

# Becoming a Body Whisperer

Three workouts to help you learn to listen to your body's signals

By LORRAINE MOLLER

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**The principle of feeling-based running, one of the five principles that define Lydiard training, and its attendant ability to listen to the body, is often overlooked and undervalued as a running skill worthy of developing, especially in a world where runners are becoming increasingly dependent on technology. Three particular workouts help develop that ability.**

Simon Martin, an experienced and keen masters runner, was looking to celebrate his 55th year with a sub-5:00 mile. But when we met last year he was feeling perplexed and discouraged. The more attention he paid to training detail and the more effort he dedicated to his workouts, the slower he was running and the farther from sight his goal was becoming. By his calculations he should have been yielding better results. Simon was beginning to consider whether "old age" had finally gotten its grip on him.

"Any ideas from a Lydiard perspective?" he asked.

I told Simon that, whenever athletes found themselves struggling to find form, Lydiard lore prescribed going back to the bottom of the training pyramid -- easy running -- until they came right.

"Run without a watch," I suggested. "Forget about the time and the distance and just run as you feel. The degree to which it feels strange is the degree to which you really need to do this."

Taking my advice, Simon reported that running without a watch "was a huge wrench." He was surprised to find himself constantly looking at his bare arm as he ran, realizing how reliant on the external feedback of his Garmin speed/distance monitor he had become. Like many runners he had fallen into the easy trap of overtraining because he had lost the vital skill of listening to his body.

## TUNING IN

All champion runners can tune in to their bodies' signals to such a high degree that they have the ability to optimally divvy out their effort over the distance required using precise split-second decisions. They don't have the time or mind-space during a race to check their monitor data, make a cell phone call to their coach and wait for him to call back with instructions on whether to increase or decrease their pace after downloading it into a computer. Nor would they want such a clumsy system when their inner technology is so much more sophisticated, speedy and accurate. Although such a scenario is laughable, many runners proceed as if this were the case and fall apart when the race requires them to be self-reliant. By contrast, every champion athlete, almost without exception, is an expert body whisperer whose trust in their internal abilities of gauging effort, pacing and timing is unwavering.

Every athlete can and should pay attention to becoming their own body whisperer by becoming fluent in the language of their physiology. The program for whispering comes pre-installed in all human beings but is frequently dulled by overriding social and familial programs. Children are natural body whisperers who, left to their own devices, will run around playfully, slowing and speeding as they feel, and performing in a natural and integrated way that doesn't invite illness, injury and discontent. However, with the information/technology explosion of our modern age, we're constantly bombarded with data from outside sources and "experts" in every field telling us what to do and how to do it. This is occurring at younger and younger ages, often with the added force of marketing expertise designed to capture young minds. The result is an emerging generation who are in some degree of body/mind/environment disconnect, having been conditioned to the noise of the outside world at the expense of their tailor-made internal signals.

As a case in point, I almost cried when my 9-year-old came home with her school report card, which contained grades for the components of physical education, including her ability to "identify and monitor the intensity, frequency, time and type of physical activity with the use of technology (e.g., HR monitors, digital fitness journals/logs)." While I feel that such assessments are irrelevant for a child, I was perplexed that

while they were at it the report card designers failed to provide any space for commentary on my child's overall physical condition, abilities and proclivities.

While runners rush to buy the latest monitoring marvels, such devices remain a poor facsimile of what nature has provided us. Our brains are so exceedingly complex that the extent of their functions remains a mystery. What studies on learning do tell us is that the "use it or lose it" adage applies. Just like a muscle, the brain responds by shaping itself to use and similarly atrophying with disuse. Neuroscientists conducting navigational studies, for example, have found that people stop forming and using their own cognitive maps once they regularly use GPS to find their way. Similarly, a runner's excessive reliance on external feedback regarding pace, rhythm, effort and distance can render their natural abilities redundant. Furthermore, children whose brains are still under construction might well be circumvented from developing the most fundamental of these neural pathways by such devices.

The good news from science is that, when it comes to mental tasks, neural networks increase with repetition, implying that any undertaking can be improved by practice. It's fairly easy for most runners to reconnect with and develop their inner technologies by incorporating feeling-based workouts. To tune in to the soft signals of your body, I suggest three workouts be incorporated into your training: silent long runs, fartlek, and out-and-back runs.



## **1) SILENT LONG RUNS**

### **MEDITATION**

Most people would regard the purpose of the base-building period of Lydiard training as purely for the myriad physical benefits of aerobic metabolism. Of equal benefit, though, is that during the longer runs especially, a particular mind-state can be accessed that's similar to those states found in meditation -- inner focused, relaxed and of lower brainwaves. Running gives the added benefit of the rhythmic breath and the alternating continuous right/left action of the arms and legs that allow the runner to easily enter a whole-brain state. To facilitate accessing this heightened state I strongly suggest silent running, preferably in nature, without conversation or headphones.

Over the months of the buildup period, the often mismatched will of the mind and capacity of the body learn to work together. As they get to know each other, questions such as, "Is this comfortable?" "How long can I keep this up?" "Can I go faster?" can be answered with quick and accurate assessments. The added advantage of getting into this pleasant state of synchronized mind and body is that the body is flooded with feel-good hormones, further reinforcing this connection. The success of the more intense training phases that follow and ultimately the confidence that the runner takes into a race is dependent on the strength and trustworthiness of this working relationship between body and mind.

**SUGGESTION:** If you've never done a buildup, do one incorporating as many silent long runs as you can comfortably handle. Take at least 12 weeks without racing to build mileage, incorporating at least one long run of over 2 hours per week and two not-so-long runs of an hour and a half.

### **POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:**

-- Surrender to the run and allow it to take you, rather than trying to

control or force an outcome.

-- If you find yourself looking at your watch or monitor every 5 minutes or every known mile mark, leave it at home.

-- Leave your iPod at home. Before long your inner voice will be enjoyable and possibly fascinating company.

-- After several weeks of buildup running, your fitness will rise to a whole new level, as will your mind/body rapport.



## **2) FARTLEK**

### **PLAY RUNNING**

The free flow of fartlek ("speed play" in Swedish) training enables the runner to let go and mix paces just as they feel. Because of this purely experiential quality of the workout, it has been utilized by many of the great coaches as a counterpoint to more structured workouts. Lydiard frequently recommended it in all phases of his training as a free-form workout that offered a variety of paces without the danger of running into an anaerobic state that required a lengthy recovery.

**SUGGESTION:** Incorporate one fartlek run into your weekly running

schedule beginning during the buildup.

**HOW TO RUN A FARTLEK SESSION:** Using an undulating course, run as a puppy does by varying the pace from a short sprint to a jog to a sustained stride and back to a jog, using landmarks and the natural terrain to guide you. Since you make it up as you go and there's no measuring of time and distance, you have complete license to dog it or zoom as your body feels. The session should be 30 minutes to an hour depending on your state of fitness.

**POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:**

-- The important thing is to experience the contrast of the different paces and match the slower recovery portions with the faster portions of your run.

-- As you focus on the specific feedback from different paces, you'll learn to run hard without the stress of forcing yourself to meet the demands of a measured track and watch.

-- The emphasis is on play: If there's not an inner smile during this run then you're not doing it correctly.



**3) OUT-AND-BACK RUNS**

**RHYTHM & PACING**

In the days before monitors, Lydiard used a system of efforts to get his

runners to gauge themselves. Lydiard programs came with instructions for each given workout: quarter-effort, half-effort, three-quarter effort or seven-eighths effort. The quixotic explanation that went with it was that quarter-effort was a quarter of full effort, half-effort was a half of full effort, and so on, and seven-eighths was full-out but without the final sprint thrown in.

Olympic marathon bronze medalist in 1960, Barry Magee, a Lydiard protege and now a successful coach in New Zealand, believes that even today this system of efforts is one of the most important facets of Lydiard's training. He recalls, "It took me about five years at least to get it right for myself -- so not easy or quick for most -- but for a few it is a breeze. It all counted in later years, as I knew how hard or how easy to train each day and could gauge my effort and pace. The champions get their efforts pretty right on. That skill alone is often what separates them from the non-champions."

To get a handle on it, Lydiard often used out-and-back courses on even terrain so that one could break the run into halves and compare the time of the outbound journey against the return trip.

Using this concept, Dr. Dick Brown, head exercise physiologist of the 1980s Nike Athletics West club, and coach of many American champions, made out-and-back runs a weekly fixture of his Lydiard online training schedules. The workout was a way of ensuring his runners developed an accurate sense of pacing before they progressed to their track workouts. "Understanding your body," Brown reiterates, "is the key to racing."

**SUGGESTION:** Include an out-and-back course in one of your steady weekly runs during base training.

**HOW TO RUN AN OUT-AND-BACK SESSION:** This is a time-based workout, so simply divide the time appointed by two, run out to a turnaround point, record your split and run back and take your time again at the finish. For this to work well the course should be of similar difficulty both ways. The goal is to run both halves of the route as evenly as possible or with slightly negative splits (second half faster). You may stop to take a quick pulse check at the turnaround and the finish if you

wish, but it's not necessary at this stage. Your focus should be on developing an efficient rhythm for the entire distance.

Using the out-and-back run you can expect to see one or more of the following as you get fitter:

- You'll run farther within the same duration of running time;
- You'll come to the same turnaround point in less time; or,
- You'll reach the turnaround point in the same time with a lower pulse-rate;
- You'll run faster (1 and 2) with the same pulse rate.

### **POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:**

-- Don't check your pace during the run; use your watch only to know when to turn around and to compare time for each half of the run.

-- If you're unable to maintain your pace you're starting out too fast. This is a costly racing mistake so repeat this exercise regularly until you get the gist of it. Even pacing is efficient and ideal for distance events.

-- If it's windy or there's a slight elevation change between the start/finish and the halfway point, try to arrange it so that the more difficult direction is negotiated first. This will reinforce negative splits and you'll walk away from the workout in a more positive frame of mind.

Silent long runs, fartlek and out-and back runs exclusively engage the inner technology of runners and develop an experience base that they can begin to trust. The more they use and trust it the more reliable it becomes. Self-trust allows athletes to listen to the whispers of their inner promptings before they become discordant screams of injury or breakdown. It also delivers the runner to the race with the self-reliance and confidence needed to fly.

Six months after my encounter with Simon I received an excited email. It read: "After I had got over the withdrawal symptoms of being without my



monitor I noticed that I was tuning in to my body a lot more. I thought I was already very aware of what was going on, but it became apparent that I had 'delegated' oversight to the monitor. Without an external time/distance read-out I was forced to tune in to my pace, breathing, energy level, how my legs felt -- all of that -- and adjust things minute by minute to stay comfortable. Some days I found I was running very slowly, but it turned out that useful work was still getting done. Previously I would have been looking at the monitor and have been desperately trying to stay out of the so-called 'junk miles' zone."

Simon went on to recount how he managed to make it to the start line of the masters world cross country championships in Kamloops, Canada, in March injury-free. (He had been injured before each of the last two major races he had targeted.) More importantly, though, he discovered that running without a watch takes the pressure off. "The watch was turning me into a zombie. [Being without it] brought joy back into my running."

The result: Simon won the race.

Like all worthwhile journeys, Simon's path to his goal was convoluted but ended even better than he had hoped. Many other runners aren't so fortunate and become lost in a world of too much information. The way back is often simply to stop and listen to the whisper of one perennial truth -- the magic is within.

*Arthur Lydiard protegee LORRAINE MOLLER is a four-time Olympic marathoner and the bronze medalist at the 1992 Games in Barcelona.*