

Now Playing Linebacker, Tiger Woods

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Ever wonder how some people make athletics look so easy? Why, for example, your tennis opponent glides effortlessly across the court and smashes your "passing shot" down your throat while you stand there, confused, panting and muttering like House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert at a press conference?

Competitive athletes share a common trait: They are genetically superior to the rest of us! Besides that, though, they also know how to position their bodies for maximum speed, power and agility.

"People need to pay attention to how they move," says Walt Cline, director of athlete development at Velocity Sports Performance in Alexandria. "I work with a lot of average adults, and when I show them basic running technique, they say, 'Can you teach me more of that?'"

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IN DEPTH

Cline emphasizes timing and body position. Many people try to drive their feet into the ground when they sprint, for example, during a basketball or soccer game, when they should in fact push off the ground -- quickly and from the balls of their feet. Doing this properly requires engaging your core while running, which forces you to use core muscles to lift your legs. And while you may never attain the biomechanical nirvana to, say, strut around the tennis court in cargo pants like Rafael Nadal, you can increase your range and mobility, Cline insists.

"Teach people how to use their bodies correctly and they develop confidence," he says. "After six or eight weeks, their bodies start to improve . . . and they actually save energy. It's like writing new software for your body."

Proper body position for sports starts with good posture. If you take hunched shoulders or a sagging back or off-center hips into even a moderate workout, you're courting injury because whatever imbalance you have will reverberate bodywide, forcing your musculoskeletal system to make unnatural adjustments elsewhere to compensate.

Next, Cline says, is something called the universal sports position (no, not in front of the TV). Look at top athletes in any sport -- from linebackers and figure skaters to bowlers, golfers and hide-and-seek contestants -- and at the key point in their motion, they are semi-crouched, hands in front, torso centered over lower body, on the balls of their feet, ready to spring. (My childhood friend Mike, during a successful hide, once held that

position behind my parent's couch for a week.) This is the ideal stance for carrying out an explosive motion, such as jumping to spike a volleyball. "You get triple extension," Cline notes, meaning you can drive simultaneously off your gluteus, quad and calf muscles. "It's a quick muscle contraction, then relaxing for the follow-through." (People who think golf is an upper-body finesse game should examine Tiger Woods's linebacker-like stance just as he starts his downswing.)

The take-away? If you want to boost acceleration, agility and your vertical leap, stay cognizant about your body position. Keep your torso centered over your lower body and press into athletic movements with both feet. And work on core strength and good posture. If you still can't touch the net at your local hoop court, you can always run for Congress.

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-- John Briley