

# FURTHER EDUCATION

HOW ADHARANAND FINN LEFT  
HIS INJURIES BEHIND, REBUILT  
HIS RUNNING FORM AND RAN  
10 ULTRA MARATHONS



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## HALFWAY THROUGH MY FIRST ULTRA MARATHON, A 34-MILES RACE ALONG THE DRAMATIC COAST PATH IN DEVON, I WAS AFRAID SOMETHING TO SNAP.

For the previous five years I'd been struggling with Achilles pain and I had recently developed a heel spur. I wasn't ignoring the problem. I had tried resting, I had seen a physiotherapist. I had changed my shoes and done the recommended heel drops, massage, yoga and foam rolling, and strengthened my core. But still the pain came.

The problem had started when I read *Born to Run* and began to change my running form. I was convinced by author Christopher McDougall's compelling account of how humans evolved to be naturally strong runners, but how in recent years our form has been ruined by cushioned running shoes. I worked with a coach and once I got it, the midfoot landing felt smoother and faster, and my running felt more enjoyable. But it hurt,

which became a major problem when I was about to embark on a two-year project to run 10 ultra marathons. If I didn't get these Achilles tendons fixed, I would break long before the end.

One night, soon after that first ultra, I watched an episode of a BBC2 series called *Doctor in the House*. The premise is that a GP moves in with a family, hoping to fix their health issues by treating the source of their problems, rather than just giving them a pill.

In this episode the father of the family, Ray, has chronic back pain. Ray is a bodybuilder who has been on painkillers for 25 years and hasn't had

a proper night's sleep in all that time. The GP takes Ray to visit Gary Ward, who has developed a technique called Anatomy in Motion (AiM).

My ears prick up. My core and movement coach, Joe Kelly, has been trying to convince me of the merits of AiM, and getting me to do some simple 'movements'. I feel good when running afterwards, but they haven't fixed my Achilles. But then, I haven't being very diligent about doing them at home.

By the end of the session, Ray has some movements just like the ones Kelly gave me and already seems enthused. He goes back to his gym, performs the movements standing in front of the mirror – and something amazing happens: his back stops hurting. Completely.

At the end of the programme, two months later, his back is still pain-free. 'I feel about 20 years younger,' says an emotional Ray. 'This is life-changing for me. It's unreal.'

This was about a month before my second ultra marathon, the Miwok 100K in California, and my Achilles tendons were sore. I had to see this miracle worker. And so, a week later, I rang Gary Ward's doorbell in north London.

Old injuries are key to Ward's approach and he took great interest in the fact I had broken my left wrist three times. He got me to place my foot

on a foot for six weeks. Now your right foot is bearing too much weight, so the foot is likely to pronate more, and the pelvis will take a different shape as your body adapts to one leg.

'And when your left leg gets better, you don't necessarily go back to putting your weight on it. You might think you do, but often we get stuck in a shape and adopt it full time.'

The AiM movements show the brain that the pattern it has adopted, the compensation for the old injury, is no longer necessary, by gently demonstrating to it the full range of movement. They tell your body it no longer needs to be in safe mode or, to put it another way, they help the brain to go back to the factory settings.

Ward then filmed me standing, and then walking. I was appalled by how crooked I was. Even just standing still I was a disaster, leaning to one side, my neck crooked, my right foot turned out.

He tried some different movements, then sent me home with a file full of instructions. I was going to have to invest some time into learning the movements, teaching my body to realign itself. I held the file close as I walked to the station, willing it to work. I had a lot of running to do.

### FAST WORK

Just one week later, my miracle happened. For the first time in years, my Achilles stopped hurting. I got up in the morning and the usual stabbing pain didn't come. I was excited to run and, sure enough, nothing hurt. None of the usual wincing until my Achilles warmed up. Right from the start, I was bouncing along, pain-free. The next run was the same. And the next.

The idea of my Achilles breaking down did not even occur as I tackled the Miwok 100K ultra along the Marin headlands in California a few weeks later. I still had moments when my body felt so battered I wasn't sure I could carry on, but that was the pounding of 100km. The stabbing Achilles pain never resurfaced.



### LOOK BOTH WAYS

Try this Jae Gruenke lesson pre-run to reduce neck tension and improve your gait

Stand and turn to look as far to the left as you can without moving your feet, or forcing it. You may shift your eyes and turn your head, your upper body, even your hips. Note the farthest thing you can see behind you.

Now try these movements 5-10 times each, moving slowly and avoiding discomfort and stretching.

1. Look to the left by turning your head and eyes only – your shoulders, hips, etc stay still.

2. Look to the left with only your eyes. Your head stays still.  
3. Keep your eyes on a point in front of you as you turn only your head to the left (this is tricky!)  
4. Keep your head and eyes forward as you turn

your shoulders and hips to the left (even trickier!)  
5. Relax for 30 seconds.  
Now repeat the initial movement. Can you see further than before? If you can, but think it's just because you loosened up, do some stretching and turning to the right and see if you get the same effect. Not as good? Try the five steps above, but to the right.



### AIM HIGH

Underactive glutes are a common issue that can lead to running inefficiencies and injuries. This AiM movement from Gary Ward will get them firing:

1. Place one foot up on a step.  
2. With this foot flat, weight in the forefoot, bend your knee and move your body forward until your hips are directly over the foot. Keep your head and body upright,

back leg straight, allowing the heel to lift off the ground.  
3. Move carefully forward, hold the pose for a second, then move back again. If you wobble, don't worry; your body is just learning the movement.  
4. Once you feel steady, do the same thing but reach forward with both hands as you move. Do six reps on each foot at least once a day.

The problem is, Ward is not a highly trained medical practitioner. In fact, he began devising Anatomy in Motion while fitting ski boots in a hire shop in the French Alps.

There's a lack of scientific evidence behind AiM, but that doesn't matter to me. All the evidence I need is in my Achilles. No double-blind study could come close to validating it more than the feeling of pain-free running. But when I come to recommend AiM, as I want to, I find myself hesitating. You'll want to see the research. Surely I've just drunk the Kool-Aid, you'll think.

If it is just a placebo effect, I don't really care. Would you? Weeks, months, two years later, after over 4,000 miles of ultra training and racing, pounding roads and trails, up and down hills, I was still running pain-free. But I wanted to dig deeper into the science.

The presenter of *Doctor in the House*, Rangan Chatterjee, has since published a book called *The Four Pillar Plan* (Penguin Life). One of those pillars is movement, and his advice is based largely on AiM. Chatterjee is a respected medical

professional and a practising GP. So I asked whether the lack of evidence to support AiM bothered him. 'It's a good question,' he said. 'But when I look for evidence, I look at how harmful the treatment is. Something like chemotherapy, for example, I'll need to see pretty good trials evidence before I'll put patients through that.'

Just like Ray and I, Chatterjee had his own miracle story. 'One day I ►

was helping a friend move house,' he said. 'I lifted a box and my back just went.'

Over the next few years he saw a physio, a chiropractor, an osteopath and a spinal surgeon. 'I couldn't work,' he said. 'I had to give up sports – I had been playing high-level squash.'

Then he came across a video of Ward online and something resonated. 'As doctors, we're always suppressing symptoms, rather than dealing with the root cause.' So he went on a course to see if he could incorporate some of Ward's ideas into his GP practice. Ward assessed him as an example case and told him his foot was stuck in pronation. He gave him some movements to address the issue and within days, Chatterjee's back got better. 'Because my right foot wasn't working, my right glute wasn't firing, so my back was hurting,' says Chatterjee. 'Now I'm back playing squash, skiing moguls, everything.'

'I saw lots of people about my back,' said Chatterjee. 'But to change the paradigm, we need fresh ideas. If we stop and wait for the evidence, things won't progress. I want to help my patients. Ray had tried all the evidence-based treatments. What do you do next? Give up?'

Ward borrowed a lot of his ideas about the way the brain processes movement patterns from a treatment called NeuroKinetic Therapy (NKT), devised over 30 years ago by David Weinstock, an American. I met Weinstock when I went to race in California, to see if he could shed any more light on how AiM worked, and why my Achilles tendons were suddenly feeling better.

'In an NKT session, we interview people, then watch them move,' he said. 'We want to see what's overworking and what's underworking. Then you release the overworking muscles, or activate the underworking muscles, which helps reprogramme the dysfunctional pattern in the brain.'

He nodded when I told him about my wrist. 'When you break something, you create scar tissue. We know through fascial research, that the fascial system is the skeleton of the nervous system, so when you cut it or disturb it, you disrupt motor control.'

## OVER OUR LIFETIME, WE DEVELOP

### HABITS TO ACHIEVE THE MOVEMENTS

### WE NEED IN THE BEST WAY WE CAN, AND

### – CRUCIALLY – WITHOUT GETTING HURT

'People are gobsmacked by the effect of these things. Just because these scars are old, doesn't mean the brain has repaired the damage, it has just learned to compensate.' Other things that can cause problems, he said, were old sports injuries, bad posture, computer work and mobile phones. 'Soon we're going to have a generation of hunchbacks,' he said.

## ON FORM

Of course, being injury-free and having great running form aren't the same thing. After getting rid of my Achilles pain I wanted more, so I began looking at ways to improve my technique. One thing I managed, partly through having a better functioning, more aligned body, was to go from being the worst downhill runner in the field when I first ran in the mountains – a 100-mile race through the Pyrenees – to being one of the fastest. By the time I got to my eighth ultra, the Lavaredo Ultra Trail in the Italian Dolomites, I was making gains on the long, winding descents, my now (relatively) elastic body bouncing where it had once been tentative. So, how did I get there?

In my investigations into form, I kept hearing about an exercise therapy called Feldenkrais, devised in the 1950s by a Ukrainian-Israeli, Moshé Feldenkrais. So I booked a session with practitioner Jae Gruenke.

I met her in Covent Garden, where she started by getting me to run up and down the street. When I pointed out I had been working a lot on my form, in case she was struggling to spot any obvious issues, she gave me a withering look.

After the running, we went into the clinic and she gave me a 'rolling lesson' in which I lay on my back, knees bent, and she pulled and rolled my legs gently from side to side. Then we headed back out so I could run again. I felt great. Before, Gruenke had asked me to listen to the sound of my feet. I thought they'd been quiet, but now I seemed to skim silently across the ground. How could a gentle session of rolling around on a table have had such a huge effect?

Gruenke explained that in Feldenkrais you don't fix form by telling people to change how they move, because movement happens at a subconscious level. Over our lifetime, she said, we develop habits to achieve the movements we need in the best way we can, and – most crucially – without getting hurt. If we suddenly try to change these habits, our nervous system, which is always trying to protect us, will set off warning lights, causing us to tense up and reject the changes. It seemed to fit with the ideas underlying AiM and NKT.

Gruenke explained that the rolling had been working on the movement of my pelvis, which wasn't moving optimally, and that the quieter footstrike came from better pelvis rotation. She told me the restricted pelvis movement could be from an injury, but was most likely simply the consequence of the many, many hours I spend sitting at a computer or slumped on a seat.

Another tip she gave me as I ran after the rolling session was to hold my arms in a slightly different position, with my hands higher up. I've maintained it ever since. 'I wouldn't have told you to do that before the lesson,' Gruenke told me. 'Without the lesson it would have felt weird, and you would forget and probably give up. But after the lesson your body was moving differently, and the higher hands fitted perfectly.'

A few weeks later, with my new tricks, my functioning Achilles and Kipchoge arms, I went



In an ultra event, moving efficiently preserves energy to keep you going



## MIND GAINS

An ultra usually becomes a battle of the mind. Here are the strategies that helped me through

### BE CLEAR WHY YOU'RE RUNNING

Having a set goal, or a strong reason to finish, can help push you on. At some point your mind is going to tell you that your reason is daft. That you have done enough. You don't need to prove anything. You must be prepared for this.

### STAY IN THE MOMENT

This is so much harder than it sounds. People tell you to run the mile you're in, don't worry about the 50, 60, 70 miles still to go, but the thought of the distance can hit you like a punch to the gut. Try breaking the

race up and think only about reaching the next aid station.

Once you've eaten and had a quick rest, you go again, thinking only of reaching the next aid station.

### TURN YOUR WATCH OFF

If you're trying not to think about

how far you have left to run, the last thing you need is a constant, beeping reminder on your wrist.

### MANTRA UP

Repeating a phrase, a line from a song, or your kids' names, over and over, can help distract you from the thought of

the pain and the distance ahead. Really, a mantra is just another way to keep you in the moment. It's hard to know beforehand what will resonate and focus your mind, but when you find something that works, return to it in your moment of need.

to a form coach to get myself assessed. Shane Benzie has worked with many top British ultrarunners and when we met in a park he stuck sensory pads on my legs, set up his iPad camera and got me to run while he filmed and recorded.

'You have balance to die for,' he said, pointing out the identical impacts of my left and right strides, while my rotation and cadence were also spot on. My arms too, were moving as he would want them to. I was still far from perfect, and he gave me some cues, but I wasn't the crushing disaster of a few months before. Things, it seemed, really were working.

And if the proof is in the pudding, how about 10 ultra marathons, ending with a 105-mile race around Mont Blanc? I got through it all with barely a niggle and lost zero training time to

injury. Because you're running further in ultras, any misalignment or dysfunction is more

likely to find you out as patterns are repeated over and over. Efficiency of movement is also key in races that can last for days and I had gone from constant Achilles pain to running across deserts and mountains, often for more than 24 hours nonstop, with my body emerging still functioning.

However, a few months after my two-year ultra odyssey, I tweaked my Achilles. I went to see AiM practitioner and author of *Even with your Shoes on* (Soap Box Books) Helen Hall, who specialises in

applying AiM to running. She filmed me on a treadmill and used a 3D scanner to analyse every kink in my system. It seems that though I may have felt like Eliud Kipchoge, I'm still far from the finished article. She prescribed a daily dose of kicking frog legs and making teapot shapes by the wall, and the injury cleared up fast.

Form, like fitness, is a journey, but I know the techniques and the experts I've discovered over the last two years can guide me in the right direction as I travel down the road.

If you're interested in trying the techniques outlined in this feature, use these sites to find a qualified local practitioner:  
AiM: [findingcentre.co.uk/search](http://findingcentre.co.uk/search)  
Feldenkrais: [feldenkrais.co.uk](http://feldenkrais.co.uk)  
NKT: [neurokinetictherapy.com/certified-practitioners](http://neurokinetictherapy.com/certified-practitioners)