

**RUNNING SELF-OPTIMISATION:
ACUTE AND SHORT-TERM ADAPTATIONS TO RUNNING MECHANICS
AND RUNNING ECONOMY**

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Abstract

The intuitive link between a runner's gait and their metabolic cost of running, or running economy (RE), has led to many trying to compare the running mechanics of economical runners to those of less economical runners. However using this approach has created controversy about whether running mechanics meaningfully contribute to RE. Additionally only a limited number of studies use a broad, explorative, inter-disciplinary approach, encompassing physiological parameters, flexibility, kinematics, kinetics and muscular activity. The purpose of this thesis was to primarily assess 'self-optimisation' through considering acute and short-term adaptations to running mechanics and RE. To assess the biomechanical and physiological mechanisms behind changes to RE three studies were conducted, in addition to a fourth study which investigated biomechanical familiarisation. Study one investigated whether there were any biomechanical or physiological changes in beginner runners after 10 weeks of running and whether any of these changes contributed to a change in RE. There was an 8.4% improvement in RE (224 ± 24 vs. 205 ± 27 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹) and an increase in treadmill time-to-exhaustion (16.4 ± 3.2 vs. 17.3 ± 2.7 min), but no change in $\dot{V}O_{2max}$, minute ventilation or heart rate. Several kinematic, kinetic and flexibility measures were found to change over time, but joint moments and stiffness remained similar, with knee extension at toe-off, rearfoot velocity at touch down and timing of peak dorsiflexion explaining 94.3% of the variance in change in RE.

Results from study one suggested that changes in muscular activity might have contributed to kinematic differences, and subsequently an economical gait. Specifically, as joint moments were unchanged after 10 weeks it is possible that muscular coactivation may have changed since varying levels of agonist-antagonist activation can produce the same joint moment. Consequently study two examined the relationship between muscular coactivation and the metabolic cost of running, as thus far there was conflicting evidence. Results showed that in trained, recreational runners greater thigh coactivation was associated with a greater metabolic cost of running. Furthermore, the speed of running was found to affect the level of coactivation at the shank and of the flexor-flexor muscle pair, with less coactivation reported at faster submaximal speeds.

The final part of the thesis focused on a manipulation investigation into barefoot (BFT), minimalist shod (MS) and shod (SH) running. Applying the novel findings from studies one and two to this topical area would hopefully provide new insight into the

BFT running debate. Prior to applying this knowledge of kinematic and muscular activity changes in relation to RE whilst running BFT, an investigation into the time required to become familiar with barefoot treadmill running was needed. Results revealed that barefoot familiarisation was characterised by less plantarflexion and greater knee flexion at touch down, whilst stride length appeared to be adopted instantaneously. Reliability (intra-class correlations) and accuracy (standard error of mean) of the kinematic data appeared strongest once individuals had been running for 20 mins. Furthermore there were no significant differences in the kinematics after 20 mins of running.

The final study considered how changing the levels of proprioception and cushioning (BFT, MS and SH) influenced RE and the potential running mechanics that contributed to any changes in RE. The ramifications of such changes on injury risk were also considered by investigating impact accelerations, effective mass and pronation. Additionally, the effect of naturally changing stride length from a shorter BFT stride to a longer SH stride on RE were examined. Heightened proprioception and no external cushioning (BFT running) appeared to improve RE by at least 5% regardless of stride length, when compared to SH running with a SH stride length. However less proprioception and no external cushioning (MS running) only improves RE, compared to SH running with a SH stride length, when runners run with their SH stride length, rather than their shorter BFT stride length (~2.5% shorter). Improvements in RE are attributed to a lower vertical oscillation and effective mass, greater dependency on efficient, Type I muscles i.e. tibialis anterior, and less plantarflexion at toe-off. However higher impact accelerations, earlier heel off and low pronation angles, suggest there may be an increase in injury risk.

Therefore the findings from this thesis have demonstrated that runners naturally self-optimize the way they run. This is seen both as an acute (changes in footwear) and short-term (10 weeks) response to changing running gait. Study two demonstrated that economical runners appear to use different muscular strategies, with study one and four showing they also adopt specific movement patterns that may promote efficient storage and release of elastic energy. Additionally study three found that runners can become familiar with BFT treadmill running in 20 minutes. It is also important to note that economical biomechanical adjustments do not always favour a reduction in injury risk. But the thesis findings seem to suggest that perhaps performance denominates in terms of self-optimisation, rather than injury prevention.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	4
List of Tables	9
List of Figures	10
List of Equations	12
Symbols and Abbreviations	13
Declaration, Communications and Publications	18
Acknowledgements	20
Chapter 1 Introduction	21
Chapter 2 Review of Literature I	26
2.1 Kinematics and Spatiotemporal Variables	26
2.1.1 Vertical Oscillation	26
2.1.2 Stride/step length	28
2.1.3 Lower Extremity Kinematics	30
2.1.4 Contact time	32
2.2 Kinetics	33
2.2.1 Ground Reaction Force	33
2.2.2 Stiffness	36
2.3 Flexibility and stretch-shortening cycle	37
2.4 Summary	39
2.5 Aims I	40
2.6 Hypotheses I	40
Chapter 3 Review of Literature II	41
3.1 Muscular Activity and Oxygen Consumption	41
3.2 Muscular Coactivation and Oxygen Consumption	44
3.3 Relationship Between Muscular Activity, Kinematics and Oxygen Consumption	47
3.4 Summary	48
3.5 Aims II	49
3.6 Hypotheses II	49
Chapter 4 Review of Literature III	50
4.1 Background Regarding the Interest in Barefoot Running	50
4.2 Performance Benefits	52

4.2.1 Added mass	52
4.2.2 Cushioning	53
4.2.3 Stride length	55
4.2.4 Strike pattern	57
4.3 Injury Prevention	58
4.3.1 Strike pattern	58
4.3.2 Impact peaks and loading rates	59
4.4 Muscular Activity	61
4.4.1 Activation and coactivation	61
4.4.2 Stretch-shortening efficiency changes	63
4.5 Summary	63
4.6 Aims III	64
4.7 Hypotheses III	64
Chapter 5 General Methods	66
5.1 General Experimental Procedures	66
5.1.1 Participants	66
5.1.2 Informed Consent	66
5.1.3 Health and Safety	67
5.2 Measurement Procedures	67
5.2.1 Descriptive data	67
5.2.2 Treadmill running	68
5.2.3 Over ground running	68
5.2.4 Gait analysis	69
5.2.5 Graded-exercise test	71
5.2.6 Heart rate	71
5.2.7 Ratings of perceived exertion	72
5.2.8 Calf muscle range	72
5.2.9 Sit-and-reach test	72
5.2.10 Preliminary screening	73
5.2.11 Electromyography	73
5.2.12 Accelerometer	74
5.2.13 Pulmonary gas exchange	74
5.3 Testing Procedures	75
5.3.1 Determination of $\dot{V}O_{2peak}$ and fractional $\dot{V}O_2$	75
5.3.2 Defining running economy	76
5.3.3 Defining joint angles	76
5.3.4 Defining ground reaction force	78
5.4 Data Analysis Procedures	78
5.4.1 Running economy	78
5.4.2 Electromyographic data	80
5.4.3 Kinematic calculations	82
5.4.4 Kinetic calculations	84
5.5 Statistical Methods	89

Chapter 6 Mechanisms for Improved Running Economy in Beginner Runners 90

6.1 Introduction	90
6.2 Methods	92
6.2.1 Participants	92
6.2.2 Procedure.....	92
6.2.3 Gait Analysis	93
6.2.4 Graded exercise test (GXT) to $\dot{V}O_{2max}$	94
6.2.5 Running economy (RE) test	95
6.2.6 10 week beginners' running programme.....	95
6.2.7 Statistical Analysis.....	95
6.3 Results	96
6.3.1 Physiological measurements	96
6.3.2 Flexibility	96
6.3.3 Biomechanical variables.....	97
6.3.4 Regression Analysis.....	98
6.4 Discussion	98
6.4.1 Changes in running mechanics	99
6.4.2 Relationship between running mechanics and running economy.....	100
6.5 Conclusion	104
6.6 Further Data Analysis from Study 1 (not included in above paper)	105
6.6.1 Joint moments and stiffness	105
6.6.2 Resultant GRF and leg axis.....	105
6.7 Further Results from Study 1	105
6.8 Discussion of Further Results from Study 1	106

Chapter 7 Relationship between Metabolic Cost and Muscular Coactivation across Running Speeds..... 110

7.1 Introduction	110
7.2 Methods	111
7.3 Results	115
7.4 Discussion	117
7.5 Conclusion	121
7.6 Practical Implications	122

Chapter 8 Barefoot Treadmill Familiarisation 123

8.1 Introduction	123
8.2 Methods	124
8.2.1 Participants	124
8.2.2 Apparatus.....	125
8.2.3 Marker placement.....	125
8.2.4 Procedures.....	126
8.2.5 Data reduction	126
8.2.6 Statistical analysis	127
8.3 Results	128
8.3.1 Reliability.....	128

8.3.2 Standard error of mean	128
8.3.3 Changes over time	128
8.4 Discussion	128
8.5 Conclusion	134

Chapter 9 The Pursuit of Improved Running Performance: Can changes in cushioning and proprioception influence running economy and injury risk? 135

9.1 Introduction.....	135
9.2 Methods.....	138
9.2.1 Procedure.....	138
9.2.2 Treadmill familiarisation.....	139
9.2.3 Experimental procedure	139
9.2.4 Data analysis.....	140
9.2.5 Statistical analysis	142
9.3 Results.....	143
9.4 Discussion	145
9.4.1 Preactivity.....	147
9.4.2 Foot angle	148
9.4.3 Heel off.....	149
9.4.4 Pronation, stiffness and muscle activity	149
9.4.5 Impact acceleration and effective mass.....	150
9.4.6 Kinematics.....	151
9.4.7 Limitations	153
9.5 Conclusion	153

Chapter 10 General Discussion..... 155

10.1 Summary of Main Findings	156
10.1.1 Does a 10wkRP improve the RE of beginner runners?	156
10.1.2 Are the short-term improvements in RE a result of changes in running mechanics and/or running physiology?	156
10.1.3 Is greater muscular coactivation associated with a higher metabolic cost of running?	158
10.1.4 Does running at faster speeds elicit higher muscular coactivation in the lower extremities?	160
10.1.5 Can runners produce a consistent gait pattern within 10 minutes of running BFT on a treadmill?	161
10.1.6 What specific gait adjustments occur as a result of familiarisation?	161
10.1.7 Will running BFT with a BFT stride length be the most economical way to run when compared to BFT with a SH stride length, MS with a BFT stride length and with a SH stride length, and SH with a BFT stride length and with a SH stride length?	162
10.1.8 Does running with a SH stride length during MS running produce a better RE than running with a BFT stride length and are both more economical than SH running?	162

10.1.9 What mechanisms are behind changes in RE during different stride lengths when varying cushioning and proprioception	163
10.1.10 Do both BFT and MS running elicit higher impact accelerations compared to SH running?	166
10.2 Influence of Footwear on Potential Injury Risks.....	166
10.3 Biomechanical and Muscular Activity Influence upon Running Economy	167
10.4 Self-optimisation: Implications for Performance and Injury Risk.....	171
10.5 Limitations	177
10.5.1 The running mechanics of the upper body	177
10.5.2 Does electromyography data represent the underlying muscular activity?	178
10.5.3 Impact acceleration as representative of tibial acceleration	179
10.5.4 Mathematically adjusting $\dot{V}O_2$	179
10.6 Applications	180
10.7 Topics of Further Research	182
10.7.1 Could an economical running gait be trained?	182
10.7.2 Long-term running economy and gait development	183
10.7.3 The potential for stability training to improve running economy.....	183
10.7.4 Modelling the effective mass based on energy demand	184
10.7.5 Transitioning to barefoot and minimalist shod running.....	186
10.8 Recommendations.....	187
10.9 Conclusions	188
References.....	190
Appendices.....	213