

Injury-free running workshop in Edinburgh next month – book now!

✖ Malcolm Balk is an inspirational Alexander Technique (AT) teacher and running coach based in Montreal. He travels all over the world teaching runners of all ages and stages to transform their technique, avoid injury, and improve their performance. Over the past 20 years Malcolm has transformed the way thousands of people run, and next month he is coming to teach in Edinburgh for the first time. Jane-Ann Purdy interviewed him for The Edinburgh Reporter.

How did you get into the Alexander Technique?

In 1979 I was working as a child care worker and had recently taken up the cello again (I had played the instrument as a child). I had a lot of tension problems, then my teacher went to London to have Alexander lessons with Shoshana Kaminitz, who was assistant teacher to Patrick Macdonald [a leading teacher of AT who trained under F M Alexander]. When my teacher returned she was full of enthusiasm about “inhibition” and “doing the monkey”. I thought she was nuts, but she kept going on about it so I decided to read up about AT, and I eventually had some lessons with a guy who came up from New York City on the weekends.

Why did you decide to become an Alexander teacher?

Shoshana Kaminitz visited Montreal and suggested that I might like to go and study with her and Patrick Macdonald in London. By that time [1982] I had been bitten by the Alexander bug, and my job wasn't really going anywhere, so I said yes. I sold everything I owned in Montreal, gave up my job, gave up my flat, packed my bags, and hopped on a plane to London.

Were you a runner at that point?

Yes. I had already run five marathons by then. But I was starting to get into trouble: I was getting injured a lot. It really was the law of diminishing returns: I put more and more into it, but got less and less out. It was a shame because I loved running.

How did your Alexander training affect your running?

I was looking for a way to improve and avoid injury, but I was worried that my tutors might want me to stop all physical activities (a lot of AT training courses insist on this). Patrick Macdonald said something different. He said, you can keep running but make sure you don't tighten yourself up. This put the onus on me to figure out how to run and not get into trouble. It's a quite different way of thinking for a runner, because usually you're thinking about your goals and how fast you can go. Now I was watching myself on a stride by stride basis. I was beginning to think about freeing my neck and releasing my shoulders. Anyway, I think I did a good enough job as they never asked me to stop running.

What else changed?

Distance. I was used to running marathons (26.2 miles) and now I was focusing on 800m (0.5 miles). It was very intense. But I noticed that I had stopped getting injured. That was the effect of the AT, because I hadn't changed anything else.

So when did you decide to start teaching runners?

After I graduated I was at an international AT congress in Brighton and a couple of AT teachers had heard I was a runner, so they asked me if I could give them a few tips on technique. At that point I didn't think I had much to offer, but when I looked at how they ran I realised that they didn't know anything at all: their arms were all over the place, their feet weren't moving well, and as for leading with the head ... So I started getting in there and showing them some stuff. They really liked it and by the time the next congress came around I was asked to do a workshop. That was 1991 and I've

been doing workshops ever since.

So what happens at one of your workshops?

I get pupils to run a short distance, and I video everyone at the start. In the early days I found that people couldn't see or even feel how they were running, but seeing themselves on the screen makes a tremendous difference. I like to use slow motion playback so they can analyse what every part of the body is doing with each stride. I then try to keep the technical information pretty simple. I get people to look at what their head and neck is doing, how the feet land and come off the ground. With each person I'll focus on three things and the implications of continuing to run that way.

What are the common problems?

Most runners tend to overstride and put the foot too far in front of them. This causes a bunch of problems. It breaks them and makes the impact heavier. They don't get a great flow and it affects their head and neck: they will compress their bodies more and make themselves heavier than they need to be. Although most will be unaware of these things, when they see it on video it is very clear.

What do you tell them?

To forget about the running to start with. I talk about the head leading and the body following, about not letting the legs be the dominant factor. We might do some walking: letting the head/neck/back lead and letting the legs follow along. And we might do some lying down [semi-supine]. Once they have a sense of these AT principles we go through some mechanics. I'll get them to have a less angular, more circular feel to the run: shortening the stride and linking the arms to the legs. Then we'll practise it a little bit, working with partners and taking part in some challenges such as running very slowly, on the spot or with some resistance. Often times people find it feels kind of odd. They don't actually feel like they're running properly any more. People like to feel

the effort, but with my method there's not a sense of muscular effort. There's a sense of flow, and a sense of real energy. I say that effort burns fuel too fast and if you're running distance you want to be stingy about burning fuel, especially as you get older. You need to be more efficient, so that's what I work on.

And then you film then again?

Yes. By now they should be able to see the difference between what was happening when they arrived and what is happening now. I then say, right let's take what you've learned and what you've observed, and try it on a ten minute run. Finally, they come back with their questions and I can fine tune some things for them. But I think it's important that they get a sense of how to work with what I've taught them on their own. I may not be back in the area for a while.

I know you've worked with thousands of runners at all levels up to Olympic standard, do you have any favourite success stories?

I had a guy come to me who was very young and very fit, but he couldn't run a 10k race faster than 42 minutes. I wound him up and said that that was the time I did on a training run and I was 20 years older than him. It was true. He told me that he trained really hard, but I told him that the problem was that he'd never learned to run slow. I told him that he should put a heart rate monitor on and keep his heart rate at the lowest level. Well, he was cursing me and saying that he couldn't possibly run that slow. But he stuck with it, worked on my technique, and after three months he did a 10k four minutes faster than he'd ever run it before. I have lots of stories like that: people find it hard to break from their old habits, but once they get into the groove of shortening their stride and reducing their effort they find it's a magical place to be.

Give me a top running tip

I'll give you two. Try to run and not hear your footsteps as

you go: develop a silent foot fall and try to work out what that means. Second, only run for as long as you can without pain. As soon as you feel pain you need to stop.

Malcolm Balk is teaching an Art of Running workshop at Abbeyhill School, Edinburgh at 10am on Saturday 14 May. To book your place call 0131 620 1129 or email contact@swimshawmethod.com

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