

THE BIG TOE

Bigger than you think!

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Ever wonder why those hamstring problems keep dinging certain athletes, like a wild virus in December and you have no idea where the hamstring injuries are coming from. You've finally eliminated static stretching from your warm up, and the kids seem to be completing a thorough, active dynamic warm up prior to the actual workout. A hamstring twinge here and there with various athletes keeps the frustration level among all at a high level. Maybe you are looking for a solution to the problem in the leg when the real culprit is neatly tucked away.

Take off your shoes and socks and **look down** at your feet. You may be looking at the culprit, THE BIG TOE! Big toe flexibility is essential for all runners. You will find it amazing how truly inflexible your athlete's big toes are. Range of motion is critical and it's something so simple to fix. Along with injury prevention, athletes with increased big toe flexibility **will** run faster.

Injury prevention: Each day we stuff our feet in socks and running shoes and hope for the best. Our feet are the foundation to our every ambulatory movement. We walk and run on various surfaces as the feet take a relentless pounding every day. We take our feet for granted, often overlooking the general foot health with our athletes and almost always overlooking the health and mobility of the big toe.

Recently I was working with an elite college athlete who was experiencing some tightness in the hamstrings. Once I began to work the big toe, the athlete's hamstrings began to loosen up. At the beginning it was very uncomfortable in both the big toe and the hamstring.

Our entire body weight is resting on the feet, yet we seldom, if ever, do any restoration work on the feet and big toes. After practice is a great time to work on the joint range of motion stuff with the big toe. Athletes can work on this at home while watching TV or just relaxing. Along with big toe manual movement work, a good foot massage done by the athlete or with a partner will really help in the area of injury prevention. Injuries begin in the feet and just work their way up the body.

Increased speed: There are several receptors in the flexor hallucis longus that control the gain on the spinal motor neurons to the lower extremity. With increase rate of magnitude of stretch you are essentially able to recruit more motor units. Simply said, you will run faster with a better range of motion in the big toe.



PHOTO A



PHOTO B

In Photo A, the athlete will support the foot with one hand while massaging across the bottom on the foot with the thumb. Emphasis should be focused on the ball of the foot, heel and arch. Using some lotion will help with the massage.

In Photo B, the coach will brace the ball of the foot and begin slight pressure against the toe. The athlete can push back with the toe, creating a PNF stretch

with the big toe. The athlete can also do manual manipulation with the big toe before or after the coach or partner works the big toe.

So why do we ignore such a simple thing when striving for increased speed and health of the body as a whole. Knowledge is probably the main reason, as many colleges or clinics never address feet or big toe issues. It's just not glamorous or cool to be doing manual manipulation on the big toe, let alone do personal foot massage. It's so simple yet athletes will overlook the big toe and focus on the injured hamstring itself. Perhaps a better warm up will help, but don't overlook the big toe. **It may have a bigger impact than you think.**

Coach Huddle is the Director of the Northwest Track and Field Clinic, to be held Feb. 11 and 12, 2011 at the SeaTac Double Tree. www.allsportsschool.com He has spoken at Track and Field clinics in Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana, Texas, Georgia, Alabama, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois.