

sole

Gravity is a runner's best friend, finds **Tony Durrant**, as he 'unlearns' all he thought he knew

There was a piece of heather caught between my toes. As I dropped behind the group to pluck it out, I took the opportunity to remove a rabbit-dropping from my heel. The joys of barefoot running.

Still, picking up the odd bit of rural colour along the way was a small price to pay for the pleasure of discovering I could trot along without hobbling. I was surprised at how comfortable my feet felt: there was no soreness from exposed heels hitting the ground, and no grazed toes. All thanks to the running technique we were learning.

The idea was to try to get the balls of the feet to hit the ground before the heels, while "falling forward", rather than lunging with the legs. It worked. And, as the threat of injury receded, we grew in confidence, quickening our pace to patter along the springy turf of a disused railway line that cut through the striking Cumbrian landscape.

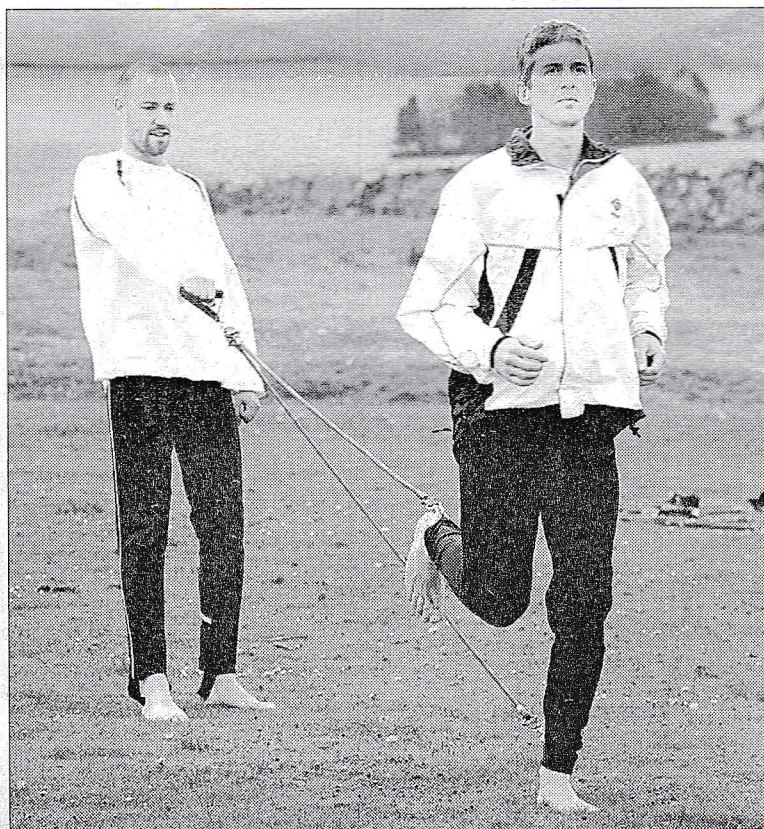
Up front, someone was singing Chuck Berry's *Sweet Little Sixteen*, the beat synchronising with the thudding feet. I had the same rock'n'roll classic running through my head, the result of our warm-up session.

But this was not a hippy, tree-hugging-for-runners thing. It was day three of a week-long Natural Running course, and we were at the tender mercies of John Woodward and Malcolm Balk, teachers of the Alexander Technique (developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander, an Australian, in the 1890s).

In the same way that students of the posture-led Technique are encouraged to break down old body habits, creating what is called "a beginner's mind", so John and Malcolm were teaching us to "unlearn" the way we had run all our lives. Easier said than done for a group that included a smattering of marathon runners as well as those like me – occasional joggers who brave the odd fun run.

Although our mileages differed, our movements did not. Our running styles were captured on video on the first day and later we watched ourselves lunge forward in the classic method loved by games instructors, who once urged us to "dig in the heel, grab a footful of earth and drive it behind".

With some simple physics – the analogy of the body as a pendulum



Band on the run: Tony Durrant has his legs tethered and (top) runs with Malcolm Balk

(We have forgotten how to play. Once it becomes work, we get locked up in our bodies)

– and a smattering of biomechanics, we were told that the old style wasted energy and was fraught with the potential for injury to the feet and knees. Instead, we were to plant the foot, ball first, under the body and to snap up the trailing leg, while allowing the body to fall forward under gravity.

To drill this into us, we underwent a daily warm-up session that involved stomping, hopping, running on the spot and singing,

John and Malcolm both came to the Alexander Technique as a treatment for blockages in their musical creativity.

This was much in evidence as we learned to "bounce" our feet and ankles in time to a variety of beats, ranging from Zulu chants and Sami reindeer-herding songs to, of course, Chuck Berry.

We would weave around the room in two conga lines, one chanting lead and the other the harmony, John leaping between us – surprisingly quick on his feet for a well-built six-footer of 58.

These all-singing, all-dancing warm-ups were not purely physical. John wanted us to free ourselves, as he put it, to play.

"We have forgotten how to play," he said. "Playing is the heart of

sport. Once it becomes work, it requires strain and effort and we get locked up in our bodies."

His zeal was matched only by his eloquence and, as the course wore on, his buzzwords echoed in our ears. "Imagine the body gliding over the points of support... effortlessness does not mean no effort... run with your integrity intact."

While John painted the broader picture, Malcolm filled in the details – the drills and skills of running. The lithe 51-year-old Canadian, a marathon runner and author, urged us to change our habits by using the hamstrings to swiftly pluck our feet from the ground, rather than the thighs to drive off.

His armoury included huge rubber bands, which were clamped to our ankles to provide varying degrees of resistance and hilarity. We also learnt to "fall up" hills using gravity, instead of driving ourselves up them.

"The Alexander technique does not tell you how to run. It teaches you how *not* to do certain things," said Malcolm. "I am inviting you to become aware of certain things that pull you out of shape."

Rubber bands released, we would set off across the sheep-cropped turf, Chuck Berry ringing in our ears. At the end of the course, I had a spring in my step and an urge to get out and run, with none of my old "must-do" attitude. I have also bought Chuck Berry's greatest hits.

■ A three-day Natural Running course in Cumbria, run by the Bashful Alley Centre, costs £175, excluding accommodation. The next three-day course is from May 13-15. A five-day course costs £500, including accommodation (call John Woodward on 01524 844299 or email him at john.bac@ic24.net). The next five-dayer is scheduled for September.

■ 'The Art of Running' (Chrysalis; www.theartofrunning.com) by Malcolm Balk and Andrew Shields is available for £11.99, plus £1.25 p&p, from Telegraph Books (0870 428 4112).