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ChiRunning® & ChiWalking®

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ChiRunning® and ChiWalking®: The Perfect Marriage to Survive, and Enjoy, a Hilly, 50K Trail Run

In the “ultra” running community, The McDonald Forest 50K is considered to be one of the most challenging 50K’s anywhere. Located outside of Corvallis, Oregon, this trail run includes 6,700 ft of uphill, windy and perilous downhill, lots of mud and even streams and logs to navigate. For me, this was the perfect venue to test my theory that a collaboration of ChiRunning and ChiWalking would be the most powerful, efficient, effortless, safe and enjoyable way to complete hilly, long distance runs.

Although I had run a number of marathons in recent years and even ChiWalked one marathon, it had been almost 30 years since I ran my only other ultra, a 50K in The Bay Area of California, so I was not at all sure how this current undertaking would go. What I did know was that I would have an athletic adventure and that I would be called upon to use all of my knowledge of both ChiRunning and ChiWalking (see footnote) to make this adventure a positive experience and a personal success.

I awoke on race day to sunny skies, a good sign given the history of rain and mud in this race’s past. And shortly later, I waited, one of 200 men and women of all ages, a fit looking group surrounded by a welcoming forest on an old logging road, Then we were off—the first steps of a very long journey with the whoops and yells of excitement masking any anxiety I may have been feeling—“only 31 miles to go” someone shouted!

The initial terrain of level roads and trails soon was transformed into steep uphill and, in response, my ChiRunning form shifted smoothly to ChiWalking and my personal project had begun. With increased lean, small steps, quick turnover, strong and high arm swing, and lateral strides when needed, I moved forcefully up the trail, passing those runners who tried to keep running or who walked with arms at their sides while exhibiting no particular form and no recognition of the changing angle of gravity as it almost pulled them back down the hill with each of their steps.

What goes up must come down and there were certainly plenty of “downs” during this run. Returning to my ChiRunning form on the downhills, I felt very confident darting down the hills as I varied my form between the usual lower body focus on gradual hills and, more often, the steep

hills form in which I lowered my center of mass, increased my cadence while landing under my column with very short steps keeping my weight line on the backside of my feet and legs. Staying on the upper edge of my maximum speed zone, it was essential that I keep good balance and the capacity to respond to the unexpected—such as slippery surfaces, roots, rocks, etc— as more than once I almost slid off the trail and had to grab a passing branch to help control my momentum. At times, I felt like I was dancing down the hills, a downhill version of T'ai Chi perhaps, keeping core strength, good alignment and lightness afoot as I worked with, not against, the force of gravity and the force of the trail coming at me. Whenever possible, I used the speed and balance of this downhill form to pass runners who moved less adeptly, braking and pounding as they seemed led by their feet out in front with upper body vertical or even leaning back toward the hill. Overall, whether gradual or steep, I found that ChiRunning downhill was the place I most frequently caught up to and passed other runners.

The back and forth dance between ChiRunning and ChiWalking proved to be especially useful in the latter parts of the 50K run when, on both level and slightly downhill terrain, I sensed that a leg muscle was on the verge of cramping. In spite of good ChiRunning form, those times when I had to catch myself from “slipping out” on steep downhills had overstressed my hamstrings. Resting my “hams” with ChiWalking, while re-focusing and totally relaxing my legs overall, allowed me to keep moving forward at a steady, albeit slower pace. Once recovered, off I went again, ChiRunning with renewed lean, pelvic rotation, relaxed legs and all around zip.

And soon I was there, the finish line banner drawing me forward for the final strides. Six hours and forty nine minutes after I began, I had completed an incredibly challenging and hilly 50K trail run and I had done surprisingly well. As I caught my breath and released tears of joy and relief, I heard the Race Director say to me: “you’ve just won your age group”, (FYI: 60 – 69) and he handed me a classy mug as a memento of my accomplishment. As I broke out in a big smile, I realized that I had done it. The “marriage” of ChiRunning and ChiWalking had been a success.



Postscript:

1. In terms of “recovery”, an important aspect of distance running and typically a key benefit of the ChiRunning and ChiWalking approaches, my experience was as hoped. A dinner and dancing outing on race night was followed the next day by a walk and playing in my usual Sunday ice hockey game. My recovery was quick with no noticeable negative after effects.

2. My observations of other runners and the inefficiencies they showed on both uphill and downhill, has led me to develop a new specialty in my ChiRunning/ChiWalking practice; offering workshops geared to ultra trail runners, including and emphasizing hill running.

Footnote:

1. See the ChiRunning® and ChiWalking® books by Danny and Katherine Dreyer for more information about the similarities and differences between ChiRunning® and ChiWalking®.

Keith McConnell is a Certified ChiRunning® and ChiWalking® Instructor residing in Eugene, Oregon with a practice throughout the Northwest. He teaches running and walking classes at the University of Oregon, serves on the board of the Oregon Track Club Masters and, as a licensed psychologist, also provides services in Sport Psychology and Life Coaching.