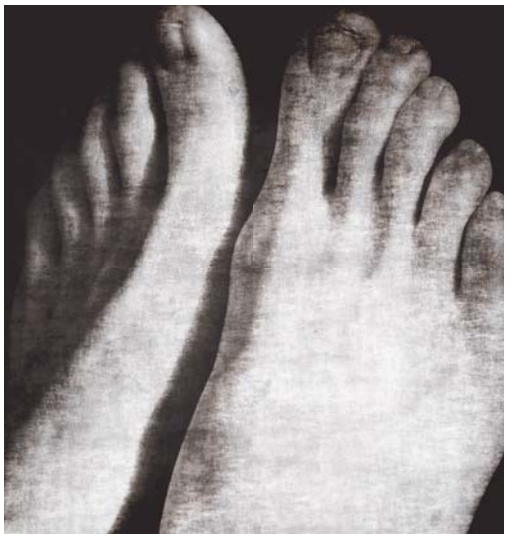

# 11 Practical Ways to Get *Quick Feet*

How to improve this vital athletic quality – fast!

BY **KIM GOSS, MS**

One of the most coveted qualities an athlete can have is quick feet. Being able to move almost instantaneously in any direction can be what it takes for a fullback to break through a defensive line, or a tennis player to return a lightning-fast serve, or a volleyball player to "bump it, set it, smack it down!" And while genetics does play a significant role in being able to move quickly, any athlete can improve their quickness – probably more so than they realize.

Due to the value of quick feet for athletic performance, many sport scientists have conducted research into ways to improve it. For example, in the May 2008 *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, a study was conducted on the value of using a backward (false) step to initiate forward movement. The study, which involved 27 men using a backward step followed by a step forward, measured how quickly the subjects could move 2.5 meters and 5 meters. What the researchers found is that training with a false step "may result in superior


In 2006 Loganville High School was the BFS High School of the Year, and much of their success could be attributed to workouts that used a balance of strength and speed training.

performance." In other words, "one step back equals two steps forward!"

Although such research is interesting and has practical application at all levels of athletic performance, there are other ways to get quick feet and also easily implement the training into any athletic training program. Any one of the 11 methods I will discuss here will make an athlete quicker – and implementing *all* of them holds the promise of helping poor athletes become good, good athletes become great, and great athletes become even better.

**1. Get Lean.** Unless your sport is sumo wrestling, possessing a high level of bodyfat is not going to help athletic performance and most likely will make an athlete slower – and more so than you might think. As a practical demonstration, have an athlete wear a five-pound weight vest and have them perform any standard test of quickness – a 20-yard shuttle run is a great test because it tests both quickness and the ability to change direction. Then have the athlete perform the same test without the weight vest – you will be surprised at how just five pounds can make a significant difference in athletic performance. To be really quick you need to be lean – after all, you can't flex fat.

Photo: Jim Burgess


Kenny Boynton of the University of Florida's men's basketball team demonstrates a drop lunge. More details about their program can found in the January/February 2012 issue, available in the magazine archive section of our website, *www.biggerfasterstronger.com*.

**2. Increase Muscular Endurance.** It's been said that if an athlete is tired in the fourth quarter, it's because they were not in shape going into the first. If an athlete is tired, their form will suffer and they are not going to be quick. Part of the reason the BFS program is called a total program is that it works all aspects of conditioning, and therefore in the off-season it's essential to keep up the repeat sprint workouts on the Tuesday and Thursday program to maintain a high level of muscular endurance.

**3. Correct Structural Imbalances.** Sports emphasize certain muscle groups over others and can create imbalances that could affect movement. If a player is injured, they will not move well. Swimmers and throwers, for example, are often relatively weak in the muscles that externally rotate the shoulders – external shoulder rotation exercises, such as those performed with dumbbells, would be valuable auxiliary exercises for these athletes to prevent shoulder injuries.

**4. Improve Leg Strength.** Being quick is not just about quick feet – it's also about strong legs. This is why runners who excel in the shorter distances have more muscle mass, because they need that strength to apply more force into the ground. This is a fact supported by research. In the November 2000 issue of the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, 33 sprinters of various abilities were studied and the researchers found that "…runners reach faster top speeds not by repositioning their limbs more rapidly in the air, but by applying greater support forces to the ground."

**5. Develop Single-Leg Strength.** When it comes to changing direction, consider that at some point an athlete will be supporting him- or herself on one leg and that single leg will have to stop the forces that propelled the body to that point in the first place. It has been estimated that the ground reaction forces in the lower limbs can be as much as five times bodyweight when an athlete drops from a height of just 12 inches. Similar forces occur when an athlete has to brake when changing direction on the field.

If an athlete does not have sufficient single-leg strength, they take longer to stabilize their body so they can change direction. With all the rapid changes in direction that take place in athletics, especially in sports such as soccer and basketball, those fractions of a second can make the difference between winning and losing. Exercises such as step-ups and dynamic side-to-side drills such as those performed on the plyo ramp are specific ways to develop this strength.

**6. Train the Calves.** Having quick feet requires a good foundation. One reason a handball bounces much better off a wall than a racquetball does is that a racquetball absorbs more force than a handball. The same principle applies in training the calf muscles to repel these forces, essentially reacting more like a handball. Calf training can be done with machines, but there are many simple exercises that can be performed off a step or small platform. One of the best calf exercises is the seated calf raise, as this exercise helps strengthen the muscles that support the arch of the foot.

**7. Train Every Day.** It's been said that for every day of practice an athlete misses, that's another day their competition moves ahead. It's especially important that an athlete works on speed year-round, as speed training works the nervous system and gains are lost quickly. Great quick-foot exercises are the dot drill, plyo ramp, jump rope and plyometrics.

**8. Play Multiple Sports.** Speed is influenced by the ability to react to different environments, and this is one more reason that athletes should be encouraged to play multiple sports, year-round. Also, trying multiple sports makes athletes competition-sharp, and this quality enables athletes to make smarter on-field and on-court decisions quickly.

**9. Test.** Testing not only motivates athletes to train harder but also helps to determine if what they are doing is working. Rather than skipping an entire practice to devote the time to testing, it's best to incorporate testing into the workouts. For example, by having a Just Jump and Run available in the weightroom, athletes can quickly test themselves in the vertical jump – or they can use it on the Tuesday/Thursday workout to test plyometric and agility drills.

**10. Practice Good Biomechanics.** Athletes need to pay attention to coaches and learn good biomechanics – using proper technique not only makes them look good in their sport but also enables them to perform more efficiently and safely. Even when your athletes are stretching, make certain they use good posture. To get you started, apply the BFS Six Absolutes of perfect technique in every movement. These absolutes are as follows:

1. Use an athletic or jump stance
2. Be tall
3. Spread the chest (lock-in the lower back)
4. Align the toes
5. Align the knees (knees over toes)
6. Eyes on target


A great tool for developing quick feet is the plyo ramp. Shown is teenager Paul Dumais, a member of the Canadian weightlifting team that competed in the 2011 Junior World Championships.


Doing explosive lifts such as the power clean is a must for developing faster athletes.

**11. Train for Power.** Explosive movements such as the power clean help athletes move faster, as they train the body to overcome inertia. In fact, elite Olympic weightlifters can often move as quickly as world-class sprinters for the first several steps. At a bodyweight of 240 pounds Olympic weightlifter Mark Cameron clean and jerked 500 pounds. Cameron attended the University of Maryland at the same time as Renaldo Nehemiah, the first man to run the 100-meter hurdles under 13 seconds. From a standing start with no blocks, Cameron could beat Nehemiah for the first ten yards – after that, of course, Nehemiah easily rocketed ahead due to his superior acceleration and ability to maintain top speed.

While some athletes are seemingly blessed with quick feet, the fact is that it's an athletic quality that can be improved by training hard and training smart. BFS

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