

# Ten Steps to Fascial Fitness

## Turning Exercise Upside Down

by Sol Petersen

**There is a change of view in personal training methods for elite athletes based around new research concerning the fascia and connective tissues that are an intimate and integral part of what we usually consider to be the 'muscles'. The new fascial research is emphasizing posture, awareness, elasticity, diet and gives us some insight into explaining why barefoot Olympic runners had less shin splints than runners in conventional protective shoes.**

What if 'Everything you know about muscles is wrong'? This is the provocative title of an article that can be seen on [www.menshealth.com](http://www.menshealth.com). The Men's Health article is based on a workshop for athletes by Tom Myers, author of Anatomy Trains. Says James Ready, the trainer for the Arizona Diamondbacks baseball team, who has begun employing Myers's fascial approach. "These days, our big emphasis with weights is about posture, not big plates," Ready says. He has also reassessed the way he diagnoses injuries. "I've had to step back and take a deeper look at everything I learned in school. We were taught to find the point of pain and treat it. But take hamstring injuries; the hamstring is usually just the smoke. You have to look elsewhere for the fire."

Exercise often is very 'muscle oriented' yet most musculo-skeletal injuries are related to the connective tissues and fascia. Each muscle fiber, bundle and group of bundles is encased in a tube of fascia, as well as each nerve, bone and organ. In fact the fascia and connective tissues are the global connecting matrix for the whole body.

If we watch children jumping, bouncing, skipping we are observing the elastic recoil of the connective tissue much more than the work of the 'muscles'. In the new fascial approach there is a great emphasis on developing elasticity. The use of elastic recoil was the secret of how Bruce Lee's one inch punch could send a man flying.

Dr. Robert Schleip is at the forefront of applying fascial research in the clinical and fitness areas. Here are his 10 steps to building a better fascial body.



Energizing Anterior Myofascial Chains with Qi Gong

## Ten Steps to Building Better Fascial Fitness

**ONE** ~ *Emphasize the engagement of long myofascial chains rather than of single joints/muscles.* This means less stretching and exercising of individual muscle groups and more attention to bodywide functional myofascial chains.

**TWO** ~ *Direct stretch loading, with many directional variations, with a preference for careful loading around the end range of available motion.* This means less repetition of exactly the same vectorial loading directions and stretch loading with both multiple variations of loading as well as relaxed muscle participation.

**THREE** ~ *Use the elastic rebound energy and emphasize the energy storage of fascia, the 'cat-like catapult action' rather than muscular effort.* This means the way of the ninja, less rope-like abrupt direction changes and more direction changes with elastic deceleration and acceleration. Equal emphasis on the preparatory 'counter movement' as on the main functional movement.

**FOUR** ~ *Recognize the importance of the Preparatory Counter Movement.* The body's preparation to achieve any powerful action usually begins with a dynamic pre-stretch. The pre-movement, the set-up, is crucial for the archer, the fast bowler, the golfer, for anyone involved in athletics or fitness. To go forward we go back first.

**FIVE** ~ *Body-Mindfulness is the key for an accurate use of the body's dynamics.* The 'No pain no gain' attitude can push us beyond true limits to injury. In a Fascial Fitness approach, the cultivation of a sensuous body perception with a high level of kinesthetic acuity is required - such as in the correct practice of Pilates, Yoga and Tai Ji.

**SIX** ~ *Re-hydrate your tissues during training.* We do this with an inclusion of appropriate resting times for tissue rehydration and viscoelastic recovery. Runners training for a marathon will have fewer injuries if they run at different speeds and include brief walking periods rather than running for 30 minutes or more at the same speed.

**SEVEN** ~ *Appreciate your unique constitutional difference yet challenge your fascial body to create a stronger resilience.* Fascial properties are partly genetic. A 'Viking' body type is good for stability and an arctic climate while an 'Indian temple dancer' body type tends to be more flexible in a tropical climate. So instead of the Yoga and stretching classes being filled with hypermobile women, these women may need to play with weights and dynamic stability loading. On the other hand, the Obelix-type men in the weight-lifting room will probably need to include some leg swings, stretches and kicks.



**EIGHT** ~ *Train with care and be cautious when you experiment with rebound energy.* Inclusion of fascial rebound and long myofascial chains often triggers an exhilarating sense of playfulness, of fun and adventure orientation. However, if untamed, this also leads to more frequent injuries than standard muscle training with monotonous repetitions. Start with lower loads than usual. Increase the load the following week only if a sense of elegance can be maintained (particularly during the elastic rebound phase). So reduce exercising with an abrupt /jerky movement quality and work with loads that allow smooth and elegant direction changes.

*This quality of body listening, of body-mindfulness is also a key dynamic in developing the appropriate fitness in your whole body and being.*

**NINE** ~ *Gentle perseverance and patience is the key in fascial training.* Be patient; take the long view with gentle perseverance. Because of collagen's slow renewal cycle (the half life of collagen is approximately 1 year), after 2 months of training the fascia, we may have very little to show, but then we may have a high return after 6 months or a year. This has real implications after injuries where we will not be looking for instant results but will anticipate training the fascia and connective tissue with a long term progress orientation - over 6 to 24 months, much like the slow progress in training for yoga or martial arts. It has been shown that boot camp-like short intense training programmes often propagate compartment syndromes & fascial inflammation.

**TEN** ~ Let's get the fuel right for fitness and enduring energy. We don't put the wrong fuel in our car so let's take care to cleanse the body system and give ourselves the right fuel. This means a well-hydrated body that is not too acidic or too alkaline. It is important to respect our physiology. The body's acid/alkaline balance, hormonal influences, chronic inflammation, poor hydration, weak lymph or blood flow all have a strong affect on the fascia and connective tissues and this affects our fitness. Scurvy caused massive connective tissue damage to sailors who had long periods without fresh fruit. This vitamin C deficiency in the fascia was cured by bringing citrus fruit on board, It has been suggested that the hunter/gatherer active life style and lighter nutrition support our fascia and muscles better than a sedentary life style cultivating stress hormones and chronic inflammation on a heavy red meat diet with saturated fats and refined sugar products.

## Developing New Methods From Ancient Wisdom

In conclusion, we are now finally beginning to appreciate the complex role of the connective tissues and the neuromyofascial body stocking in our approaches to exercise and fitness. The ancient Qi Gong and Tai Ji practices are well known for emphasizing elastic recoil and whole body integrated strength in their approaches to health and wellness. Watch animals – they are great teachers. These 10 steps to Fascial Fitness should act as an important reminder in our self-care and empower our physical body to its resilient best.

Now, back to barefoot runners; it appears that these runners strike the ground more gently with more of the forefoot than runners in conventional running shoes. This obviously reduces the stress transmitted to the fascial and skeletal framework. Try going for an extended run barefoot on soft grass and compare your whole body experience with doing the same in training shoes. This quality of body listening, of body-mindfulness is also a key dynamic in developing the appropriate fitness in your whole body and being.

### Fascial Fitness Resources

You can find out more about fascia and the innovative research and Fascial Fitness programmes developed by Dr, Schleip on [www.somatics.de](http://www.somatics.de), [www.fasciafitness.de](http://www.fasciafitness.de) or [www.anatomytrains.com](http://www.anatomytrains.com)

You can download this article and contact Sol through [www.theradiantbody.com](http://www.theradiantbody.com)



**Sol Petersen** is a Structural Integration and Fascial Fitness trainer with over 30 years experience. As a Body Psychotherapist, Adaptive Physical Education teacher and Tai Ji teacher, he specializes in applying Hakomi Mindfulness-based Psychotherapy to Manual, Movement and Aquatic Therapy. Co-founder of Mana Retreat Centre in

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