

ATHLETIC BALANCE (AND PERSPECTIVE)

Steve Myrland

“One should seek good balance in motion and not in stillness.”

Bruce Lee (“THE TAO OF JEET KUNE DO”)

“In an environment of artificial instability, the human body will create artificial stability.”

Gary Gray PT (in conversation)

If you have ever spent an extended period of time aboard a sailboat, you will have first-hand knowledge of an interesting and telling phenomenon: When, after many hours on the water, you disembark and set your feet on terra-firma once more, you find your inner gyroscope is now a bit . . . off . . . when it comes to standing on something that does *not* move. Your central nervous system has, in fact, adjusted (beautifully!) to a world in constant (and often unpredictable) motion. You will experience much the same thing if you spend time running on a treadmill. Once you switch the machine off, you face some moments of awkward re-adjustment to a (relatively) stable world.

These examples suggest something more than the simple fact that the human animal is a marvelously adaptive creature. I believe they should also cause us to question the “proprioceptively-enriched” environments we seek to create for athletes in the hope of making them “functionally” better-balanced creatures.

It has been suggested by many that the balance progression begins with solid ground training, and then moves from one unstable surface to another (each slightly less stable than its predecessor), and so on until.....? We have been introduced to all manner of interesting “de-stabilizing” products from balance-boards, to closed-cell foam rollers, to inflated pillows, physio-balls and more. The makers of these products (as well as many respected colleagues) would have us believe that these items can help athletes solve their balance deficiencies and make them better performers.

I disagree. The question we must ask ourselves as coaches is: Are we training athletes to compete; or are we training them to perform circus-tricks? Watching someone

balance one-legged atop a large inflated plastic ball while juggling meat-cleavers and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance is certainly a compelling spectacle, but, I will argue, it has little to do with creating a better tennis player, javelin thrower, bicycle racer, or gymnast. The “toys” may be intriguing; but the emphasis on them for performance and injury prevention / rehabilitation is, I believe, misplaced.

As we see in the central nervous system’s adaptation to the “ground” as represented by a sailboat, the human body will *always* try to adjust to an unstable environment. But it is significant that we do not (generally) have to run fast, jump high, or throw accurately and far while sailing. I am persuaded that balance training requiring an athlete to “attach” to a single spot (or a few spots) and deal with instability in the absence of sport-specific movement and skill execution may produce measurable results; but *not* the results we need.

Consider, instead, a balance progression paradigm that begins with static balance and goes quickly to dynamic balance predicated (simply) on variations of the gait-cycle. You stand; you step; you bound; you hop; you turn; you run; you run faster; you stop quickly; you change directions; *you move—and in all three planes*. Perhaps you change venues by learning to perform on grass; sand; gentle inclines, etc.; but the progression must go toward more *movement* (speed, amplitude and efficiency); not more toys.

If I’m wrong, we should all plan to take our athletes to sea and only return when they can do high-wire bounds in a force-nine gale.