I doubt if I’m alone in my frustration as I read about involved, time consuming training programs on how to succeed in citizen ski racing, ultramarathon, bicycling, paddling, sailboat racing, etc. For those of us who are passionate about a different recreational pursuit for each season, those time, money and energy consuming approaches leave us wondering how we can hope to improve in anything when we love it all!

Articles about sports performance frequently mention the importance of technique but fail to give direction on how to achieve this often elusive efficiency. Is it acquired only through repetitive practice? How can we know if we are practicing well or practicing mistakes when we are often out on the rivers, roads, and trails alone?

There is a way. The Feldenkrais Method® for improving mind/body awareness can provide recreational sports addicts with adequate skills to feel good and have fun while participating in many activities. The Feldenkrais Method is being used in Colorado by ski instructors; in Hawaii and Australia to teach surfing; at the Olympics to help injured paddlers; at a premiere southeastern paddling school to teach kayaking; and it is available in most areas of the U.S. Its practitioners can help you learn to feel good, have fun, and improve, while actually holding down a real job and maintaining peace in your household. The Feldenkrais Method is rich in its ability to assist in improvement in multiple activities and many realms of life because the commodity it offers is AWARENESS.

With refined awareness of your body and mind, you can notice immediately when your weight is not balanced over your ski or centered in your boat. You can learn to feel the difference between one leg that is rarely or never injured through overuse while running, and the other that collects aches and pains more quickly than finishers’ T-shirts. Once the difference is known precisely, things can start to change. Have you ever taken a lesson in your favorite sport, repeat what the instructor shows during the lesson, only to “lose it” almost immediately? That too can change. When your brain learns to more precisely monitor movement, the internal sensation of the new learning can be retained and applied.

How is this awareness taught? Awareness Through Movement® lessons make use of attention to the sensation of gentle, novel, playful movements. Most are done lying on a comfortable floor so there is no concern of falling, tipping over, looking silly, drowning or other unpleasant results of mistakes. Experimentation and mistakes are actually encouraged as an important part of the learning experience. A lesson might work with a simple movement of reaching out with a leg and sensing the connection of this movement into your pelvis and lengthening of the side of your waist and ribs. The clear sensation of this simple combination of movements helps a cross country skier balance on one ski; a paddler balance her boat; and can reduce strain in the knees in walking and running.

Movements can be specifically chosen to match a particular activity, simulating skills such as rolling a canoe or kayak, or walking or running. Or lessons can be more general: addressing basics such as relaxed breathing, differentiating movements in the spine, (feet, shoulder girdle, pelvis or other areas of the body that are unfamiliar), balance, and coordination of eye movements with head, neck and spine.
Individual lessons are especially useful if there is injury or if what is needed is to develop awareness of a movement pattern or body region that is quite inaccessible to your awareness. If you have ever been told to do something in order to alter technique and no matter how it was described or demonstrated it made no sense, this was probably because the movement or body area involved is not available in your self-awareness.

Many people do not have adequate awareness of the ribs, upper back and chest. They therefore inadequately use the potential of this area for movement resulting in balance problems, excessive use and strain in the shoulders, neck, lower back, and knees. The same holds true for the hip joints and pelvis. These are large joints with powerful muscles that often could be used to great advantage if the recreational athlete has a clear sensory knowledge of the multitude of movement combinations possible. The key word here is sensory.

Feldenkrais lessons use unusual movement combinations and sequences to clarify unfamiliar, non-habitual possibilities. Improvement in your favorite recreational activities can occur once these possibilities are acknowledged by your brain. You will automatically use the more efficient, easier way once the option is known.

As a recreational cross country skier I had an experience of decreasing fatigue in my lower leg while I was skiing! This was possible because I had been doing Awareness Through Movement regularly and was able to sense that my body weight was on the inner border of the foot as I glided on one ski. The other foot and ski was flatter. By moving my attention upward, I learned that I was balancing more easily on one ski than the other because my hip, waist, and ribs were lengthening more easily on the more balanced ski. This discovery made my day of gliding through the woods much more enjoyable. This piece of learning was exciting because it was discovered by independently sensing a basic technique error – no coach required.

The beauty of this method of improvement is that the awareness gained applies to everything you do – even sitting in the car on the way to have fun. Learn to learn from internal sensation that you will retain instead of by visual imitation that is more quickly forgotten. Learn to imagine movement so that you can mentally practice the perfect low brace or cross stroke in your white-water canoe instead of physically practicing your mistakes. While practicing physically, make the most of your time with refined attention to your movement precision.

There are bonuses to using the Feldenkrais Method to aid in your sports performance. The lessons are often as relaxing as a massage, therapeutic for injuries, assist in preventing injury, and are a fun, gentle way to improve flexibility. When you learn to learn about yourself you have the key to continued improvement.

Learning plus improvement equals fun!

– by Ruth Jaeger. Ruth practices in Rhinelander and Woodruff, Wisconsin, where she also assists in coaching the high school cross country ski team that won the state meet last year. Reach her at RJaeger@bfm.org or call at 715.369.7470.
Pins and Needles

What do heads and bowling balls have in common? They're both round and heavy and can offer a wonderful opportunity to learn how to organize body, mind and spirit. When friends visiting recently from Germany asked us to take them bowling, I never imagined that I would take up bowling. In fact, I thought I wouldn't be able to participate. Five years ago, I fell on my head while I was skiing and gradually lost significant function in my right arm. I suffered from chronic pain and took three and a half years to relearn how to write. In spite of my disability, I knew I would have a full recovery someday.

That day came, -- I arrived at the bowling alley and was entertaining the possibility of bowling like a child -- with two hands! I had so much fun that I returned and bowled again. As the week had passed, so did my fear of re-injury. I attempted to bowl right-handed. When my arm hurt, I switched and bowled with my non-habitual left hand and gave hi-fives with my right hand. I doubled my score! The next time I bowled, I discovered I could no longer bowl left-handed. I knew I was doing something that wasn't serving me, but I had no clue what. Things shifted when I turned bowling into an ATM lesson.

I scanned myself and noticed and accepted the elusive obvious that the bowling pins looked blurry even though I was wearing my glasses. As I wondered what Moshe would do, I heard my trainer's words, “Take off your glasses.” Next, I noticed that I held my breath when I threw the ball. I discovered that coordination of breath and movement was critical to my timing when I released the ball and ultimately my success of knocking down the bowling pins. I felt how much I contracted as a reaction to the weight of the ball.

I practiced sensing how the ball was a part of me, rather than just a heavy object that I had to contend with in order to be successful. The more I imagined that I was one with the ball, the more deeply I felt how I was misusing my self. I noticed how I was contracting in my belly and upper ribs and stiffening my head, neck and jaw. I noticed when I released the ball that I was looking at the floor below me rather than at the pins. When I adjusted my head and kept my eyes on the ball, I slowed down, focused, and threw spares and strikes instead of gutter balls. In a few short months, bowling has evolved from a recreation to a practice. It has improved my awareness of my habit of holding in my belly and tucking in my pelvis when I lift and carry weight in other daily activities such as gardening and my Feldenkrais practice. Now, I imagine that I am one with the “obstacle,” let my belly go and enjoy what I am doing.

-- by Elise Cheval. Elise was an immunochemist until she had a skiing accident and gradually lost function of her arm. After she was examined by a physician who practiced Feldenkrais Method, she knew she had found her life work. She became a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner™ in May of 1999. She practices in Marin County, California. Reach her at elisecheval@xtreme.net.

The Moving Mind: an interview with Jack Heggie

“If you learn to apply the Feldenkrais Method to sports training, it can easily speed up the learning process by a factor of ten,” says Jack, and he should know, after teaching himself and his many students how to play their game at a much higher level. One of his chief discoveries unearthed the hidden assumption that you can control all of your movements consciously. As he states in his book, Skiing with the Whole Body, “The idea that we can voluntarily control all our movements is a myth, a myth that has been causing those who want to learn to improve performance a tremendous number of problems.” Most of the quick coordinated movements required to play a sport well are actually controlled by a part of the brain, not under direct voluntary control, which he calls the Moving Mind. “The idea that there is a Moving Mind, a semi-autonomous part of the brain that controls most of our movements, is based on the fact that the majority of the nerve impulses arriving at the final common path originate in the evolutionarily old part of the brain,” he says.

The key issue in learning to use the Moving Mind, and thus to learning superior performance, is learning to use your whole body in the most efficient way in every move, and Feldenkrais can provide you with a way to do this. It is Jack's personal and professional experience that leads him to say, “Once the idea of reprogramming the Moving Mind is grasped, however, large improvements may be made very quickly.”

--by Jack Heggie. Jack, a skier for three decades, earned a degree in physics and worked as a computer design engineer, programmer, and field engineer. A Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner for 16 years, he maintains a practice in Boulder, Colorado. Reach him at jackheggie@aol.com or call 303.449.8100. His books, Running with the Whole Body, Skiing with the Whole Body, and audiotapes, “Healthy Back” and “Total Body Golf,” available through the FGNA office.
**Tennis Everyone!**

How would you like to become incredibly coordinated in all movement essential to playing winning tennis? What if you never tightened up on your strokes or felt it hard to bend your knees for those low shots? How about being able to consistently get the power of your whole body into every shot?

Well don’t get too excited, because achieving that level of skill obviously takes time. It takes practice and dedication and love of the game. And some players may never attain it. However, if you’d like to have skills like these, read on! The Feldenkrais Method contains excellent strategies for moving you in the direction of playing your best tennis.

Every time you walk on the tennis court, you carry with you habitual efforts and tensions from your everyday life. These habits may interfere with all of the movements essential to playing your best tennis. For instance one common problem for most recreational tennis players occurs when parts of the body are left out of a stroke.

Research cited by the chairman of the United States Tennis Association Sports Science Committee reports, “The factor in tennis that most limits players success is movement ...in fact, **about 70% of the errors that occur in skilled tennis strokes are not due to stroke mechanics per se but to movement**.” Efficient movement in most tennis strokes involves ground forces that are transferred through the legs, hips, trunk, and arms in a specific time and sequence. When one or more of these parts are left out, a subsequent body part must work harder in order to achieve the same result.

Just imagine a forehand stroke hit with no trunk rotation.

The arm must swing the racket very hard, using much more muscular effort than normal, to generate sufficient racket head speed. This can not only cause unforced errors, but may lead to injury (e.g., tennis elbow or shoulder).

This was a common pattern with many of the more than 50 players referred to me by Scott Borowiak, a respected USPTA tennis teacher in California, with over 30 years experience. He reports that “I have used numerous methods for off court training. If I had to choose the most effective, it would be The Feldenkrais Method applied to tennis. Students whom I have referred to Gil have returned with a better understanding of how to move and swing with much less tension.”

Another USPTA teacher and tournament player, Roger Kahn, reports that, “By working with Gil and The Feldenkrais Method, my posture has evolved to the point where **I no longer cause the chronic discomfort and pain that I suffered most of my adult life. I feel able to glide effortlessly with coordinated and powerful movements.**”

In these and many other cases, the Feldenkrais Method has been used to specifically enable the tennis player to learn to use ground forces for powerful swings; to generate this power from the hips and pelvis; and to smoothly coordinate these forces through the whole body in proper timing and sequence.

– by Gil Kelly. Gil has applied the Feldenkrais Method to helping hundreds of tennis players improve their game since the 1980s through his Whole Body Tennis Program. He has presented to the USPTA annual convention and has been written about in “Inside Tennis” magazine. He can be reached at gil@gateway.net and 303.494.2346.

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