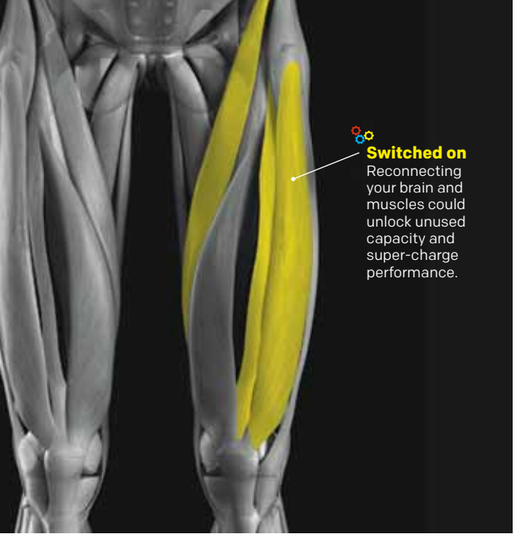
BOOST YOUR FIBRE POWER

WORDS: ADHARANAND FINN
ILLUSTRATIONS: SCIENCE PICTURE COMPANY

The Be-Activated technique promises to get your muscles firing at full capacity and in the correct sequence, bringing a gear shift in speed and strength. Already used by top sportsmen, can it deliver to the PB-chasing everyman/woman?



'The best way I can describe it,' said Joe Kelly, a Devon-based sports performance specialist, 'is that up until now you've been running with the handbrake on. When you take it off, you'll run much faster.'

I was 37 and had just run a 2:55 marathon. It felt like the pinnacle of my running career. To give myself one big push at breaking the magic three-hour barrier, I had just spent six months living and training at altitude in Kenya. I even wrote a book about it, called *Running with the Kenyans* (£8.99, Faber & Faber). But now that it was done, I was resigned to the fact I would not run that fast again for the rest of my life.

That was, until I started talking to Kelly. He had just become qualified in a new treatment called Be-Activated, and he was very excited about it. The technique was devised by South African physiotherapist and kinesiologist Douglas Heel, who has treated many top sports stars, including the players at Celtic FC, the South African rugby team and Olympic 10,000m silver medallist Elana Meyer.

'It's all about getting your body to work in the right sequence,' Heel told me. 'If there is tension in your muscles, they will tighten. Then the other muscles will have to compensate for them. Then they, in turn, won't be doing their own job, and pretty soon everything collapses. It's like the trip switches in a household fuse box – the body also has override switches for when it gets overloaded.'

The result, according to Heel, is the hunched, collapsed, shuffling running style many of us will be all too familiar with. 'Muscle activation is like switching everything back on. Your body is then able to operate in sequence, and at its optimal level.'

'JUST LIKE YOUR HOUSEHOLD FUSE BOX, YOUR BODY COMES FITTED WITH TRIP SWITCHES FOR WHEN IT GETS OVERLOADED'

IN ON THE ACTION

It all sounded great, so I booked myself in for a Be-Activated session and a few days later I'm lying on my back on Kelly's treatment table. What follows is one of the most painful hours of my life.

'I've had women tell me the pain is as bad as childbirth,' he says while grinning and digging his fingers into my hips. At times, he feels like he's twisting a knife in, but he assures me he's really only pressing lightly. Almost as bad as the pain are the tickles. Lying there trying not to laugh as he presses a funny point in my side is a different kind of agony.

Kelly is pressing neurolymphatic reflex points – trigger points on my body that stimulate the muscles into action. And some of the results are mind-bendingly instant. At one point he has me sitting on a chair and then standing up without using my hands. This is no problem, of course, although I can feel my legs straining as I do it. However, after some painful pressing, I try it again and almost leap out of the chair as though my legs are made of springs.

To demonstrate another activation point, he pulls my legs to the side and tells me to hold them there while he tries to push them back to the middle. I can't. Not even close. It's as though I have no muscles capable of carrying out the instruction. It's a blind spot in my muscle power. After a few minutes of torturous pressing, he tries again. 'OK, hold your legs out to the side.' He pushes, and suddenly muscles that didn't seem to exist before kick into action and I'm holding him. He pushes some more, harder this time, but I'm holding firm. It's a miracle.

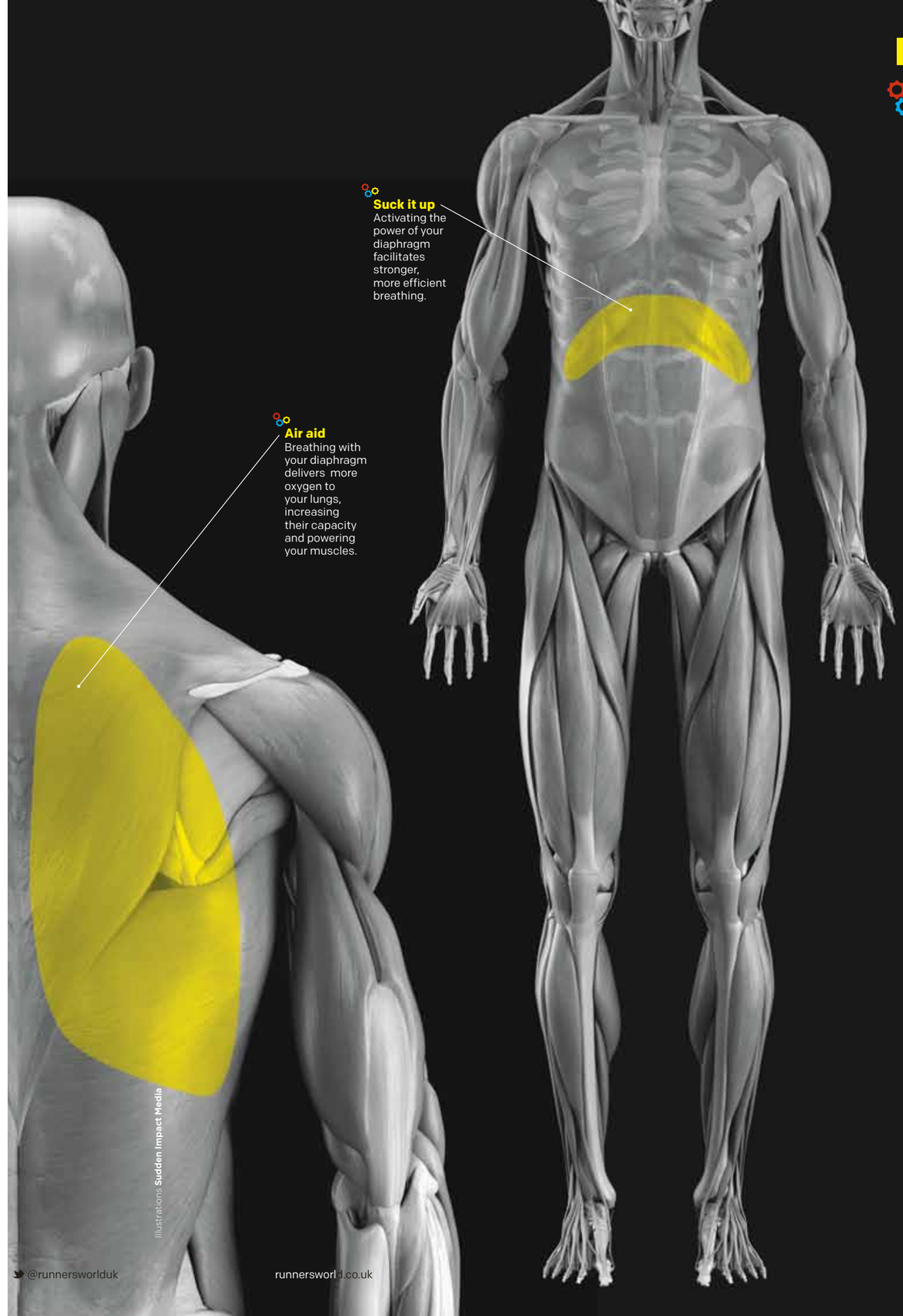
The next evening, I take my newly activated legs out for a run with my local club, Torbay AC. I'm not sure what to expect. As amazing as it was to see muscles materialising out of thin air to hold my legs out sideways, how useful will that be for my running?

Many of Heel's clients are sports stars from the worlds of rugby and golf, where extended mobility in different directions seems more important than in our world, the runners' world. In running, the movement tends to be fairly unidirectional – the same repetitive steps in the same forward motion. But during my time in Kenya, training with some of the greatest long distance runners on the planet, I began to realise that one of the biggest advantages they have is their fluid movement and running form.

It's fascinating that Kenyan runners so dominate the steeplechase. Aside from the two Games they boycotted, the Kenyans have won every men's Olympic steeplechase gold medal since 1968. Yet, there are virtually no facilities for steeplechase training in the entire country. So why are they so good at it? Kelly thinks it's all about their movement. 'If you watch the way Kenyans run, they are very upright,' he says. 'The back of the neck is straight. The body is functioning in sequence, so it's no effort to leap over barriers and carry on running.'

With a more active lifestyle and less time spent sitting slouched in cars or on sofas, or hunched over computer screens, Kenyans are accustomed to using their bodies in a more natural sequence. 'Most Westerners, whether athletes or not, struggle to do a straight, unsupported squat,' says Kelly. 'This is a simple, basic action if your body is functioning correctly, but most of us can't do it.' Kenyans can. And if we want to run like them we need to start by making sure we have the same set of muscles switched on and working.

The training session in Torquay that night is six one-mile reps back and forth along the seafront. ▶

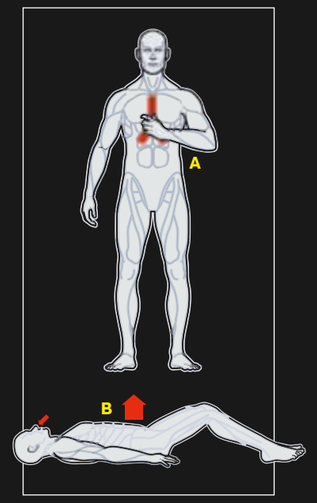


Illustrations: Sudden Impact Media

HIT YOUR SWITCH

ACTIVATE YOUR DIAPHRAGM

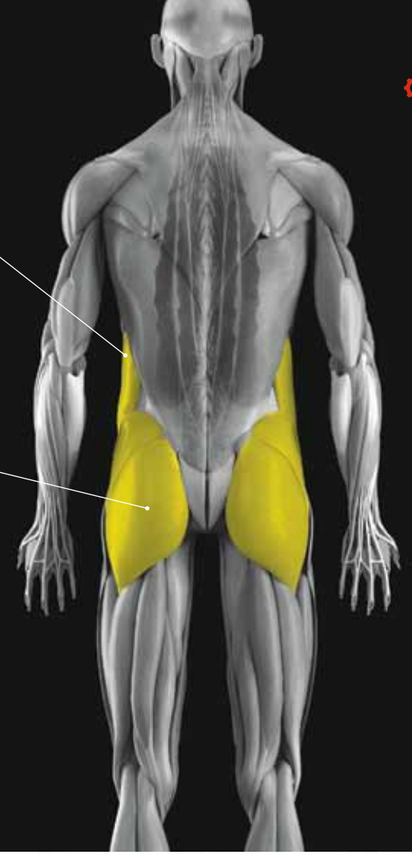
Activating the diaphragm helps to increase your lung capacity and gives you a more efficient breathing system. It also unlocks the hip flexors, which initiate your body's running movement, and it stimulates the relaxation response, helping release tension and promote correct movement patterns.



A Start rubbing at the base of your chest bone (sternum) with your thumb in small circles all the way up to the top. Take about 30 seconds to a minute to do this, pressing firmly but not too hard, and lingering on tender points. Once you have gone all the way up, come back down again.

B Follow the activation with a breathing exercise: lie on your back with your knees up. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, making sure your tummy rises with each in-breath. The breathing should be all in your stomach, with nothing in the chest. Do this for two minutes.

! Afterwards you may feel dizzy or light-headed – that will be the extra oxygen to your brain. You may also feel calm, and your stomach may begin gurgling – this is just the blood returning to the digestive task. Afterwards your body should feel light, as the diaphragm starts to release the body's shut-down patterns. Once you're accustomed to breathing with your diaphragm, you can take this into standing, and then bring the awareness to breathing while running.

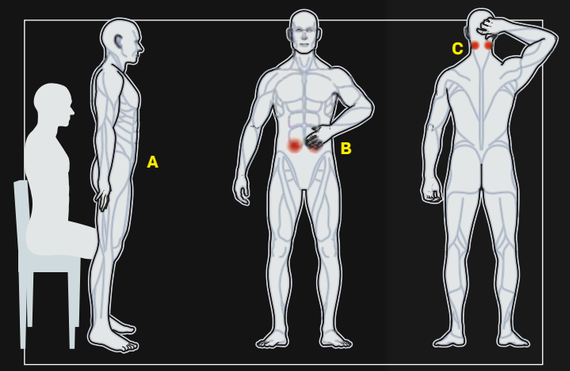


Side project
Hip-flexors are a key driver in the running action and ensuring they are fully functional guards against lower-back pain.

Rearguard action
Getting your glutes firing will boost your speed and steady your legs, pelvis and torso to maintain good form.

ACTIVATING YOUR HIP FLEXORS AND GLUTES

Here's how to fire up your key muscle sets for running



A Before you start, sit on a chair and, without using your hands, stand up. Sit down again. Then stand up and sit down once more. Note how hard/easy this feels.

B To activate the hip flexors, stand up, and then press firmly (but not too hard) into a spot one inch below and one inch to the side of your belly button. Kelly describes it as pressing into butter that is slowly melting. Use all your fingers to cover a large area. If you find a sore point, that's the place to work on. Do this for 30 seconds on each side.

C Then put your right hand behind your neck and rub firmly in a circular motion with three fingers on either side of the neck, just below the base of the skull, for about 15 seconds on each side.

! Now try standing up from your chair again. Depending on how compromised your body was initially, you should feel a big difference.

As we set off on the first, I find myself running smoothly at the front of the fastest group, with almost no effort. I want to laugh, it feels so easy. This Be-Activated treatment is amazing, I'm thinking to myself. I can barely contain my excitement, already planning a fresh assault on my PBs as we turn around and start the second rep, back along the seafront in the other direction. Suddenly, with the full blast of the wind in my face, I realise why the first interval had felt so easy – we'd had a hurricane blowing behind us.

Wind aside, though, I'm clearly running faster and easier than usual. One of my regular training partners even jokingly asks me what I've been taking. In some ways it does feel a bit like cheating – although, of course, I'm only switching on muscles that are already there, enabling everything to work as it was designed to.

RESTORING ORDER

Over the next few weeks I find myself running more smoothly and easily than I ever have done. I've been consciously working on improving my form ever since witnessing the elegant running styles of the Kenyans, and after Kelly's treatment it feels easier to lift my legs up more and get a bouncier, smoother stride going. It's also less of an effort to maintain it for more than a few miles.

One of my weaknesses, I've been told by several coaches, is that I hunch my shoulders when I run. Heel and Kelly cite this as a classic sign of my body not working correctly in sequence. Other signs, according to Kelly, are overpronation, tight hamstrings and quads, and a curved back. As for my shoulders, Kelly noticed the weakness and worked on it when he treated me, and it definitely feels easier to keep them relaxed in the weeks afterwards.

Still, the real proof comes when I line up for my next race, a half marathon. It's a windy day in Bideford, north Devon, but the course is mostly flat. My previous half marathon PB, run after all the training in Kenya, is 1:23. I set my virtual pacer to guide me home in 1:22.

Despite being hampered by a bad stitch, which forces me to stop twice, I run a massive personal best of 1:19:50. It's obviously hard to be sure how much of this improvement is directly down to Kelly's agonising prodding rather than other factors such as the course, my fitness and so on, but what I do know is that *something* is definitely working.

'STRESS OR LACK OF SLEEP CAN CAUSE THE BRAIN TO REGISTER YOUR BODY AS OVERWORKED – EVEN IF YOU SAT DOWN ALL DAY'

Having at least tasted the proof in the pudding, I decide to further investigate the recipe. I speak to some other physiotherapists about the theory behind the Be-Activated technique and they all agree it makes sense. In fact, they're surprisingly unmoved, saying they use similar practices in their own treatments. Many point out that the principle is similar to using strapping or a knee or ankle brace when someone is injured. Like muscle activation, these devices are used to 'remind' the brain of where the muscle or joint is.

Further investigation shows that Heel and Kelly are not out on a limb with Be-Activated. An established treatment in the US, known as Muscle Activation Technique, works on very similar principles and has been championed by New York Yankees baseball superstar Mark Teixeira, who says it has made him stronger and helps get him through a full season.

Closer to home, Robin Lansman, principal osteopath at the Body Back-Up clinic in London, tells me that the Be-Activated technique is almost the same as a system he has devised, which he calls Functional Active Release. As with Heel's system, the core principle is 'getting the mind connected to the body's muscle groups'.

Heel was a student under the eminent sports scientist Tim Noakes, author of *Lore of Running* (£14.74, Human Kinetics). Noakes is famous for his central governor fatigue theory (covered in detail in RW's May 2012 issue), which says that the brain controls the level of fatigue you feel in your body, shutting it down when it senses it is becoming overworked. Over thousands of years, the theory states, the brain has developed to overcompensate, shutting the body down early in order to keep something in reserve in case of emergencies. So, no matter how exhausted you feel, if you spot a lion, you would suddenly find reserves of energy to run faster.

'However, in the modern world, things outside running, such as stress at work or even a bad night's sleep, can cause the brain to register the body as overworked, and start shutting it down – even though all you've been doing is sitting down all day,' Heel explains. 'Any tension or stress in the body can cause this to happen.'

When the muscles start shutting down, the correct sequence of the body is broken. For example, when you run, your hip flexors should perform the vital job of lifting your leg. But if your hip flexors are malfunctioning, the quad muscles have to move in to support the deficiency. That then means the quads are no longer doing their job properly, and so on in a cascade of inefficiency. 'Over time, the body may start to recognise this compromised movement as the default pattern and not even know it is doing it wrong,' says Heel.

What the Be-Activated treatment does, then, is send a message back to the brain to say, 'It's OK, these muscles are not really fatigued, we haven't been running across the scorched earth for days, there are no lions around, everything is safe and well.' Once the key muscles are switched back on, everything else can go back to doing its own job, and your body can return to its natural and fully functioning sequence again.

HANDS ON

One of the great things about the treatment is that you can do it yourself. Along with the sessions with Kelly, I begin 'reactivating' myself for five minutes before each run and I'm convinced I feel better for it every time. I just seem to have a wider range of movement in my legs, and even my breathing feels more powerful. Heel tells me he even has ultra-marathon clients who stop to 'reactivate' during races (See *Activating your Diaphragm*, page 45).

The longer term impact seems obvious, too. After coming back from one of Kelly's treatments one night, my wife asks me how I'm feeling. Without even thinking about it, I leap over the back of the sofa. That's quite unlike me. Even though it's hardly a high-jump world record, I've never been particularly agile or keen to leap over things. But after the Be-Activated treatment I just feel an energised spring in my body and know I can make the jump easily.

Before my next race, or my next PB as Kelly confidently calls it, I get a few more treatments, including one intensive session lasting two hours. It now hurts less than before, but the impact is no less as I then run yet another half marathon best, this time 1:18:32. More PBs tumble in the following months as I carry on activating myself.

I'm not alone, either. Claire Akin-Smith, an ultra runner from Bristol, tells me her running also improved significantly after a series of Be-Activated treatments. 'I suffered from overusing my thigh muscles,' she tells me. 'But with very little treatment I found myself immediately able to move, walk and run more easily. I went on to win my next three races, all offroad marathons and ultras.'

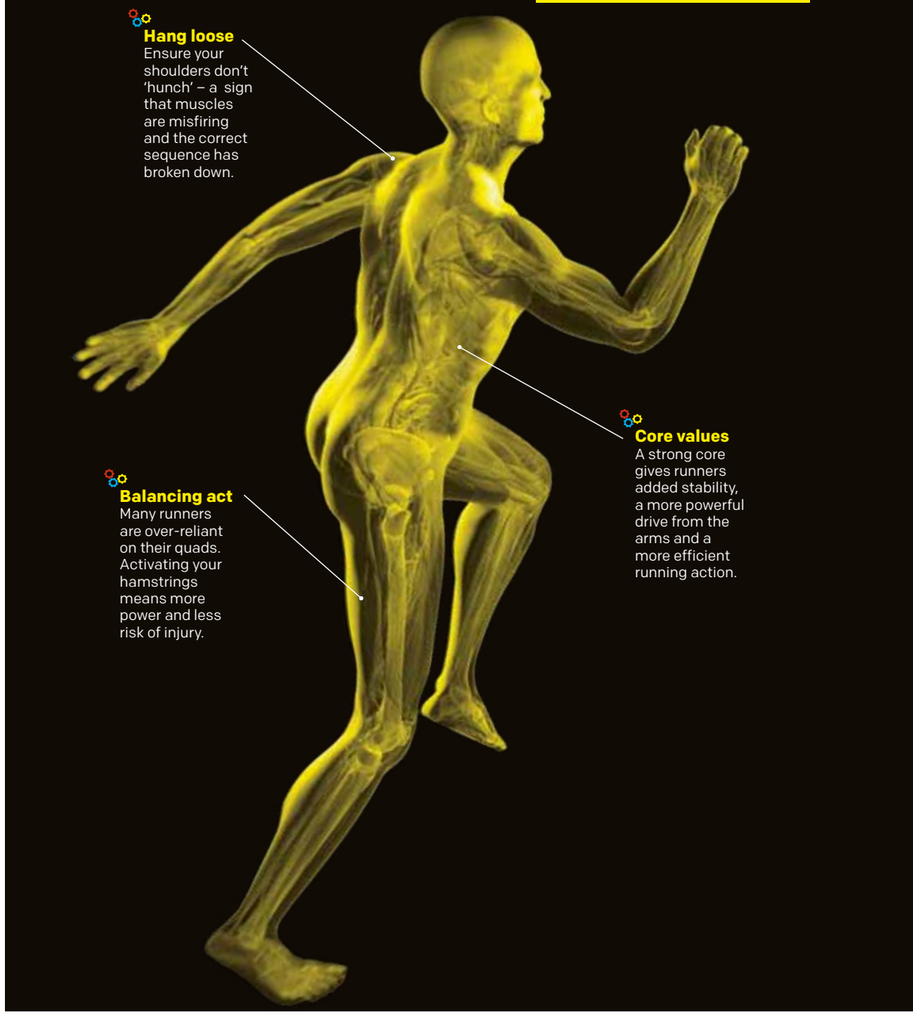
Of course, anecdotal stories alone don't prove that the treatment works. However, Cape Town University has deemed Heel's techniques interesting enough to warrant a full research project, which is under way right now. 'We're pretty sure it works, from the evidence we've seen – what is less certain is whether it is placebo or real,' says one scientist, who asked not to be named because of other research commitments.

Alex Hutchinson, a former elite runner turned exercise scientist and author, also suggests the improvements I'm seeing could be a result of the placebo effect. 'My general view of things like this is that they may well produce benefits, but the benefits stem from the intuition and/or charisma of the practitioner more than from any magical release of the body's hidden energies,' he says.

Until the research is done, we won't know for certain what the Be-Activated treatment really does, but having experienced it myself I know that until then I won't be starting a race without my RoboCop routine of reactivating. An added spring in my step, plus 10 consecutive PBs and counting, is evidence enough for me.

Illustrations **Sudden Impact Media**

HIT YOUR SWITCH



Hang loose
Ensure your shoulders don't 'hunch' – a sign that muscles are misfiring and the correct sequence has broken down.

Balancing act
Many runners are over-reliant on their quads. Activating your hamstrings means more power and less risk of injury.

Core values
A strong core gives runners added stability, a more powerful drive from the arms and a more efficient running action.