

Strengthen your game from the ground up

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By **DR. ROBERT WEIL** Columnist

Run faster, jump higher, be quicker with more agility!

Sounds great doesn't it? Strengthening your feet and ankles is one of the best ways to improve all aspects of sports performance. It also will reduce chances of sprained ankles, the most common of injuries.

Over the last 25 years, I've seen some of the world's best athletes in all sports, and I've never seen an athlete with "over-developed ankles." It is usually a weak link, and, as mentioned above, ankle injuries as well as foot injuries are all too common.

The body's foundation and base of support are the feet, but often foot and ankle training are neglected unless it's rehabilitating an injury. It makes much more sense to strengthen and train these areas routinely and proactively.

Old routines usually involved tape or braces for ankles, but that was mostly for athletes with previous problems. These methods could be helpful, but they often left out strength and balance exercise.

However, adding these exercises to any training program for any sport can be beneficial. Strong and stable feet and ankles help prevent shin splints as well as knee, hip and back problems. So often we'll see young athletes totally concerned about their bench press or arm and shoulder power. After all, these are the "show muscles." But these same athletes can have difficulty balancing on one foot. They need to be educated about -- including foot, ankle strength and stability exercises for "functional strength" -- the ability to move with power and speed, change direction, stop and start with balance.

These abilities can be successfully trained with simple inexpensive programs. The use of rubber bands, mini-trams, and balance boards are examples of great ways to work all of the foot, ankle and lower leg areas. Balance work also will improve knee, hip and back stability and strength. Try standing on one foot at a time on a mini-trampoline for 15 to 30 seconds. All the stabilizer muscles in your whole body are working. These small stabilizer muscles help protect all the joints of the feet, ankles, knees, hips and spine.

When these types of tram or balance board exercises are performed, I like to call it "instability training." Changing positions on the tram or boards will work different areas differently.

Rubber bands or tubing are great to work all of the ankle's ranges of motion -- moving the foot up and down, side to side and in and out -- can strengthen all the lower leg muscles. Small muscles of the foot, arch and Achilles also will benefit.

Slow, deliberate movements are best when using rubber bands. The bands are available with various resistances. Start light and progress gradually. Getting some instruction from a sports medicine physician, therapist, or athletic trainer is wise. Proper form and technique are important.

Call my friends at Athletico with locations all over the Chicago area, or Bob Gajda at Gajda Health Plus Network in Hoffman Estates or Bannockburn for some high-powered instruction. These types of exercises are simple and safe for almost all ages, but don't let their simplicity fool you. Top athletes in all sports have benefited greatly.

Free screening

Free foot and athletic screenings are always available at my Aurora office. If you or your active kids are dealing with foot, ankle, leg and knee problems, especially if they are persistent or recurring, pay attention to foot type and mechanics. Regardless of the sports activity, especially if it involves running and jumping, foot types like pronated flat feet, high arches, or leg shapes like knock knees or bowl legs can be what we're looking for. Prevention of problems, picking the proper shoes or improving performance is the name of the game.

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist from Naperville with an office in Aurora. You can hear him on his weekly radio show at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays on 90.9-FM. Contact him at drweilsportsdoctor@yahoo.com and visit his Web site at sportsdoctorradio.com.