

The Balance Challenge

By Peter Twist

Consider a high speed collision sport relying on movement mechanics supported only by a thin skate blade over ice. Visualize a pro golfer driving a ball over 400 yards, a downhill skier blasting over icy terrain, a mountain biker riding over rocks and roots or a major league baseball player making a spectacular diving catch. One has to wonder why all levels of athletes have not embraced structured balance training forever. Perhaps it was because we did not understand that balance is highly trainable. Balance training overloads the variety of 'software' the muscles rely on to detect, read and process mechanical adjustments. We can teach this software to compute accurate responses and command the muscles to get the job done right. This system of mini brains sensing shifts in body position and muscles reacting with corrective actions develops exceptional proprioception.

Dynamic sport requires stability, the resistance to the disruption of equilibrium. Athletes can improve their ability to withstand body checks, incidental body contact, force absorption and power production. During tight turns or high speed tactics, if they lose momentary body control and their mechanics break down, they are well trained at regaining balance, instead of falling. With training, mini brain sensors become more sensitive,

identifying deviations sooner; and the information loop from sensor to brain back to the muscles becomes shorter so the information is processed quicker; and response accuracy is improved. The muscles are given precise and accurate instructions appropriate to the dynamic sport challenge.

Sport features speed and impact, played out on an uneven terrain, making falls a given and rapid body adjustments a requirement to success. A highly trained balance system is needed to keep athletes up on their feet and able to capitalize on a body more reactive to unpredictable events.

Balance for Strength: An athlete's perfect position to apply optimal power is their perfect position of balance. An athlete needs whole body stability to battle injury free. With balance training they can automatically assume a more stable position before applying or absorbing force.

Balance for Movement: A player who hopes to improve acceleration must first work on deceleration and mechanics to achieve perfect transitional balance. Stopping under control into a perfect balanced position decreases injuries and sets the athlete up for more proficient acceleration in the opposite direction. In the stop and the start, transitional balance aims for proper weight distribution,

while activating all of the deceleration muscles, braking into a perfectly balanced position, knees flexed, center of gravity low and over the braking leg with an aggressive body lean. Essentially players decelerate into the perfect starting mechanics.

Being in a perfect balance position is also important to each leg stride, whether executing linear power strides, cross overs, lateral transitions or explosive adjustments backwards. Achieving perfect balance on each stride will result in more movement per stride while expending less energy, a powerful combination.

Balance for Reactive Agility: Balance teaches the muscles to react quicker and helps the body learn to make fast and automatic adjustments. High speed reactive agility becomes increasingly critical as players move up levels. Each graduation to a higher skilled league brings the challenge of less time and space. Less time to make decisions, less time to cover a set amount of space, less time to execute skills and tactics. Opposing defenders are faster, more skilled, smarter and better positioned – they get on their players sooner. Tighter competition space against more qualified opponents makes reactive agility - an important asset.

The key balance training rule is that you must be slightly out of balance to train balance. Single leg jumping drills, partner pushing exercises and

accessories like stability balls and BOSU's fit a sport balance program. They are fun for youth because there is a pure element of play and athleticism. It is interesting to try and coordinate the body to succeed at a balance challenge, and makes players focus and think their way through an exercise. Conquering the balance challenge develops Smart Muscles™ - a body that is capable of linking the mind and the muscles almost intuitively where the muscles quickly comply to the minds commands. Working hard, thinking sharp and having fun is a great workout!

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