

Running Doc

West Virginia's Mark Cucuzzella has become one of the country's top running form experts

● As a lifelong runner, Dr. Mark Cucuzzella knows what a drag it can be to be injured.

But he also thinks improved running form, dynamic strength and modern footwear can provide solutions to most of the walking wounded. After all, it worked for him.

After more than 20 years of running, the former University of Virginia track and cross country competitor and avid marathoner started experiencing severe pain in his feet due to arthritis and other degenerative changes. Although he was only 34 at the time, running was becoming very laborious.

"I figured my days of running pain-free were over," says Cucuzzella, a professor of family medicine at the West Virginia University School of Medicine who owns a marathon PR of 2:24.

Instead of giving up, he set out to learn about the biomechanics of running and started to retool his running form with a lower-impact gait with a high cadence and short strides. As he began to find his way back to healthier running and continued to learn more, he wanted to share what he discovered.

In the past several years, he's meticulously studied running form, surveyed runners, taken part in research studies, conducted running form clinics and given presentations at medical conferences (including the Running Medicine Conference at the University of Virginia) and running industry events. A lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserves, he is designing programs to reduce running injuries in military personnel.

Along the way, he's become one of the country's most respected experts on running injuries, running form, modern running shoes and how each are intertwined.

Cucuzzella believes the recent developments in running footwear, including shoe with a flatter slope from heel to toe, can



Dr. Mark Cucuzzella leads numerous running form clinics in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

go a long way in helping runners improve their form and reduce overuse injuries. But, although he runs barefoot on occasion, he's not a proponent of running barefoot or even in uber-minimalist shoes all the time.

"My goal as a doctor is to keep people healthy," he says. "It's about teaching people about the position and posture of running. It's not about minimalism. It's about learning a better movement pattern and learning the supplement strength drills and mobility drills. Most people don't want to run barefoot, they just want to run without pain."

Now 46, Cucuzzella has been pain-free for years and completely revitalized as a runner. In recent years, he's been a top-10 masters finisher at the Boston Marathon with times in the 2:30-2:40 range and a frequent top-25 finisher at the JFK 50-miler.

In 2010, Cucuzzella opened Two Rivers Treads in Shepherdstown, the country's first running store selling solely footwear aimed at promoting good form and a natural stride. The shop sells bigger brands such as Newton Running, Merrell, Altra and Inov-8, as well as selected shoes from

NATURAL RUNNING CENTER

Dr. Mark Cucuzzella and endurance journalist Bill Katovsky launched this online resource two years ago as a means of sharing the latest studies and information about running mechanics, running injuries, new footwear, training and a variety of other endurance-related topics. Check it out at www.naturalrunningcenter.com.

New Balance, Brooks and Saucony, but it also carries small brands such as Lemming, VivoBarefoot and Skora.

Cucuzzella also launched the Natural Running Center, an online clearinghouse of information about running form, injury prevention and footwear—including a free 72-page booklet written and compiled by Cucuzzella called "Injury-Free Running."

Ultimately, Cucuzzella just wants runners to be healthy and enjoy their time out on the trails and roads.

"I believe anyone can learn to run better, especially someone who has been hurt," he says. "But you have to look at the whole mechanics of the movement and have to get stronger and de-stress the joints and get into a more level shoe."

—Brian Metzler

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