

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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MONTREAL

Where circus culture hangs its marquee

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon
GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

If you want to run off to join the circus, you don't have to go very far. Montreal has become the circus capital of North America, and right now, circus season is getting into high gear.

We're not talking about the jugglers, fire-eaters, and clowns on unicycles you are likely to encounter on Place Jacques-Cartier or Place des Arts on a balmy summer evening. The founders of Cirque du Soleil may have started out 30 years ago as stilt walkers and street performers, but they became famous as proponents of the "new circus." This arty brew infuses the great clowning and acrobatics traditions with theater, music, dance, and sheer New Age spectacle. It struck a chord with a generation of Quebecois. The artistic and financial success of Cirque du Soleil spawned an industry. Suddenly the young acrobat had a future that didn't involve teaching gym.

The epicenter of Montreal circus culture is the TOHU campus on the outskirts of the city, where Cirque du Soleil established its international headquarters in 2000. Nearby is the National Circus School (École nationale de cirque), which was founded in 1981, moved into a new building next to Cirque du Soleil in 2003, and had to expand in 2009. The TOHU Pavilion, with Canada's only high-tech circular performance space, has

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DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

An end-of-the-year performance by students at TOHU Pavilion.



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

ChiRunning: a technique made for the dedicated (and injured, thus recovering, then reinjured) runner that focuses on natural body alignment and gravity

BY KARI BODNARCHUK
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

TOFINO, British Columbia — Angela James started running at age 40 and completed her first marathon that same year. She tackled two more marathons and soon developed Achilles tendonitis, a classic running injury that repeatedly flared over the next decade.

"It really took me out of the game when it hit, and then it became chronic," said James, now 58.

Ten years after that first marathon she discovered ChiRunning. The new style helped her fully recover from her injuries and develop better running form, and it taught her that "it's not the running that causes injuries, it's the way we use our bodies," she said.

James learned the technique from Danny Dreyer, an ultramarathoner and running coach from Ashville, N.C., who developed ChiRunning in 1999 as a way to help reduce and prevent injuries (he suffered from bad knees) and make running more fun. He drew inspiration from a tai chi class, and incorporated his own ideas on body mechanics. The result: a technique that places emphasis on good body alignment, engaging the core, and using gravity rather than leg strength to propel the runner forward.

"People over-rely on their legs for propulsion, which causes inefficiencies and injury," Dreyer told me recently. "What kids have right is that they really trust gravity. They run by falling forward and letting their body get ahead of their

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Runners on Mackenzie Beach at a ChiRunning retreat on Vancouver Island. Above, Angela James, a certified ChiRunning instructor, videotapes participants.

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Lexington, Ky., mixes its history with its cuisine in old spaces.

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Anguilla's beaches, food, music, star tourists are all low-key.

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Naumkeag (left) and its Stockbridge past.

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Burlington, Vt., cooking up a big rep.

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Inspired by tai chi to ‘run like a kid again’

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feet. As people get older, and farther from the ground, they make the decision to run upright. That’s where the wheels come off. Your center of mass is directly over your feet and you’re working against gravity.

“I’m here to teach people how to run like a kid again,” said Dreyer, 64, who will teach a ChiRunning clinic at Kripalu in Stockbridge, May 26-30.

The technique took off after Dreyer published his first book in 2004, “ChiRunning: A Revolutionary Approach to Effortless, Injury-free Running.” About 200 instructors now teach ChiRunning in more than 30 countries, and the practice has gained a lot of popularity in North America, Australia, and Europe, and parts of Asia. (Massachusetts has about five instructors from Lawrence to North Adams.)

“I tried teaching myself,” said James, “but it wasn’t until I took a workshop with Danny and had feedback and video analysis that I really started to get it, to understand what it feels like in my body.”

Now people come to her to learn how to run injury- and pain-free. James, a certified senior ChiRunning and ChiWalking instructor, teaches half- and full-day clinics near her home in Vancouver and offers running retreats on nearby Vancouver and Salt Spring islands and in Italy.

Eighteen of us attended her ChiRunning retreat in Tofino on Vancouver Island’s west coast last spring. The weekend getaway included instruction for all levels of runners, although a majority of us were beginners or people embracing the sport again after years of injuries, frustration, or lost interest.

“The whole point of ChiRunning is to enhance the joy of running and prevent injury,” said James, who has completed an IRONMAN race and marathons worldwide, and coached for Team in Training.

The Tofino retreat runs from Friday night to midday Sunday, and includes a full explanation of the ChiRunning technique, video analysis, individual feedback, a mix of back-road and beach running, healthy food, and comfortable accommodations at Middle Beach Lodge. The cedar lodge sits on a rocky headland overlooking the ocean in an area known for its pristine beaches and dramatic weather (it’s the first stop for storms that rip across the Pacific Ocean from Asia).

Most participants stayed in individual rooms in the resort’s beachside lodge, but my husband and two children came along for the weekend, so we rented one of the lodge’s two-room cabins with a kitchenette and deck that overlooked the ocean and a barrier island. While I attended the workshop during the day, my family explored the wide, sandy beaches looking for critters in the tide pools, wandered along coastal hiking paths, and drove to the new aquarium in nearby Ucluelet.

As rain and wind battered the coast our first morning, we hung out by a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace inside the toasty



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Runners on a beach in Tofino, along with ChiRunning instructor Angela James. Sometimes they run barefoot (below) and go back to examine the imprint left by their form.

lodge while James ran through the fundamentals of ChiRunning, starting with the importance of body alignment.

“Imagine you have a column running from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet, and you rotate around that central axis,” she said. “You want to align your ears over your hips, shoulders, and ankles. When you’re not in good alignment, your muscles and ligaments have to work harder to support you, and you’re more prone to injury.”

She had us practice standing tall, reaching our heads toward the sky, and tweaking our body position to attain the right posture.

“Your shoulders are like the headlamps on a car,” she said. “They just keep pointing forward — no movement.”

Then she taught us how to fall.

“The main difference between power running and ChiRunning is that we engage gravity,” she said. “With ChiRunning, you lean forward and allow gravity to pull you along, rather than using your legs to power you forward.”

James made us stand facing large wooden columns and



practice keeping a straight stance and then falling forward at the ankles, putting our hands out to catch ourselves.

“You’ll learn to find that sweet spot,” she said.

When the rain subsided, we followed a small dirt path down to Middle Beach, a wide, sprawling beach backed by enormous hemlock and yellow cedar trees that overlooked the Pacific and several small islands in Clayoquot Sound. We lined up side-by-side, with eyes fixed on a headland in the distance, and practiced the technique.

“Stand tall, keep your feet parallel, and fall forward from the ankles,” she reminded us. “You want to engage your core, but keep your legs and upper

body loose. Relaxation is as important as alignment.”

The technique felt awkward at first, and several of us had to work hard on not hunching over or pushing off with our feet. Some took off their shoes and ran barefoot across the cool, damp sand.

“It’s like you’re sneaking up on someone,” said Liana McLellan from Calgary, Alberta.

“That’s exactly right, you’re very soft on your feet,” said James. “The cool thing about learning on a beach is that we can analyze our footprints in the sand to see if they’re ‘clean.’ You don’t want to displace the sand.”

James had us do a few laps using a metronome, a device that helps runners keep a con-

IF YOU GO . . .

Angela James

604-351-1140

www.angelajames.com

Runs half- and one-day clinics in Vancouver and retreats on Vancouver and Salt Spring islands. Or attend a retreat on a 12th-century organic farm in Tuscany, Italy, Sept. 22-29.

Danny Dreyer

866-327-7867

www.chirunning.com

ChiRunning founder and author runs workshops and clinics worldwide. Find New England instructors through website.

Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health

Stockbridge

866-200-5203

www.kripalu.org

ChiRunning Intensive: Run with Ease and Fluidity, taught by Danny Dreyer, May 26-30; \$425 for class, lodging from \$344 (dormitory-style) and \$452 (standard room) for four nights.

Middle Beach Lodge

Tofino, British Columbia

866-725-2900

www.middlebeach.com

Retreat includes accommodations in beachside lodge and meals. Rates for cabins start at \$165.

sistent cadence.

“The body loves rhythm,” said James, setting the metronome for a waltz-like cadence. “The less contact your feet have with the ground, the less chance of injury.”

Then she used her iPad and videotaped us running, so we had a visual when she later gave us individual feedback.

“Heels up, toes down,” she reminded us, as we took turns running in wide circles around her.

That afternoon, after instruction ended, some people headed into Tofino to visit the First Nations gallery or poke around boutiques, whereas others went for a longer run, to practice yoga on the beach, or to nap. I hiked down to the

shore with my family, watching my daughter collect banana slugs along the way.

We regrouped at the main lodge for dinner and storytelling. McLellan, a dental hygienist from Calgary, told me she had been a runner on and off for about 30 years.

“I have had back problems for a long time, mainly due to practicing dental hygiene for many years, and running has sometimes made that worse,” she said. “I first had problems with shin splints about five years ago and had to take many months off from running because of that.”

Recently when I talked with her, she said, “I am just getting back into running and I do find the chi technique to be very comfortable and that it helps prevent injuries. I haven’t had shin splints and my lower back feels better.”

We spent the next morning reviewing the basics of ChiRunning, and learned how to apply the technique on hills. James showed us how to really pump our arms as the grade increased, and how to sidestep on super steep areas. We spent the rest of the afternoon on nearby Mackenzie Beach, running along the shore and learning to speed up and slow down depending on how far forward we leaned.

“The principles you learn in ChiRunning can definitely be applied in other areas of your life,” James later said. “I feel calmer and more centered, and I’ve learned to go with the flow more rather than pushing all the time.”

“The most important thing is to just relax and have fun — that’s what it’s all about.”

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ANGELA JAMES, *certified ChiRunning instructor*