Just as important would be learning how to apply the principles of the Pose Method to walking, because I do that much more than I run and often suffer from the effort. Lastly, I would like to think I could drop 30 seconds off my Helen time once I am able to run with skill.

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The Greatest Benefit

Running is one-third of the original CrossFit model of fitness. I fully enjoyed my CrossFit Olympic Lifting Seminar and have used it to great benefit in coaching. I know I would enjoy a Gymnastics Seminar and will need that training to best coach others. However, in my judgment, neither of those tools is as elemental as learning to run with skill.

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If you are a coach, the vast majority of the athletes who are paying you to make them fit will benefit more from running skill than from skill at pull-ups or Olympic lifts. Lucky for you and your athletes, you don't have to choose between these competencies. If you are a professional—i.e., first responder, military member, pro athlete—you can rapidly improve your performance and your health by learning how to apply the Pose Method. The skill set isn't nice to have; it is an essential element for any athlete to approach his or her full potential.



Courtesy of Paul Eich

About the Author

Paul "Apolloswabbie" Eich owns *CrossFit Fire of the Gods* in the Memphis area and has been CrossFitting since 2007. He was a participant in the 2008 CrossFit Games, the 2009 CrossFit Games Regionals and the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games Open.