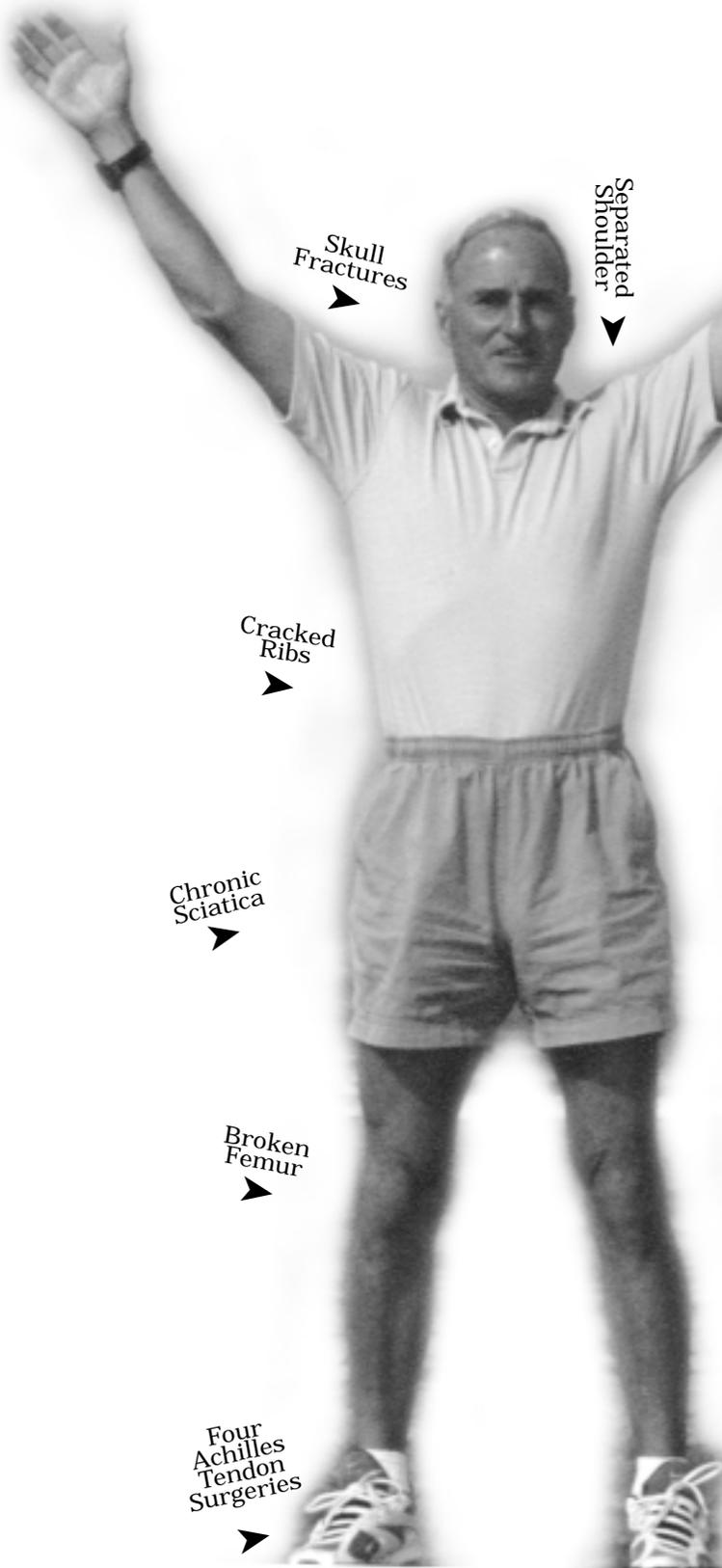


The Miracle Cure

B Y R O Y M . W A L L A C K



It was painful to watch. Awkwardly, agonizingly, a man, apparently a cripple, shuffled along, one shoulder tilted at a weird angle relative to the other, his left leg dragging behind him as if it were broken. It seemed to take him forever to move 20 yards. The crowd began to notice and murmur sympathetically. Poor old guy.

Then 58-year-old Dan McCaskill shocked everyone. He finally

Super-runner Dan McCaskill was desperate to stop his agonizing pain. Could a radical new muscle-balancing therapy save his career?

limped his way to the podium, then leaned forward. For the fifth year in a row, he was handed the first-place medal for winning his age group at the Torrey Pines 5K run.

Maybe the finest masters road racer in the San Diego area over the last 20 years, the Carlsbad resident has made a career of proving that you don't need to be able to walk to run. A retired Federal Agent with the U.S. Border Patrol and a former 82nd Airborne army para-

trooper, McCaskill began running for fitness in the early 1970's and soon was untouchable at races ranging from the 1500 meters to the marathon. At age 39, he ran the second-fastest half-marathon in the U.S., 1:10. At 40, he ran the fastest Masters 15K, 49:12, and a sub-32 10K. Training 75-to-100 miles a week, he became the national age-group 3000-meter steeplechase champion at age 45. At 50, he won the national age-group 25K championship. At 55, he could still run a 34-minute 10K.

McCaskill's competed in so many races — over 1,000, he thinks — and won so many of them, that he can't remember times, dates and even names of the events.

"I've probably won my age group at every race in San Diego," he guesses. "Nobody could touch me. In my 40s, I could win races outright."

He retired from work at 50 just so that he could concentrate on racing. Nearing 60, he still loves the competition as much as ever, and can still finish in the overall top-25 of a 5K.

GROWING PAINS

But while McCaskill thought he'd spend the rest of his days running happily into the sunset, his body stopped cooperating.

"Throughout my career, I'd always be crippled the day after the race, but I'd just take a pill and stretch," says McCaskill. "Then, in the 90's, the pain got so bad that I thought I'd have to give up running for good." Last year, for the first time ever, he had to stop and drop out of two races because he was in so much pain.

A laundry list of injuries a kilometer long, starting in his youth, finally caught up to him. In high school, a broken femur kept McCaskill in traction for a month and a body cast for a year, leaving his left leg and inch longer than the right. He had two separated shoulders, skull fractures and several cracked ribs from bike crashes in the '80s. Since 1981, he's been plagued by chronic sciatica which tightens his left leg during races, causes a limp when he walks and often forces him to drive his car while sitting on one cheek of his ass. In 1984, his left Achilles tendon swelled to three times its normal size; on doctor's orders, he didn't run or bike for a year. The next year, when he got back up to 60 training miles a week, the Achilles flared again.

He ran on it until he could stand no more, undergoing the first of four Achilles operations in 1994.

In short, McCaskill was a mess. He tried everything: Massage therapy, physical therapy, yoga five days a week, anti-inflammatories, vegetarianism, chiropractic.

By January 2000, with his right Achilles now as bad as his left one ever was, and his shoulders so misaligned that a tailor had to make him a suit with one side of the collar sewn higher than the other, McCaskill knew he had to try something

radical. His pain wasn't just ruining his running, it was distorting his body, wrecking his life. That realization, and the recommendation of a friend, is what led him to Symmetry.

WATCH THE 5-YEAR-OLDS

"The second he walked in the door, it was obvious that Dan was the most inflexible man I'd ever seen," said Patrick Mummy. "He was tighter than tight, no fluidity, total bilateral disfunction and deviation."

Mummy is the co-founder and owner of Rancho-Bernardo-based "Symmetry — The Pain Relief Clinic," a pioneer in a little-known, relatively new treatment method called Postural Therapy. This therapy is based on the theory that chronic pain is caused by muscular imbalances; simply, that some muscles are overused while corresponding muscles are underused. As the imbalances solidify, the body's symmetrical harmony is lost and the over-worked muscles eventually begin to hurt. The pain can be stopped when we learn how to regain symmetry by shifting some of the load to the under-utilized muscles.

Mummy explains that muscular imbalances are usually rooted in traumatic injury or bad lifestyle habits encouraged by modern life. Examples are endless: After a falling rock has smashed your right foot, you may find your left calf muscle cramping from having to over-compensate for the damaged side. When you sit at a desk for hours with your neck and shoulder cradling a phone in your right ear, the left side of your neck may begin to spasm.

Mummy became interested in Postural Therapy while at San Diego State University, where he was a top baseball player who suffered from chronic injuries. Armed with a

degree in exercise physiology and a growing dislike of a medical system that treats symptoms rather than causes, he began experimenting with a grab-bag of Eastern therapies to "realign" and "reeducate" out-of-balance bodies.

He settled on a holistic approach that borrows from martial arts, yoga, and tai chi. There are no drugs, equipment, or surgery. Instead, after Mummy pinpoints the body's weak points, he prescribes an individualized series of what look like stretches — he prefers to call them "strengthening exercises" — for the patient to do on his own.

A picture on a wall in one of Symmetry's examining rooms shows the profile of a typical five-year-old boy standing up. He represents perfect balance as nature intended it.

A straight vertical line has been overlaid over the photo of the boy. Upon close examination, you see that his ankle, knee, hip, shoulder and ear all fall exactly on that vertical line. His back is arched, his butt back and prominent, and his stomach rounded, not sucked in. Upon further examination, you can see that the boy's body mass is roughly split 50-50 by the vertical line.

Another photo show a front view of the boy. A vertical line from top to bottom bisects him perfectly. That's because the right and left side of his hips, his shoulders, his knees, and his ears are level, so that each pair forms a perfect 90-degree angle with the vertical line of the body.

Finally, there's his pelvis. Measured from the Iliac crest, it tilts forward 10 degrees.

When these three lines, or

planes, are in alignment, the body is in what is called "Dynamic Tension." It's a postural state, Mummy claims, in which every single muscle of the body is at the same tension, where breathing is optimized, where the core body is ready for action.

"This is the perfect posture for motion, which we were designed to be in 80% of the day," says Mummy.

He explains that the 10 degree tilt of the pelvis is the most effective angle to help the hip flexor do its job of pulling up the leg, a key to motion. The

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level hips give you a perfect ability to rotate side to side. The lined-up ankle, hip and ear assure right-to-left balance.

Unfortunately, this perfect state of Dynamic Tension is fleeting. Early in modern life, children begin to do something unnatural: They are sit for long periods of time. They don't want to — they are forced to. That's why, at the ripe old age of five, we begin to break down.

As we sit, the less we move the pelvis, which Mummy calls the "fulcrum" of all of our movement and the "center of our energy." The hip flexor muscles begin to shorten, drawing your butt in under you.

Ironically, being athletic exacerbates the problem.

"Athletes are actually worse off than sedentary people regarding posture," says Mummy. "They are not only out of balance, but they actively reinforce it. They are exercising on a misaligned posture."

TRUING A BENT WHEEL

Last January 27, Mummy subjected McCaskill to gait and

postural analysis that validated what he thought the second he saw the old runner hobble into his office. Using a pelviation meter, a fancy level, Mummy found that the left side of McCaskill's pelvis was angled 14 degrees, while the right side was angled five degrees — a whopping nine-degree disparity. His left shoulder blade was elevated three degrees. The hips and head tilted forward four degrees more than they should. The upper torso rotated right to left. The pelvis rotated left to right. The upper torso was offset to the left. McCaskill stood with too much weight on the right leg, both heels and on the inside of each foot.

McCaskill was like a bicycle rim way out of true; some spokes were bearing a heavy load while others were doing nothing at all.

"His posture showed so many compensations and imbalances that it impacted his running, walking, and all his movements," said Mummy.

When it was time for the diagnosis, Mummy didn't pull punches.

"To tell you the truth, I don't understand how you can walk," said Mummy. "To undo all your imbalances, it's going to take lots of work over the next 10 weeks."

Mummy then taught McCaskill a 10-exercise routine of stretching/positioning poses. The exercises were specifically chosen to de-emphasize McCaskill's over-contracted muscles — particularly the unnatural ele-

vation of his left hip and the huge disparity between the left and right angles of the pelvis.

The positions involved everything from lying on his back with legs twisted to pressing against walls and bending over chairs.

McCaskill was to do the hour-long routine at home twice a day for a week, holding each position for several minutes. Once he showed progress with these exercises, Mummy would give him sets of progressively more strenuous exercises. Symmetry has developed a bank of 350 exercises in all, about 30% of them straight from yoga. Photos of them all can be found in the book and CD-ROM "Symmetry — Relieve Pain; Optimize Physical Motion," which McCaskill took home with him.

When asked how the exercises felt on Day 1, McCaskill replied succinctly: "It hurt like hell."

THE 10-WEEK PLAN

Like the old song, however, it hurt so good.

"Afterwards, my body was much more in alignment, looser, less painful. I had more range of motion in my movements. I walking much more fluid and balanced," says McCaskill. "It was a rarity for me."

Technically, what was happening is that he was suddenly using his left side more equally with his right. He was more balanced for the first time in years.

As Week 1 progressed, McCaskill found himself looser in general and his stride more fluid. He found some of the Symmetry position "tortuous,"

and was plenty sore in the worked areas, but the payoff was worth it. On the morning of Day 4, he noticed he could walk down the stairs with far less effort than normal, and didn't hold onto the banisters for the first time in years.

On February 1, after six days of exercises, McCaskill returned to Symmetry for the results. Mummy found that his hip angle disparity had improved from nine degrees to four degrees. There was significant improvement in his shoulders, standing posture and walking gait.

"The first routine had done its job," said Mummy, who prescribed a new set of exercises to rid McCaskill of his unnatural rotation. "Some of them were even more painful than the first ones," said McCaskill. "My tendons, muscles and bones are in complete rebellion."

Technically, he was right. The deep soreness he was experiencing is what Mummy calls "transitional pain;" as the body unraveled and muscles were being reeducated and called upon to perform differently, they resisted.

By February 8, Day 13, McCaskill complained of continued soreness, but felt a more balanced and longer stride length with each run. His hip angle disparity was now only one degree. Four days later, McCaskill did his first fast-sustained intensity workout in years.

On February 15, Day 20, McCaskill and Mummy celebrated a major breakthrough.

For the first time 25 years of running, McCaskill felt as if his left leg was "doing its job."

By February 23, Day 27, McCaskill noticed he hadn't taken a pain pill for a few days. The range of motion in his shoulders was greatly improved. He wasn't limping as much when he walked. Four

days later, he finished the Torrey Pines 5KM race in 20:23, taking first in the 55-59 age-group division.

A few days later, he was astounded to find that he had no sciatica pain.

March 15, Day 48, was a landmark day with a twist: Despite a perfect 10-degree/10-degree hip angle, and increasing range of motion on his right side and shoulders, nearly all of McCaskill's other measurements were worse. He had a great deal of muscular pain, and complained of a sudden decrease in left leg function.

The explanation, according to Mummy, was a final "transition phase." Apparently, the body was trying one last time to fight the changes, he postulated. "It's like the "detox" phase in an alcoholic's recovery program, where the body is ridding itself of its last toxins."

April 19, Day 83 was Graduation Day, McCaskill's last appointment with Mummy. And it was beautiful. Perfectly matching pelvic tilts. Shoulders level. No trunk rotations. Left hip elevated just a half degree. Side view and frontal plane flawless.

McCaskill took a final set of exercises from Mummy to do on his own, then went out for a hard fartlek workout. He felt smooth and balanced. His sciatica didn't act up. His limp was gone. He ran fluidly, covering more ground at an even gait. After it was over, he had no recovery pain.

Is McCaskill cured? Technically, no: He'll have to do postural exercises the rest of his life, or risk regression. But in terms of lifestyle, he is truly a new man. As he told Mummy, gratitude in his voice, "I am no longer the walking dead." ▲

For information go to www.symmetry.com

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