

In 2010 at age 67, I started experiencing injuries that were especially serious and long lasting. First an injury to my left calf lasted for months. Whenever I would run fast for an extended time the calf would tighten and I would end up walking home. After a great deal of stretching every day and building up speed slowly the injury healed. Then, when I was 70, I experienced an Achilles tendon injury in the same leg. Probably both injuries were related to the same tightness in my lower leg. The Achilles tendon injury was different from any other I had experienced in that it lasted for over two years.

The Achilles tendon injury started out as a slight strain and for awhile I ignored it. The injury became steadily worse. Eventually I inserted extra heel lifts in my shoes and started running mainly with a rear foot strike rather than with my regular mid to forward foot strike. I also started running mainly on grass. These steps allowed me to keep my mileage up. But as time went by, the injury became even worse and my training speed lower. I included more walking in my workouts and limited my racing. In 2014 I ran in just one event. Advice that I received concerning treatment suggested that I should use very light massage of my tendon, lower leg, and calf either using my hands or a hand held massaging unit. I think the idea is that light massage will stimulate the tendon to heal without further injuring the tissue. I followed these suggestions and found some relief for awhile. But eventually my tendon became extremely tight. During the same time period the balls of my feet, especially my right foot, became painful at times. By September of 2014, when I was nearly 72, I was starting to think my running days would soon come to an end.

Then a wonderful thing happened. We were visiting our daughter, Laura, and her family in The Netherlands. Laura suggested that I make an appointment with a physical therapist that had helped her. He uses the technique of myofascial release. At my appointment the therapist had me lie face down on his table and then he vigorously massaged my calf, lower leg and my Achilles tendon with his very strong hands. When he got to my Achilles the pain from the massage was very intense. At this point I started to have misgivings about this treatment. I was especially afraid he was going to make the tendon worse. After 20 minutes I was about to tell him to stop when he asked me to stand up on my toes. That is when a minor miracle occurred. My Achilles felt a lot better and I told him so. He said, "Okay let's work on it some more." The more he massaged the better the tendon got. Next we talked about heel lifts. He explained that lifts help only temporally and continued use eventually causes harm. Short term, lifts make the Achilles feel better because they cause the sore tendon to not stretch as much as it normally would during walking or running. But long term, lifts cause a slow shrinking in the tendon's length because it is never stretched to its full extent. This further causes injury to the tendon during running. I asked the therapist if he thought I could run a 6 hour run in Amsterdam that was to occur in a few days. He suggested it would be okay to start and then possibly not run the full 6 hours if my Achilles bothered me too much. He also thought it would be okay to use heel lifts for protection during the run but suggested that I not continue using them after that. A few days later I completed 50K with time to spare and then walked for the remainder of the 6 hours. This was my first race in nearly a year. My tendon had some discomfort during the event and tightened some in the days to follow but all in all it was okay. Luckily the ball of my right foot also only hurt a little probably because the running path was mainly soft. Another appointment with the therapist again relieved the tension and discomfort in my Achilles. During the few weeks that followed our visit to Amsterdam, I found that my Achilles tightened and the ball of my right foot became painful. To relieve the discomfort I began vigorously massaging my lower left leg and Achilles tendon and the ball of my right foot a couple of times a week. My Achilles responded each time I did the massage but did not completely get better until I started massaging it every day. Now I massage both tendons every day as a preventative measure. When I first started vigorous self-massage my Achilles would have discomfort

at the beginning of each massage session. By the end of the session the tendon would feel considerable better. After about 3 months of daily massage the Achilles did not have discomfort at any time when I was massaging it or when I was running. This is when I felt it was all better.

I also tried massaging the sore ball of my right foot. It did not respond until I also started stretching it in a certain way. To stretch the bottom of my right foot, I put the tips of my fingers of both my hands under the toes of this foot and my thumbs on the tops of the two toes next to my big toe. The thumbs are positioned where the knuckles of the two toes stick up a little. Holding my toes in this way, I pull them upward and back in the direction of my leg thereby stretching the muscles in the ball of my foot. I hold the stretch for about 30 seconds and then I rest and repeat once. I started stretching my foot in this way when it was very sore. I did it every day and the ball of my foot got better and better. After a month my foot was considerably better. After two months I was able to run with no discomfort. I still stretch and massage both balls of my feet almost every day as a protective measure.

It has been about a year since my recovery. During this year my workouts were increasingly more vigorous as I got in better and better shape. As my body adjusted to this increasing work load, I occasionally experienced tightness to a hip, hamstring, knee and groin. These were all relieved by self-massage. Self-massage even cured a shin splint in the matter of a few days. I am again running with a mid to forward foot strike and this helps to stretch out my Achilles tendons and to keep them healthy. I am convinced that had I not been introduced to vigorous massage and discovered self-massage I would not be running nearly as well as I am now and possibly I would not be running at all.

If you have a serious or chronic problem you should consider seeing a physical therapist or massage therapist who uses myofascial release as I did. Also consider self-massage of the area and surrounding area as follow-up.