

The Intensity of Speed By Lee Taft

I often get asked about running form and how an athlete's form can be improved or changed. Although I think running form is important for efficiency and small improvements in speed, I think the real issue is the intensity of speed or force application.

Certainly if an athlete has horrible running form and the arms and legs are a biomechanical disaster, I would really put most of the emphasis on correcting form. In most cases, athletes have adequate form (still can make some improvements in it) but lack intensity when moving.

Regardless of if the athlete is moving laterally, backwards, forwards, or vertically, the intensity of effort when applying force into the ground and when driving the arms needs to be high. Many plays in sport are won and lost by inches. If a player is a second late, many times they lose out on the play. Being aggressive and applying intense force into the ground can make all the difference in the world.

I want to give you some examples of situations that will help to clarify:

Baseball

A baseball player is attempting to steal second base. If the player has perfect running form but lacks the intense push off and arm action to generate as much force as possible to propel the body forward, it will not be a successful steal.

Tennis

A ball is hit wide outside the doubles line, and the player must sprint to it from the center court. If the initial 3-4 steps from center court are not as aggressive as possible and the arms are not used to help generate more leg force, the chances of making a successful shot are limited.

Basketball

If a defender has to shuffle or crossover to defend against an offensive player trying to drive to the hoop and the push offs are not aggressive, it will be an easy path to the hoop for the offensive player.

Soccer

When a goalie must get to a loose ball before the offense does, the amount of force they apply and the aggressiveness at which they do it will greatly enhance their success of getting to the ball.

I can pretty much go through any speed sport and give an example. The underlying message is that if the athlete doesn't apply force into the ground aggressively which helps to propel the body forward or in the direction of travel, plays can be lost.

Let me talk about technique for a second. There is a basic sprinting form that we all have imaged in our heads. The arms swing forward and back without crossing the mid-line of the body, and the hands go about chin level and pass by the hips on the back swing. The legs drive straight forward and back with a good knee lift with the feet passing near or over the support leg knee. What about laterally? What is your mental image of lateral movement?

Basically, when an athlete is shuffling laterally (like a basketball player), he or she needs to keep the hips fairly still and avoid a big up and down movement like galloping. The shoulders should remain over the knees or at least slightly forward of the center of mass. Keeping the shoulders forward allows the hips to be flexed greater, and this helps with balance. If the athlete is crossing over laterally, like a soccer player defending, the hips should still remain level, but there is more of a running action with the legs (hips turn), and the shoulders remain somewhat oriented to the opponent.

When you are teaching speed, it is important to make sure the athletes have good running form and multi-directional technique to make them a better mover and to reduce the potential for injury. But most important is the intensity of force being applied to enable the athlete to move faster. Good form and poor effort will never beat bad form and great effort.

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