

## Snatching Victory from Da Feet

By Dave McGovern

I can take a hint. Well, actually, I can take it or leave it. And I have left it—"it" being a hint from our esteemed editor Cindi Leeman—for as long as I could. But Cindi has been hinting louder and louder that I should write a Part II of the technique article I put to paper in the inaugural issue of **WALK! Magazine**. So instead of writing about something more pressing—like matching your socks to your underwear, or using your heart rate monitor to contact space aliens—I've flinched in the face of Cindi's whip and proudly present more on racewalk technique.

In the initial racewalk article, I suggested practicing two drills to help you develop elements of the technique. (You should be quite good at them by now—you've had nine months to practice.) In this issue I'll focus on one of the most important areas of good racewalking technique: the feet. I'll expand on those drills from the first issue of **WALK!**—which, incidentally, had a lot to do with the feet—and discuss more ways to strengthen the feet and lower legs.

I've probably analyzed more hours of videotape of racewalkers than just about anybody on the planet. And the thing that really stands out is that elite racewalkers use their feet to great effect, and most other walkers don't. So even though there may be some differences in genetics, diet, training, etc., between the elites and mere mortals, the feet seem to be the component that most clearly separates the two groups.

When top racewalkers ply their trade, they push off the toes explosively behind the body. Video and still photos of most elite walkers will show the back foot perpendicular to the ground and flexed at the ankle significantly. Photos of more pedestrian walkers show no such ankle flexion; the angle between the foot and the lower leg stays fixed at about 90 degrees all the way to push-off. This

results in a shortened, less powerful stride behind the body. Pumping the arms and driving the knees vigorously through are certainly important, but the feet are akin to the follow through in golf or tennis: Your "game" is going to suffer without it.



Weak pushoff.

Photo by Jeff Salvage.



Strong pushoff.

Photo by Jeff Salvage.

Simple awareness of the problem can help a great deal. But in many cases, strengthening the muscles of the feet and lower legs must occur before a racewalker can get the explosive push-off that the elites use to such great effect. There are a number of drills, resistance training exercises and other techniques that can

be used to build up lower leg and foot strength. Try the following:

- Perform toe raises for shin strength; calf raises for calf/ankle strength. Stand on the edge of a step with the front 3/4 of the foot hanging over the edge. Slowly dip the feet down, then all the way up. Repeat until fatigue is felt in the shin, then stretch the shins and repeat several times. For calves/ankles, repeat with the back 3/4 of the foot hanging off the step.



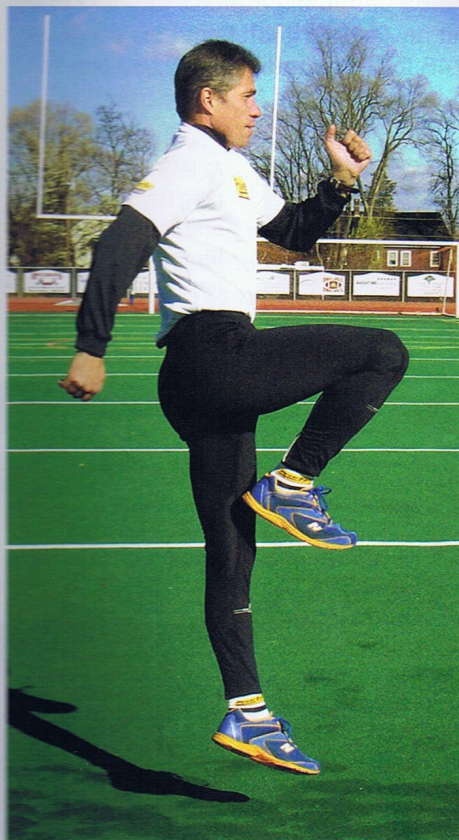
Above: Calf dips.

Below: Toe raises.

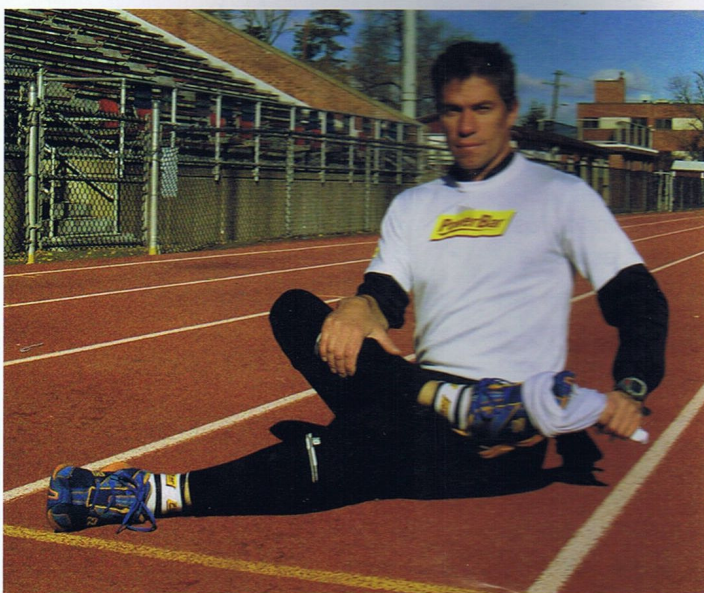


- Walk on your heels with straight knees to strengthen the shin muscles; on the outsides of the feet to work the peroneal muscles on the outside of the lower leg. Continue for about 30 seconds, then stretch and repeat.
- Walk on your toes—way up on your tippy toes—to strengthen the calves.
- To strengthen the bottoms of the feet, use toe grip exercises. Repeatedly pick up a towel or other soft object with your foot by curling your toes.
- “Wobble board” exercises are great for lower leg strength and for balance.
- Racewalking slowly up a gradual incline is undoubtedly the most specific strengthener for the ankles and calves. Hill work will also help to ingrain proper heel placement. Somewhat faster hill repeats may be used to develop an explosive toe-off.
- Specific range of motion exercises with some form of elastic band or tubing are excellent for isolating weak areas of the shins and ankles. Simply loop a heavy elastic band (Thera-Band, surgical tubing, bungee cord, etc.) around the foot and work the muscles against the resistance provided by the elastic.
- “Plyometric drills” are great for

developing a strong push-off. Try skipping and jumping rope. When skipping, focus on pushing yourself more up than forward, and really try to get your whole body off the ground with each skip. When jumping rope, stay up on your toes as much as possible.



Above: Plyometric drills.



Range of motion exercises.

- Finally, avoid wearing “fat” shoes: The thicker the midsole, the greater the levering force imparted to the heel. “Real” racewalking shoes or running flats with a low heel will help to keep the foot from flattening prematurely.

To reduce “stumpiness,” your feet

must be strong, and an active part of the walking motion. Racewalking will eventually strengthen the feet and lower leg muscles, but by adding some of these extra exercises to your daily routine you will be able to dramatically reduce the time required to build up these muscles. By doing these drills and exercises, more powerful, legal walking technique may be just a couple of feet away! ♦

**Dave McGovern** is a member of the U.S. National Racewalking Team and the author of **The Complete Guide to Racewalking** and **The Complete Guide to Marathon Walking**. Visit his web site at [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org).

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