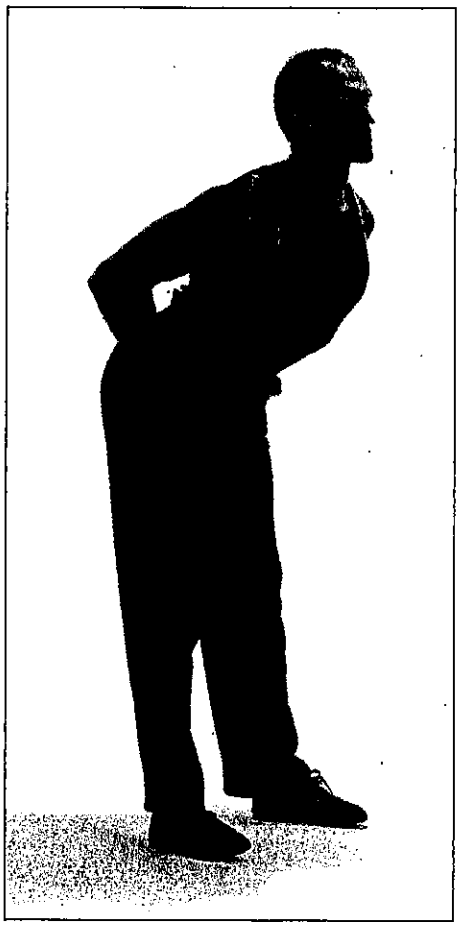
17. The Good Morning Hamstring Stretch

Bending forward with a barbell on your shoulders is one of the key exercises in weightlifting and powerlifting. For some mysterious reason, it is called 'a good morning'. As my friend and powerlifting champion, Marty Gallagher, has wondered: "Why does such a manly drill have such a 'hearts and flowers' name?"

This stretch closely mimics the Barbell Good Morning which makes it the first choice for an iron rat's hamstrings.

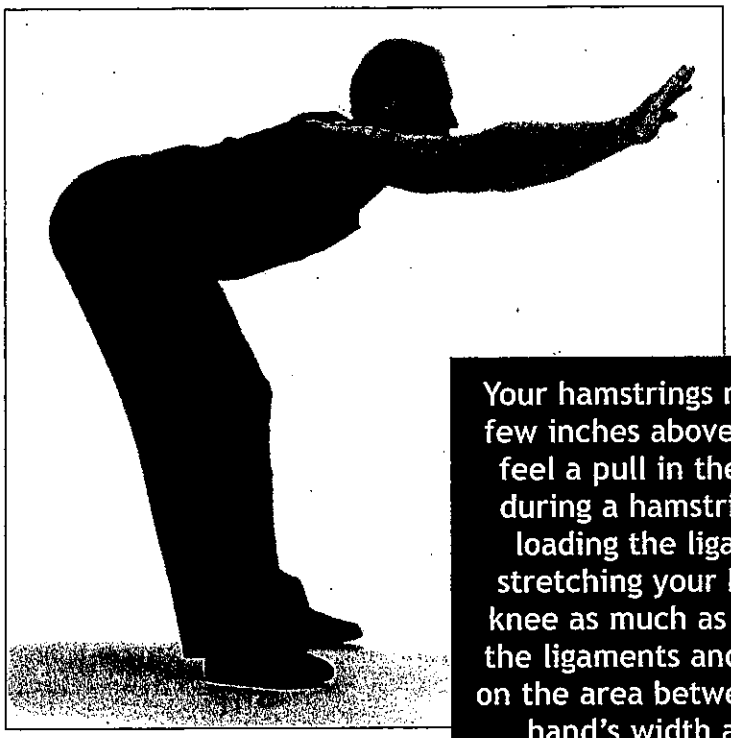
Even if you do not lift anything heavier than your laptop, make this your first hammy stretch because it will finally teach you the difference between stretching your back and stretching your hamstrings. Few comrades get the difference, hence many overstretched backs and overly tight hams.



Stand normally, your feet shoulder width apart and pointing forward. Start by placing the edges of your hands into the creases on top of your thighs. I learned this neat trick from a friend of my wife's, dance instructor Kathy Foss Bakkum. Press your hands hard into your 'hinges' and stick your butt out while keeping your weight on your heels. Your knees should be slightly bent.

Keep your chest open, your lower back arched, and your chin pointed forward throughout this and other hamstring stretches! If you do not, your hammies will remain forever tight.

As you are folding, you will feel a pull right underneath your butt—or a hand's width above your knees. If you do not—read the manual again! Once you have understood what a hamstring stretch is supposed to feel like, reach your arms forward for balance and finally get to work!



Your hamstrings meet their tendons a few inches above your knees. If you feel a pull in the back of your knee during a hamstring stretch, you are loading the ligaments rather than stretching your hammies. Bend the knee as much as necessary to unload the ligaments and refocus the stretch on the area between your glutes and a hand's width above your knees.

Flex the spots where you feel the pull. At the same time squeeze your butt and imagine that you are trying to paw the ground with your heels or push your heels through the floor.

When you release the tension your body will fold like a jackknife. Appreciate the difference between folding like a jackknife and bending forward!

Naturally, you cannot completely relax with the Good Morning stretch because your back must stay straight and your chin up.

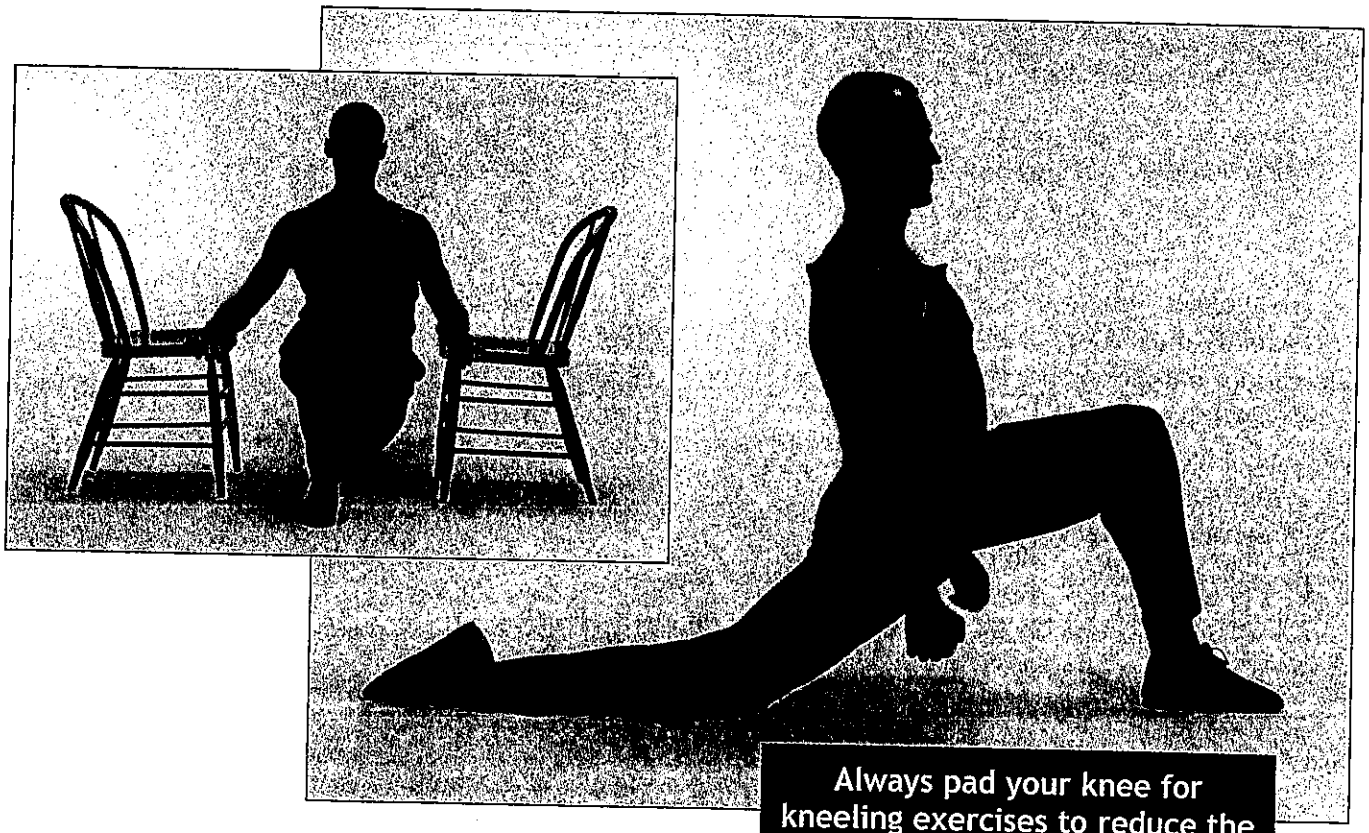
After this relative relaxation increase the stretch even more by sticking your butt even further back and, if you know how, contracting your hip flexors—the muscles in the front hinges you have pushed against with your hands. It does not hurt to have a spotter in case you overbalance and keel over. Holding on to something for balance and/or having a wall behind you to break the fall, is another option

18. The Kneeling Hip Flexor Stretch

Tight hip flexors are the culprit behind bad backs, monkey butts, and athletic mediocrity.

The hip flexors are your glutes' antagonists. When the hip flexors are tight, they do not allow the glutes—which are the strongest muscles in your body—to exert themselves efficiently, be it in running, jumping, punching, or any other activity.

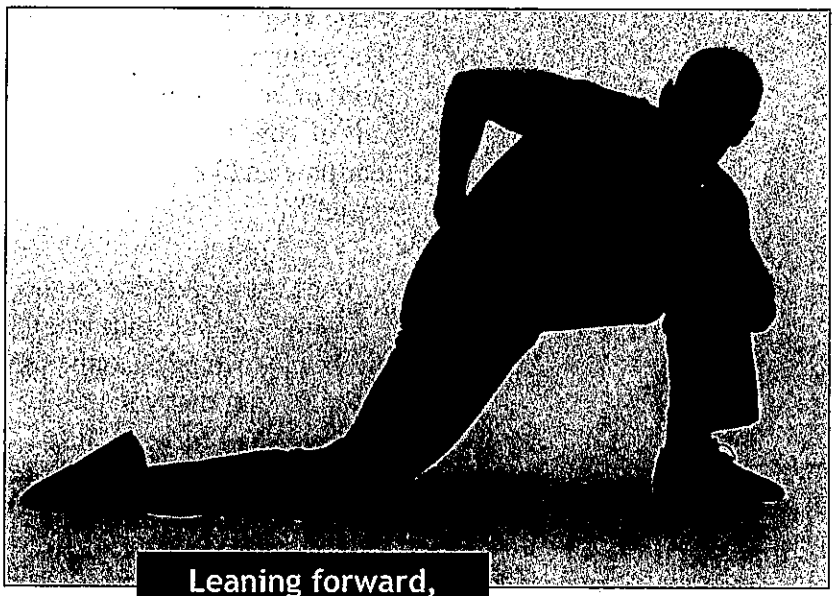
Kneel on the floor and lunge forward. Your torso and the front shin should remain upright for the duration of the stretch and your hips should stay squared off. You may spot yourself with chairs if you wish.



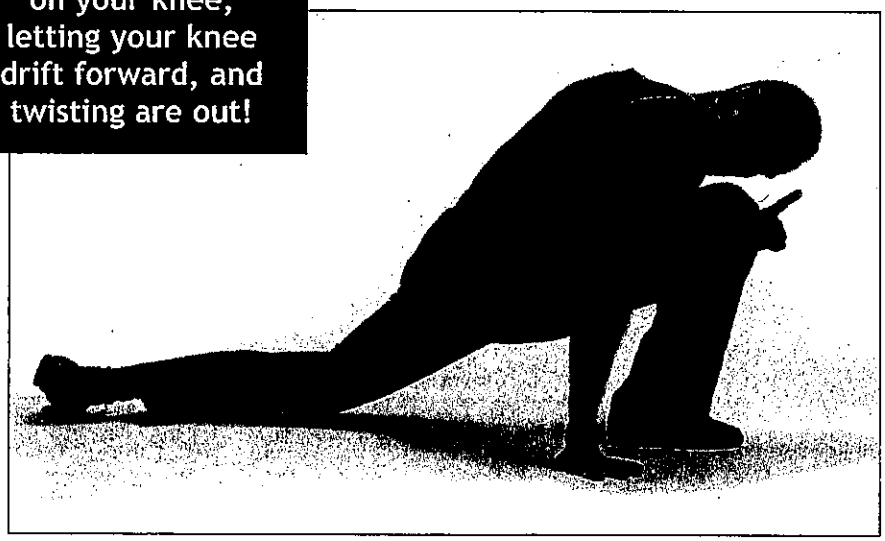
Always pad your knee for kneeling exercises to reduce the risk of cartilage damage and other problems.

Flex your abs to protect your back and contract the hip flexors—the muscles on the front of the kneeling leg—by imagining that you are going to kick forward with that foot or knee.

Once you release the tension, you will sag straight down. It is imperative for success and safety. Leaning forward, placing your hands on your knee, letting your knee drift forward, and twisting are out! Make a point of looking out and not down because your body tends to follow your head.

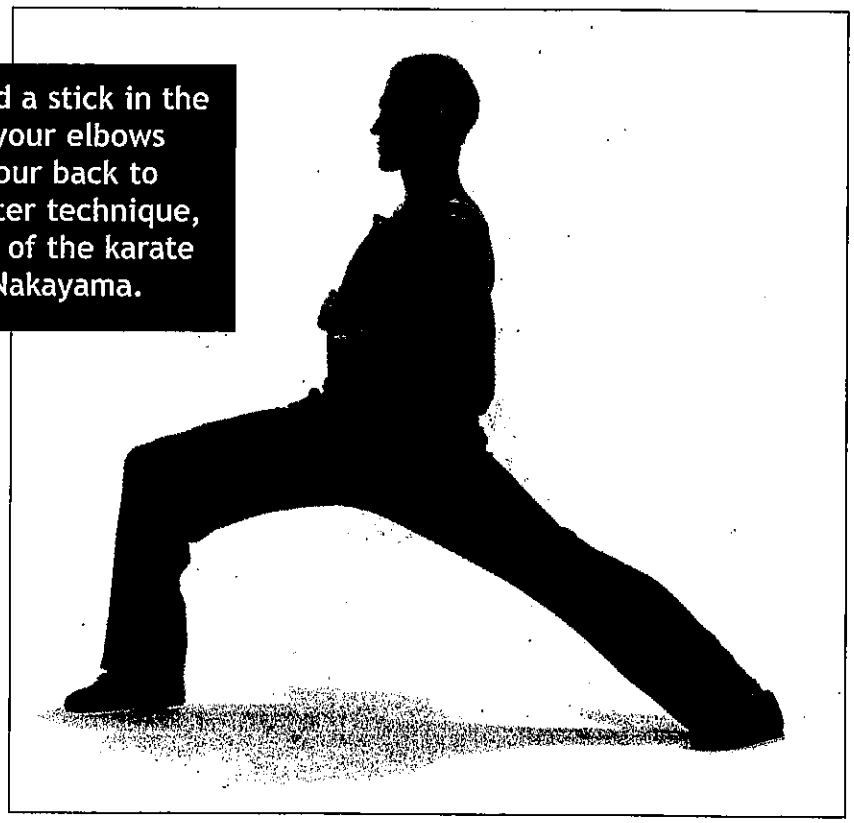


Leaning forward, placing your hands on your knee, letting your knee drift forward, and twisting are out!



20. The Karate Stance Hip Flexor Stretch

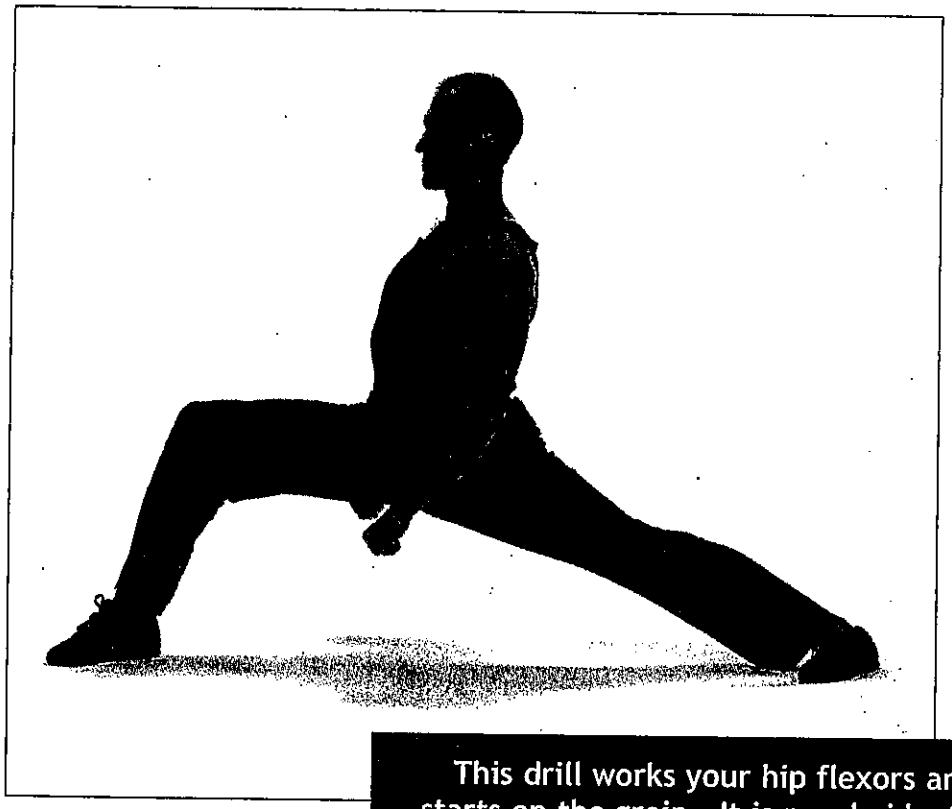
Stretch as you did previously: apply forward pressure with the rear leg, then propel yourself forward with the same leg. Now, you will feel the stretch not only at the hip hinge but also in the groin. To be safe, make certain that your back knee is locked and the muscles surrounding it are contracted.



You may hold a stick in the crook of your elbows behind your back to enforce better technique, an old trick of the karate legend Nakayama.

Your rear foot should maintain a surface contact with hundred percent of its surface. Unfortunately, at an extreme angle, this drill becomes hard on the ankle. That is why you should advance to a different stretch, for example, the intermediate groin stretch, before you reach that level. A possible exception is a karateka who makes an informed choice to keep on advancing in this highly karate-specific stretch, in spite of possible health risks.

Do not think that these drills benefit only karatekas, however. I teach this and the following stretch to powerlifters who have a hard time locking out their deadlifts and I cannot think of a sport where they would not be helpful.



This drill works your hip flexors and starts on the groin. It is nearly identical to the previous stretch.
The only difference is that while the feet are still facing in the same direction, they are turned a little less than forty-five degrees to the side.
If your right foot is forward as in the photo above, both of your paws will be pointed a little to the left and parallel to each other.

21. The Karate Stance Groin Stretch

Always lock your knees and keep your quads tight when performing groin stretches!

This drill, although it targets the groin muscles, also works your hip flexors.

This time keep your feet flat and parallel to each other. The knees stay tightly locked for the duration. Relaxed knees are prone to getting wrenched!

Do not be aggressive on the width of the stance. Make sure that your pelvis is thrust forward. If your butt wants to stick out even when your feet are close together, work on the previous two stretches a while longer.

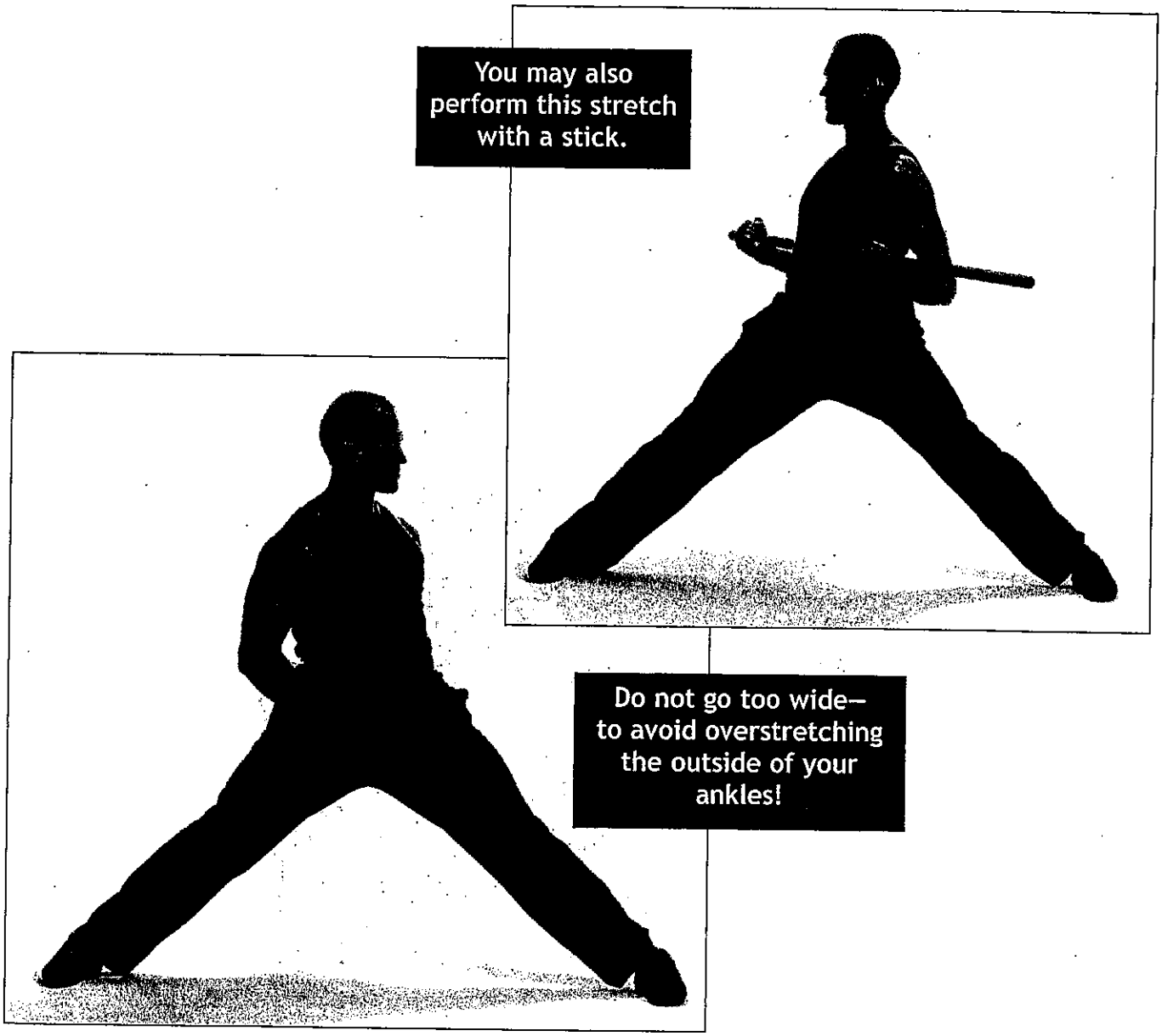
You may also perform this stretch with a stick. Pinch the floor as if you are trying to slide your feet together or are trying to close scissors.

When you have released the tension, apply the outward pressure with your feet (as if you are opening scissors). At no point should your feet roll in or out; keep your 'suction cups' flat on the ground!

As you apply the outward pressure, slowly turn your hips in one direction, and then another. At no point should your butt stick out! You should have a solid, grounded, powerful feeling and your torso will remain upright.

After a few repetitions carefully take a wider step and repeat the drill. I repeat, do not go too wide—to avoid overstretching the outside of your ankles!

Once you have progressed to what you believe is your safe limit, it is a good idea to periodically practice all the karate stance stretches in the maintenance mode—for the powerful body awareness effect they offer for any sport. Perhaps you could do one set of these stretches before your splits.

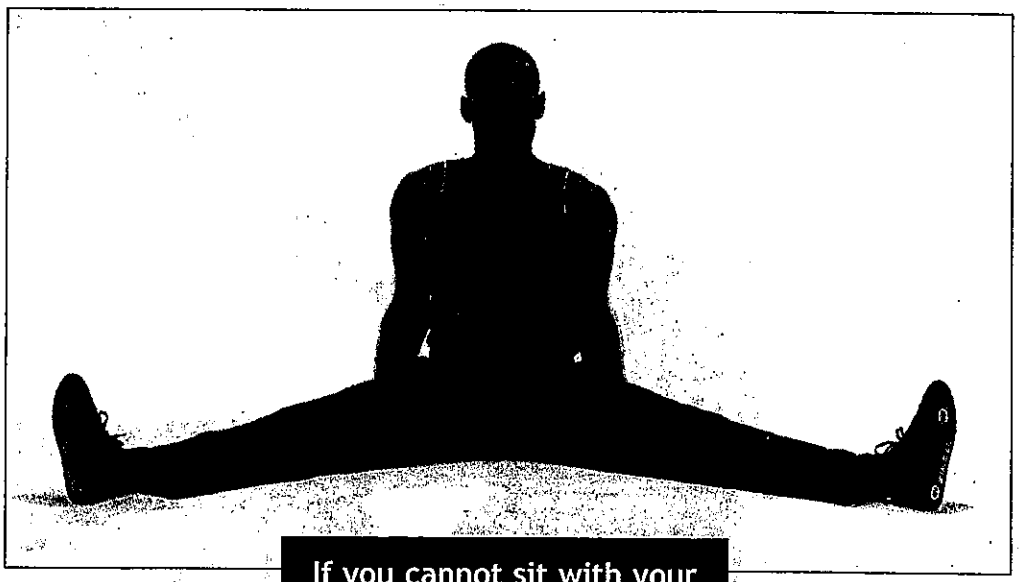


22. The Seated Groin Stretch

Sit on the floor and place something moderately slippery under your feet. If you exercise on a carpet, glossy magazine covers work well. Thick socks are good on a vinyl mat, and you cannot do better than folded wash clothes for hardwood. Skateboards are to be avoided.

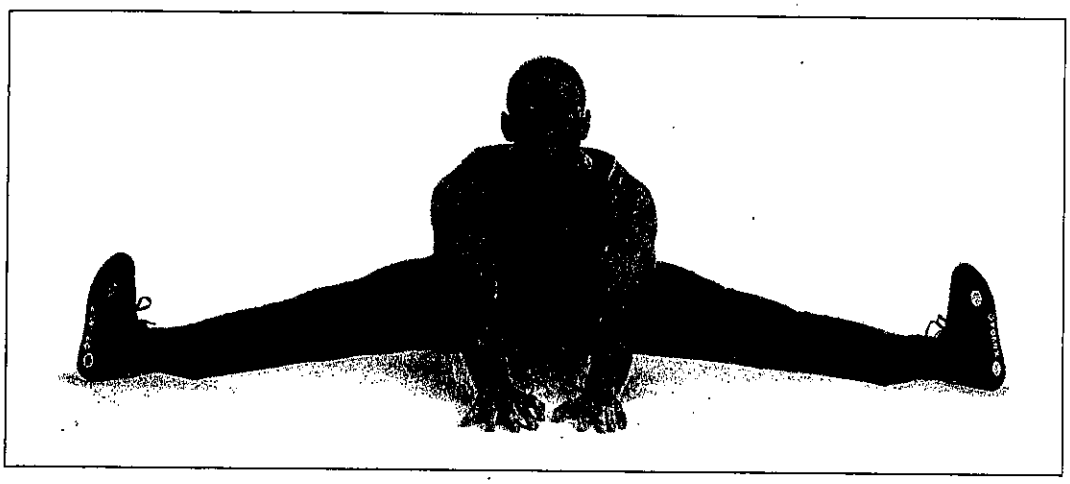
Spread your legs as wide as you comfortably can (don't worry, comfort will end very soon). If you cannot sit with your legs straight and spread and your back insists on staying rounded you are not ready for this drill! Work on your good mornings and karate stretches for awhile before tackling this one.

Place your hands behind your back and gently lift yourself up. Open your chest as much as possible and imagine that you are trying to push the walls apart with your feet. This imagery—recommended by Moscow hand-to-hand combat instructor Vlad Fadeyev—will enable you to immediately increase your stretch by a couple of inches!



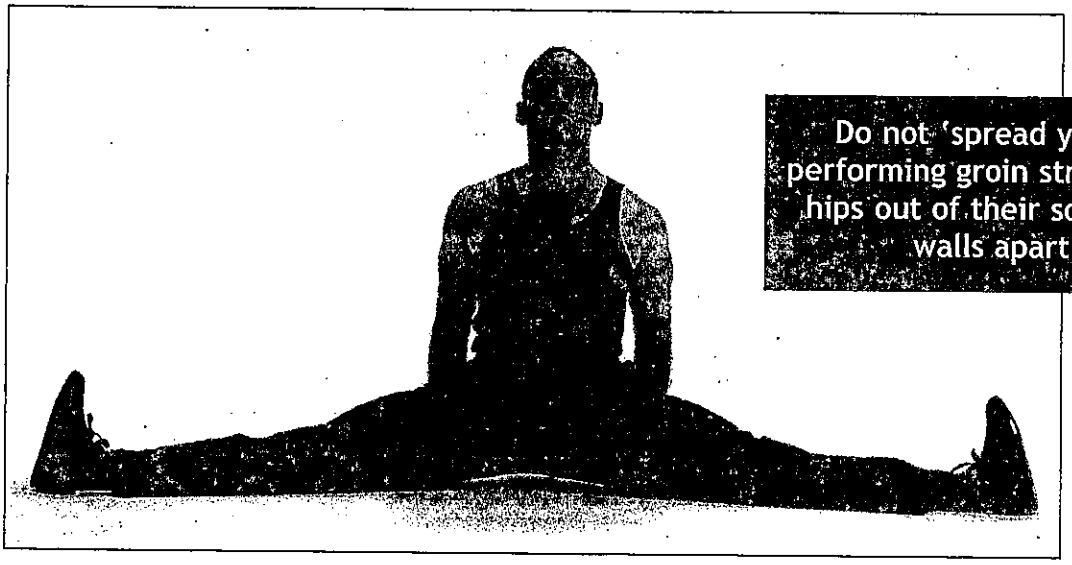
If you cannot sit with your legs straight and spread and your back insists on staying rounded you are not ready for this drill!

When the walls refuse to move any further, gingerly lower your butt to the floor. Keeping your chest up, carefully push your belly forward until you feel tension in your inner thighs. Do not round your back. Keep your hands in front of you, but do not touch the ground unless you are heading for trouble and need a spot. Make sure that your toes are pointing to the ceiling and do not flop outward, now or at any point during this stretch!



Contract your tight inner thighs. If you have a hard time getting your adductors to tense up, you have either found some sneaky way of keeping the weight off them (knock it off, before I order you to do pushups!), or you are not ready for this stretch yet. If you cannot spread your legs far enough apart to start with, you will not generate enough leverage. Swallow your pride and go back to the karate stretches.

Hold the tension for a period of time determined by the variation of the contract-relax stretching you are employing. I personally prefer Forced Relaxation and a roughly twenty-second contraction for this stretch.



Do not 'spread your legs' when performing groin stretches; 'pull your hips out of their sockets' 'push the walls apart' instead.

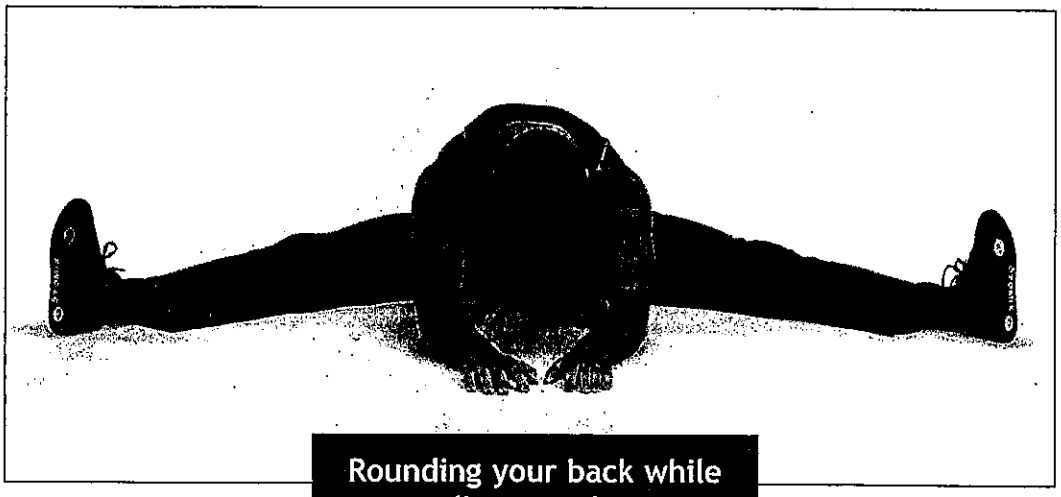
When you finally release the tension with a sigh of relief your limp body will drop forward a little. Your hands may now touch the floor and catch your weight. It is good to use your hands to limit your advance to small increments for increased safety. Be certain to keep your lower back reasonably straight throughout the stretch to increase the effectiveness of the drill and to avoid overstretching the back ligaments!

Flex your adductors again and repeat the drill. You may experience slight pain inside your knees. If you have done everything like I told you and you doctor has assured you that there is nothing wrong with your knees, here is what you should do. Concentrate the tension on the tender spots and hold it for long periods of time, 30-60 seconds, before releasing.

Do not attempt to increase the ROM for a while—weeks or even months. Keep on practicing long contractions without stretching advances, until the tissues around your knees get stronger and stop bothering you.

If, or once, your knees are fine, keep on contracting and relaxing, until your trunk either does not move any further forward without excessive rounding, or the whole thing gets really old. Now it is time to carefully sit up, shift your weight on your hands behind you, and push the walls apart again. Then lean forward and repeat the whole sequence. Once your ROM stops increasing or you start contemplating my murder, slowly get out of the stretch.

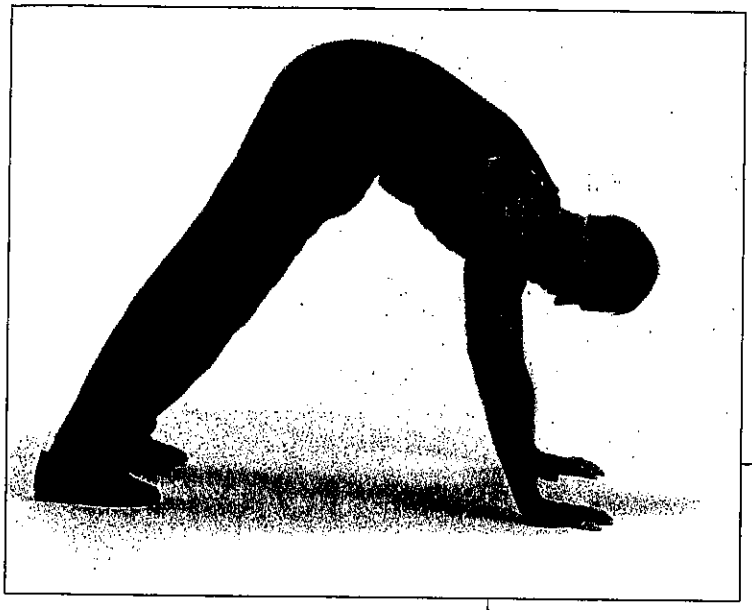
You may want to do a set or two in Waiting out the Tension style, before starting your isometric stretching sets.



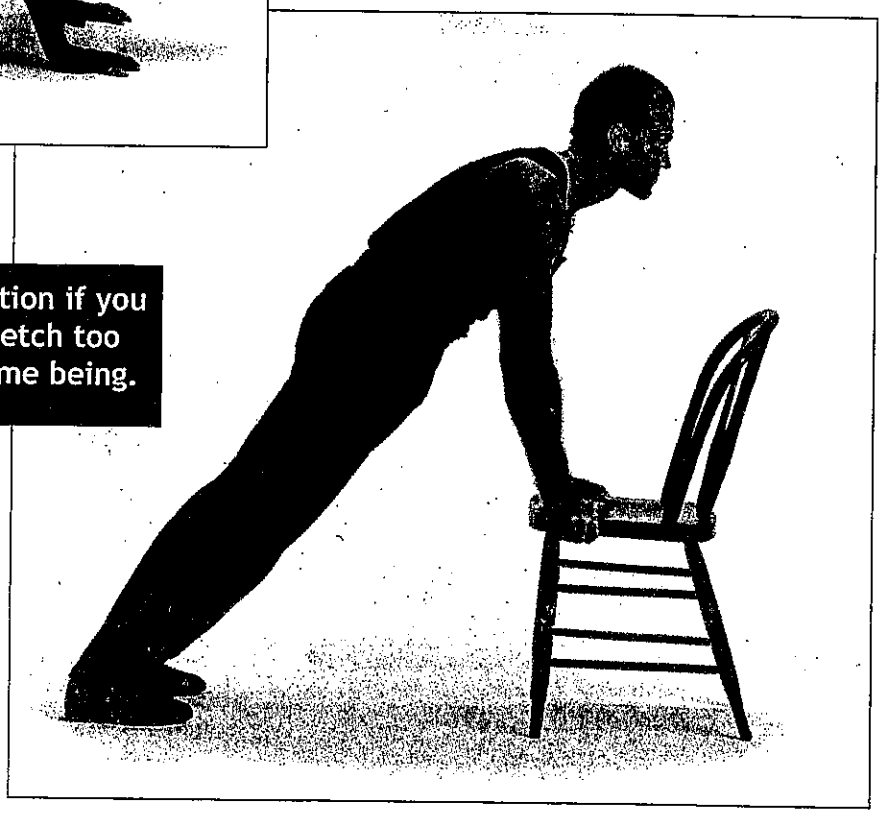
Rounding your back while spreading your legs can damage back and pelvic ligaments.

23. The Calf Stretch

Assume the pushup position on the floor—or against a sturdy elevation if you find the floor stretch too difficult for the time being. Shift your weight to the balls of your feet. Your knees may be slightly bent.

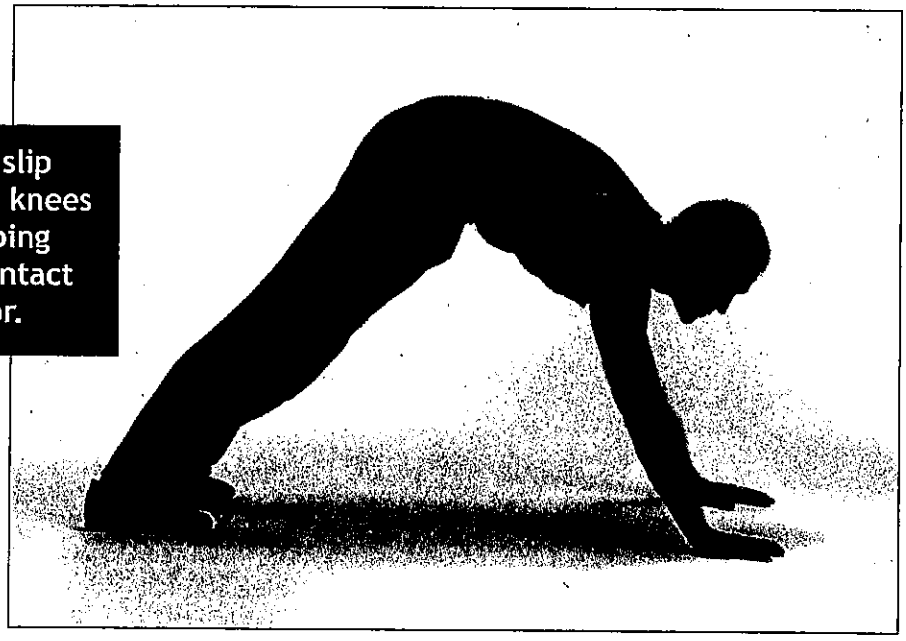


Tighten up your calves by imagining that you are trying to get up on your tiptoes. Hold steady tension for a long time—calves boast spectacular endurance—before releasing it.



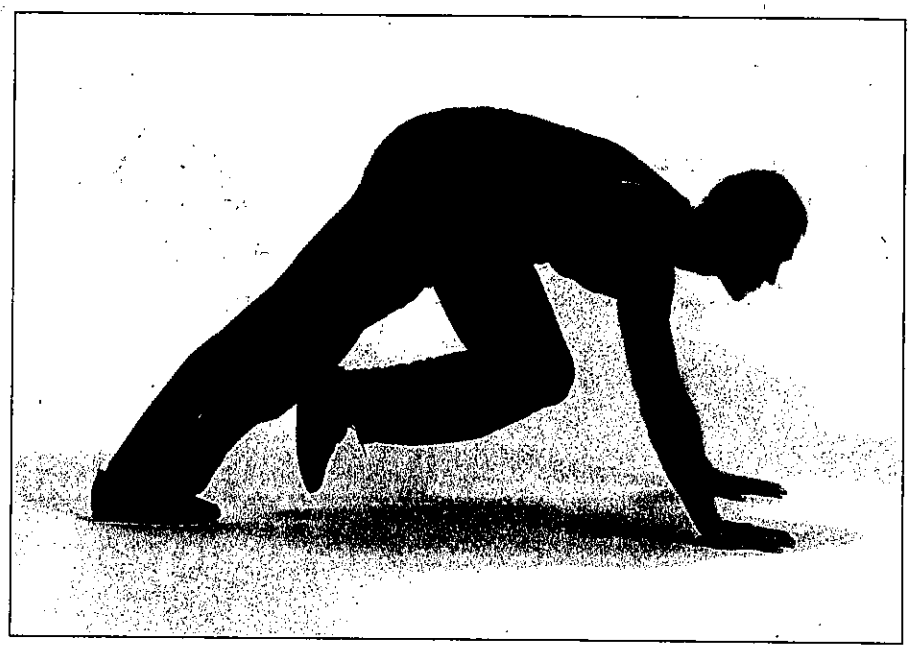
Use a sturdy elevation if you find the floor stretch too difficult for the time being.

Let your body slip forward from the knees up, while keeping your heels in contact with the floor. The angle between your shins and your feet will get smaller. Repeat for the appropriate number of contractions.



Let your body slip forward from the knees up, while keeping your heels in contact with the floor.

Once your calves are strong and flexible you may intensify the stretch by working one leg at a time.



24. The Shin and Instep Stretch

Are the muscles on your shins tight from running? Do you want to be able to point your toes better for kickboxing or dancing? Then this foot-flexion stretch is for you.

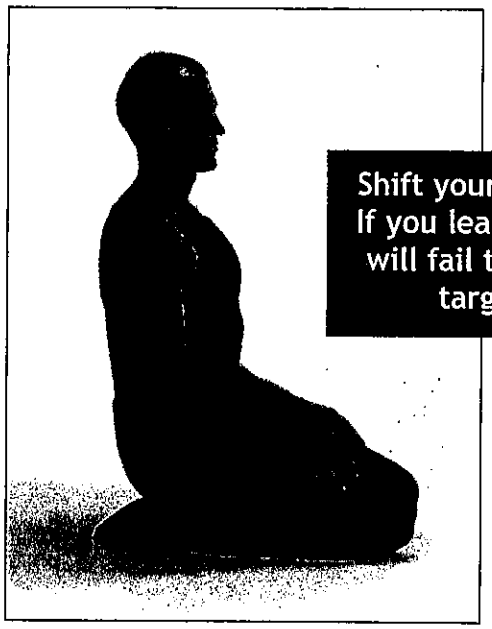
Sit on your heels with your toes pointed back. If your knees refuse to hyperflex painlessly, stick a stiff pillow or something similar between your hamstrings and your calves, to limit knee bending.

Shift your weight back. If you lean forward you will fail to stretch the target area. Contract the muscles on your shins by pushing with your insteps against the floor, as if you are trying to bring your toes towards your knees.

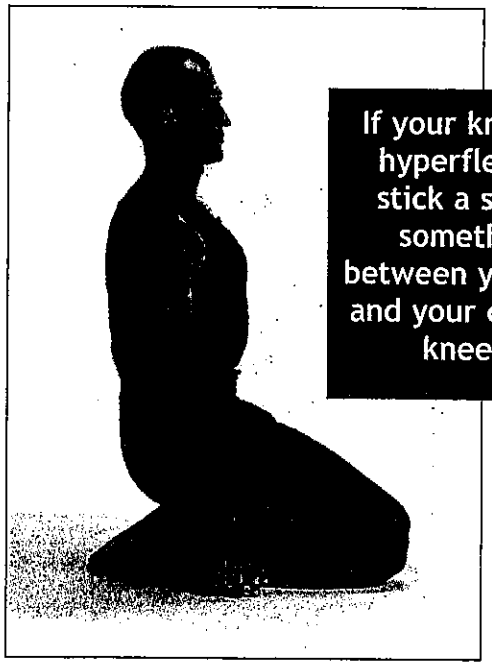
When you release the tension, your body will sink a little, as your feet move toward being in a straight line with your shins.

Now point your toes even more—as if someone is pulling you by your toes and is trying to pull your ankles out of their sockets.

Repeat the whole sequence as many times as necessary.



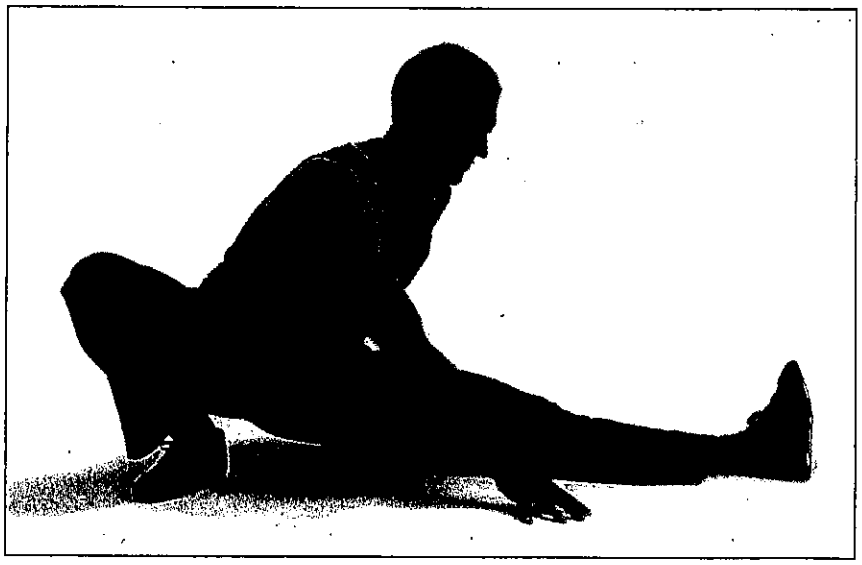
Shift your weight back. If you lean forward you will fail to stretch the target area.



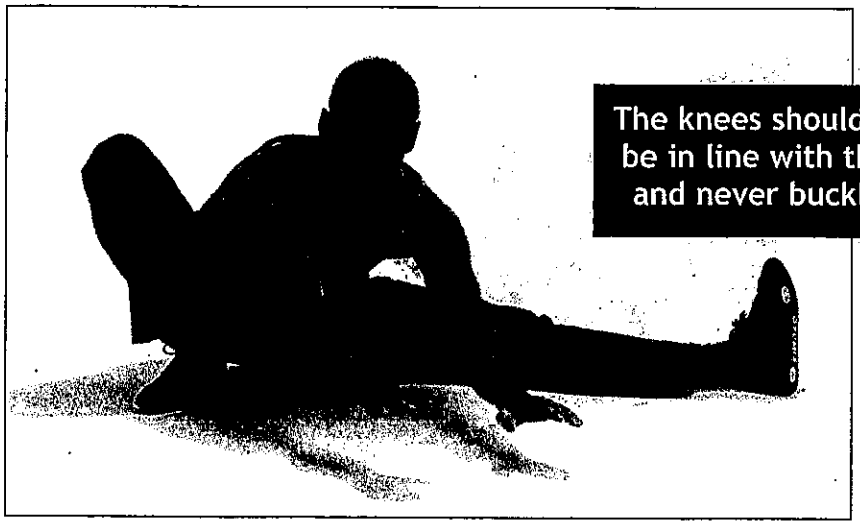
If your knees refuse to hyperflex painlessly, stick a stiff pillow or something similar between your hamstrings and your calves, to limit knee bending.

26. The Cossack

This cool stretch will loosen up your hips and improve your squatting ability. It is not nearly as tough as splits; I have placed it in the advanced section because beginners have a hard time tracking their knees properly. The knees should always be in line with the toes and never buckled in!

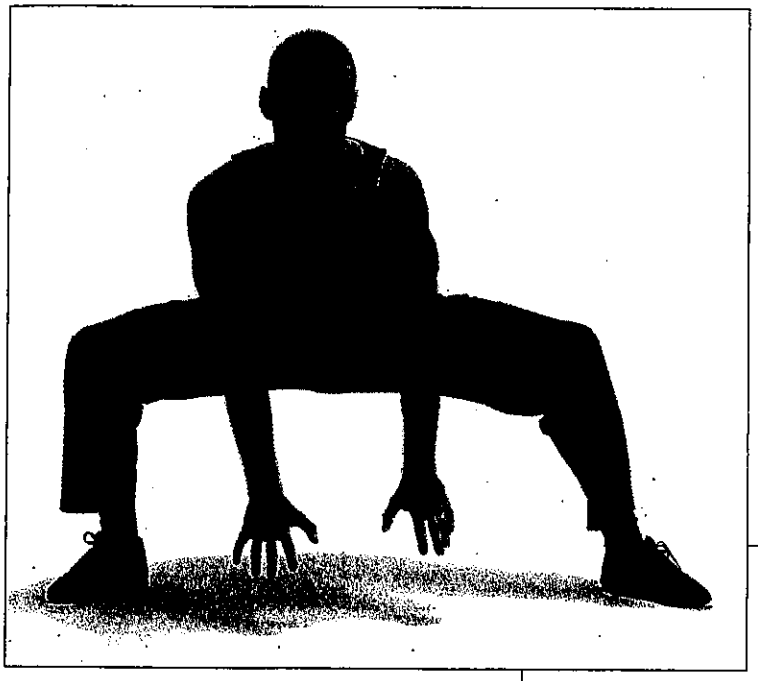


Squat down on one leg while keeping the other leg straight and relatively unloaded. You may hold on to something for balance. Squat down as deep as you can and squeeze your butt.



Release and sink deeper.

The knees should always be in line with the toes and never buckled in!

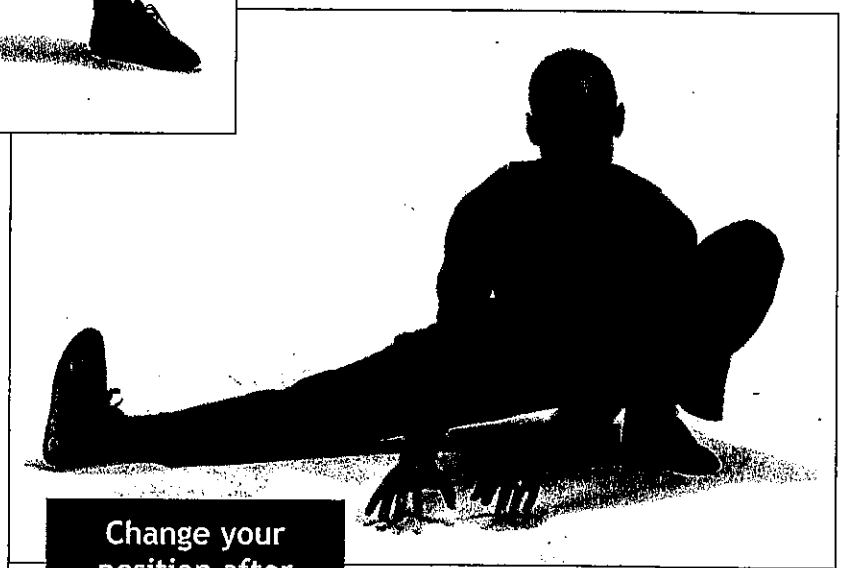


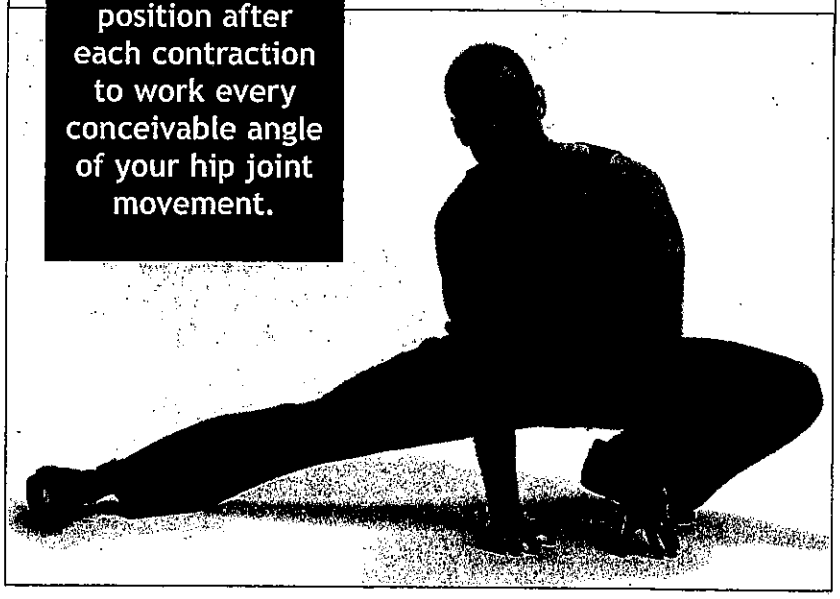
Do the drill in both directions. Change sides whenever you feel like it by pivoting near the ground.

Switch your position after each contraction to work every conceivable angle of your hip joint range of motion. Break up the distribution of weight between your feet; vary the direction where your unloaded foot is pointing; shift the weight on your support foot from your heel to your toes and back. Get a distinct feeling of 'rolling' in your hip joint when you switch positions. 'Elongating' your straight leg, as you have done during splits, will help.

Make sure to keep one leg totally straight except when you are switching sides! Understand that the Cossack stretch is not for everyone's knees.

You may combine the Cossack stretch with the Cossack mobility drill from *Super Joints*.

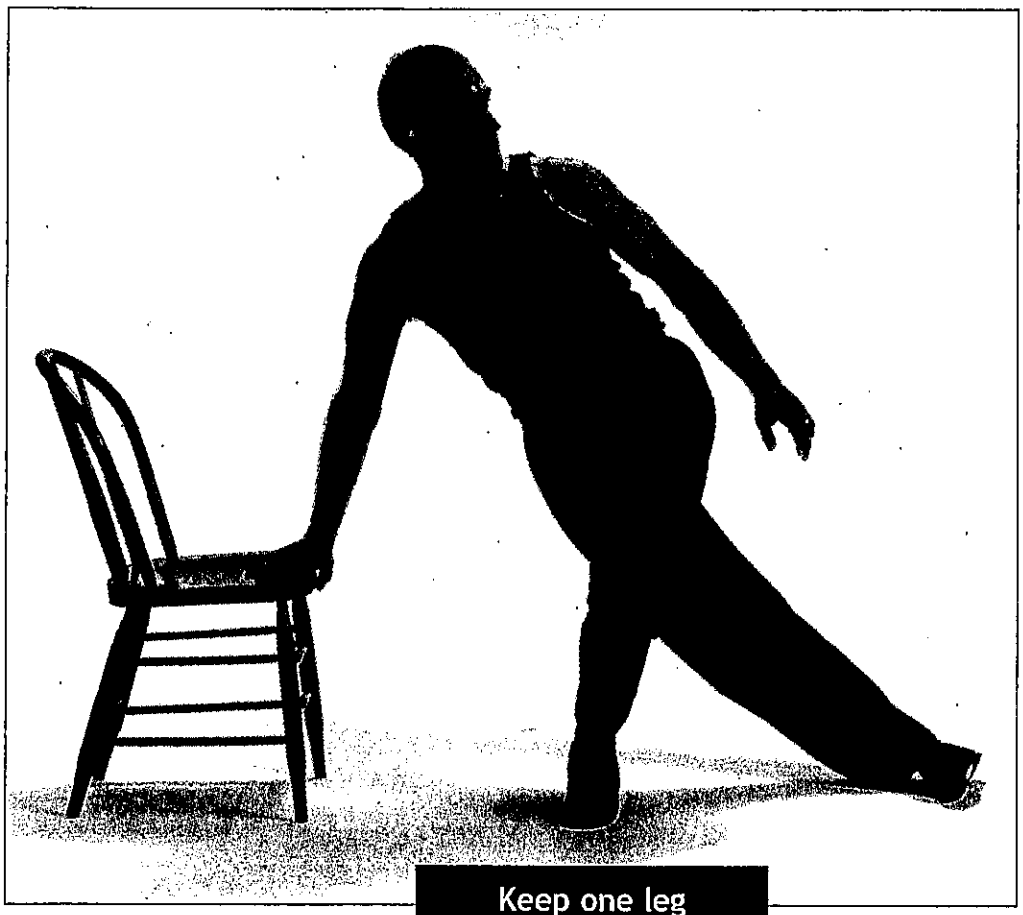




Change your position after each contraction to work every conceivable angle of your hip joint movement.

27. The Reverse Cossack

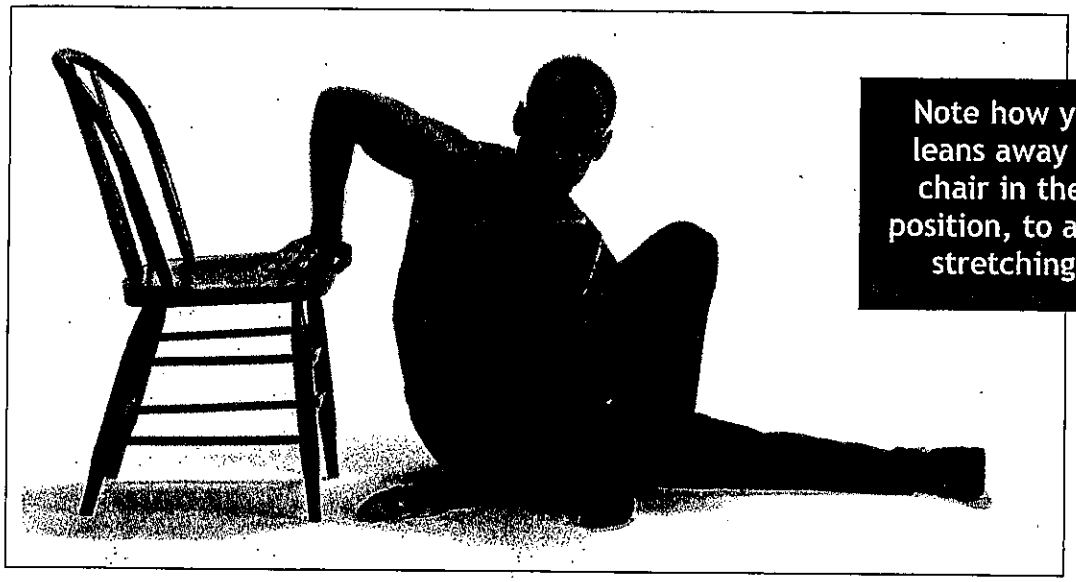
The so-called IT band on the outside of your knee tends to tighten up big time in runners. My buddy John Faas reports from the U.S. Navy SEAL training base in San Diego that even elite frogmen are not immune against this problem and stretch their ITs religiously. Here is the best way.



Keep one leg straight and the knee of the other leg tracking its foot.

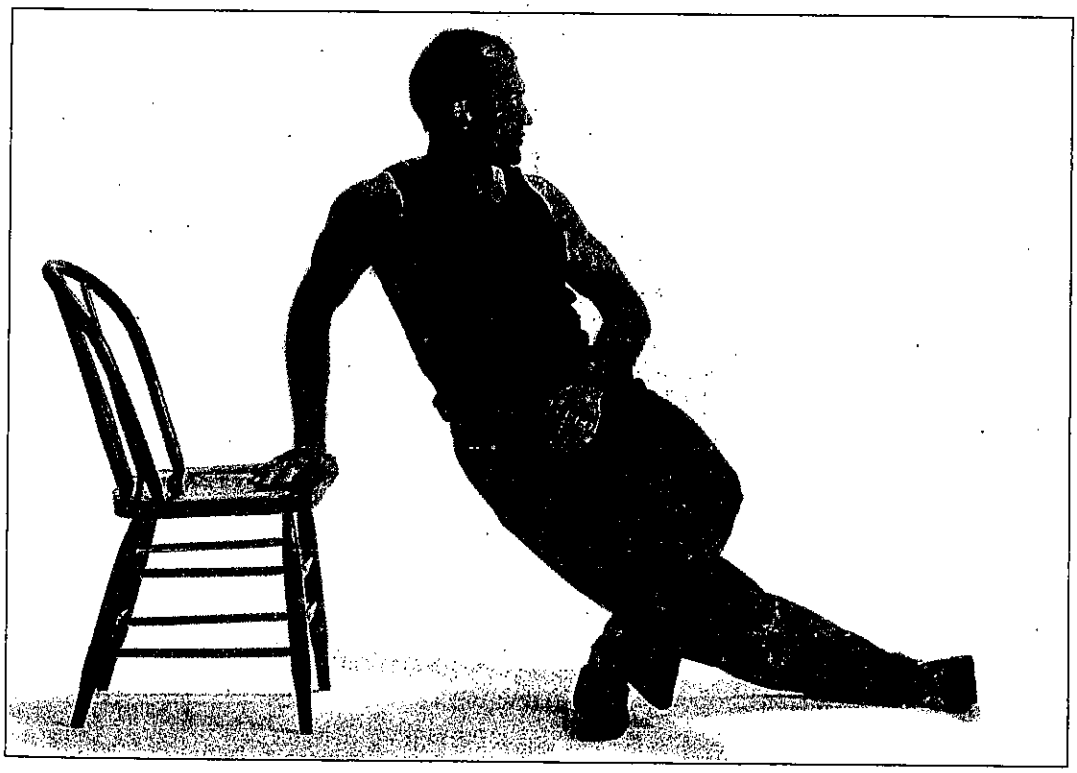
Assume the illustrated position. Keep your right leg straight and your left knee tracking your left foot for the duration.

With most of your weight on the outside of your straight right leg pivot and 'screw yourself into the ground'.



Note how your body leans away from the chair in the bottom position, to amplify the stretching effect.

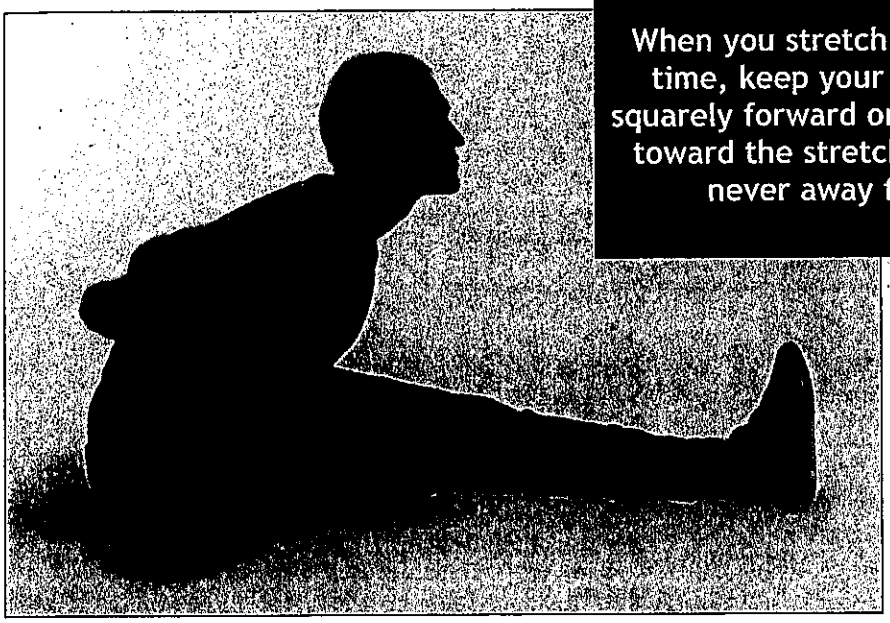
Push with the outside of your right foot into the ground, then release and sink. Note how your body leans away from the chair in the bottom position to amplify the stretching effect.



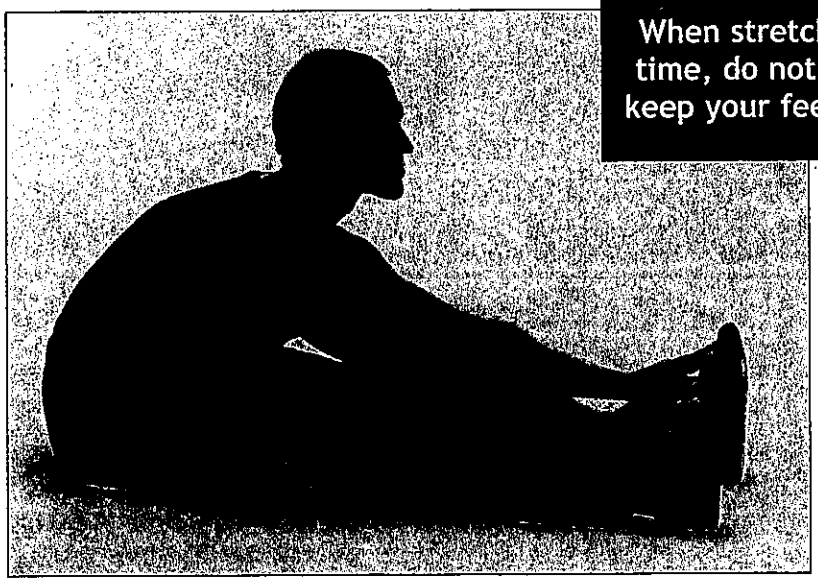
Repeat the drill with your left paw.

30. Hamstring Stretches

Once, thanks to good mornings, the difference has sunk in—between folding at the hip and bending from your back—you may choose from a variety of the following hamstring stretches. They all obey the same rules as the good morning: chin and chest up, back straight, dig with your heels, fold at the hip, etc. Keep your knees slightly bent or locked depending on your preference and health history. As an option, you may keep your hands behind your back to ensure a straighter spine.



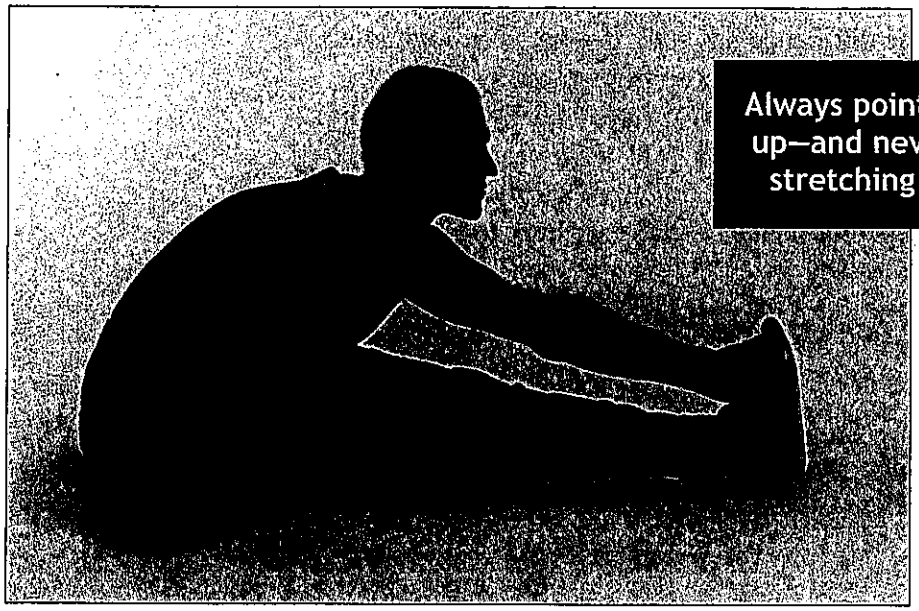
When you stretch one leg at a time, keep your hips facing squarely forward or even slightly toward the stretched leg—and never away from it!



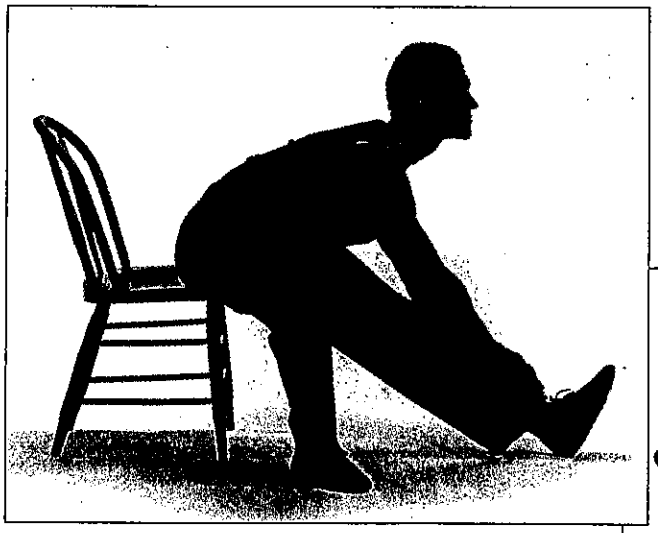
When stretching two legs at a time, do not spread your legs; keep your feet almost together.

The most basic ham stretch is the two-legged floor version.

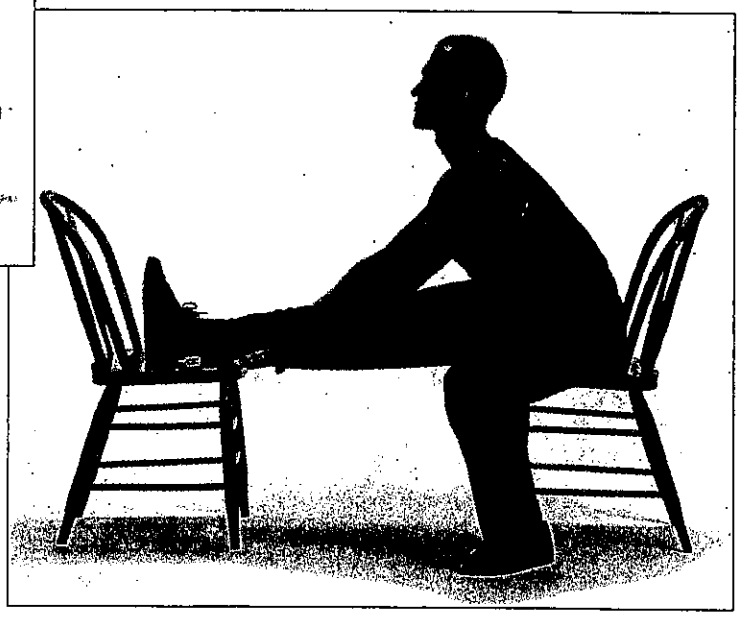
For the one-legged version, fold one of your legs toward the opposite knee—not the other way, as in the hurtful hurdler stretch! Make sure to keep your weight over the stretched leg and not away from it!



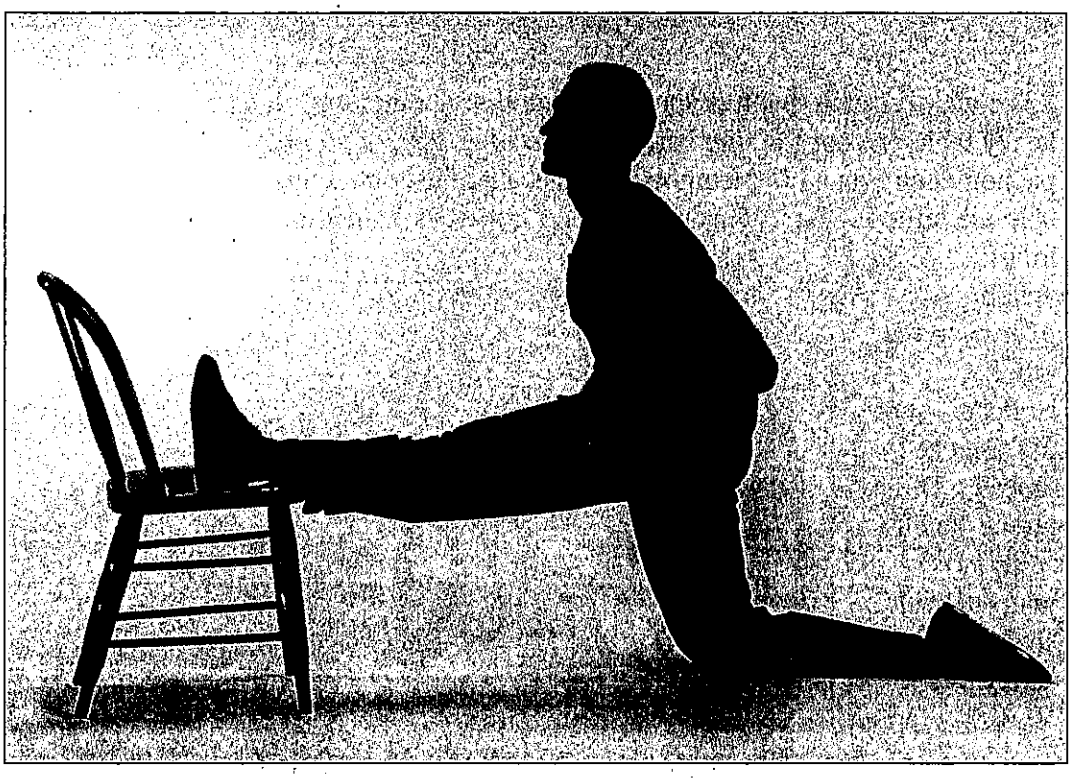
Always point your toes straight up—and never outward—when stretching your hamstrings.



There are also easier chair versions—for the majority of Comrades who are not flexible enough just to keep their backs straight, when seated on the floor with their legs in front of them.



The free standing one-legged ham stretch is a good one for nearly any level. Make a point of keeping your weight over the leg you are stretching. Also, keep the bent knee of the other leg tracking your slightly turned out foot; never let your knees bow in!

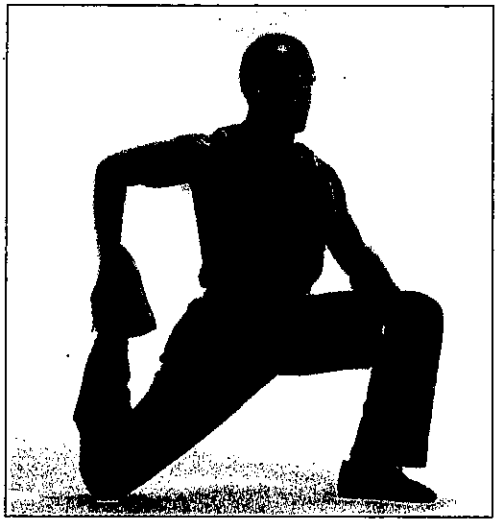


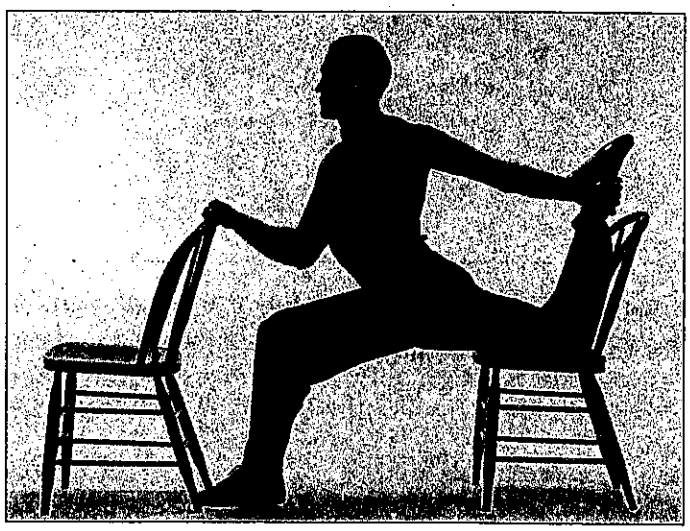
The cool knee-on-the-floor chair stretch is very user friendly, because the kneeling leg is pulling the pelvis in the right direction. Make sure to pad your knee with something soft and to watch your balance. You may surround yourself with a couple of chairs for balance if you wish.

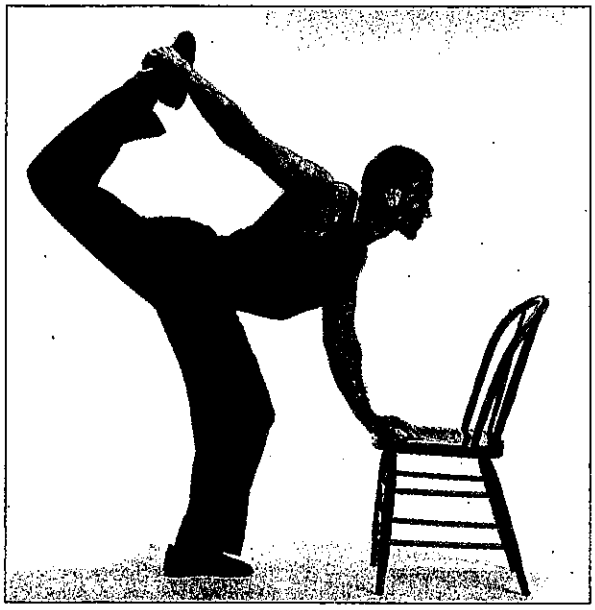
31. Hip Flexor/Quad Stretches

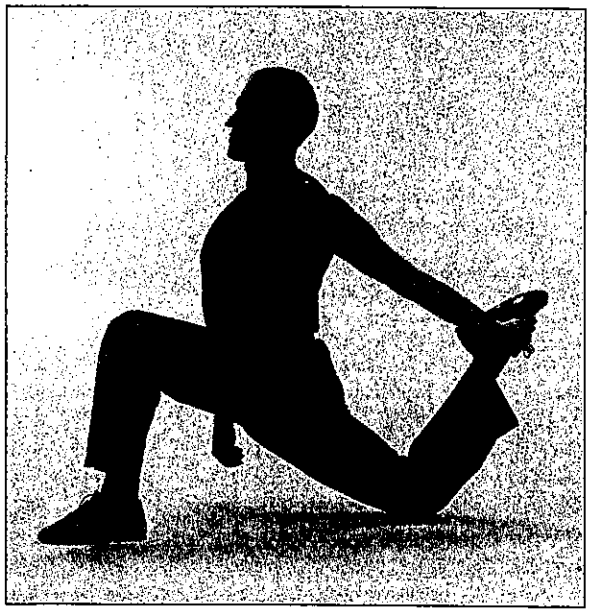
When Comrades complain of tight quads, their problem is usually the hip flexors.

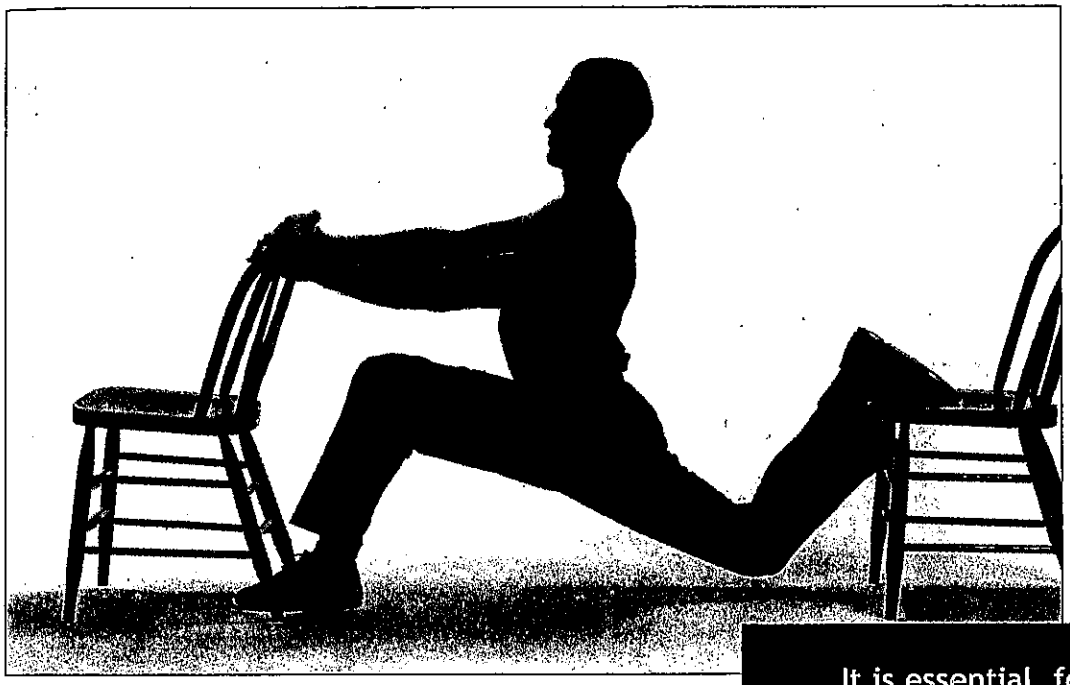
One muscle of the quadriceps group, the rectus femoris, also flexes the hip, so it has been stretched with the previous stretch. If, for some strange reason, you need to work on your knee flexion as well, take your pick of the following modified hip flexor stretches. I do not advise that you attempt them until you get proficient with the basic kneeling hip flexor stretch and the karate stance hip flexor stretch.



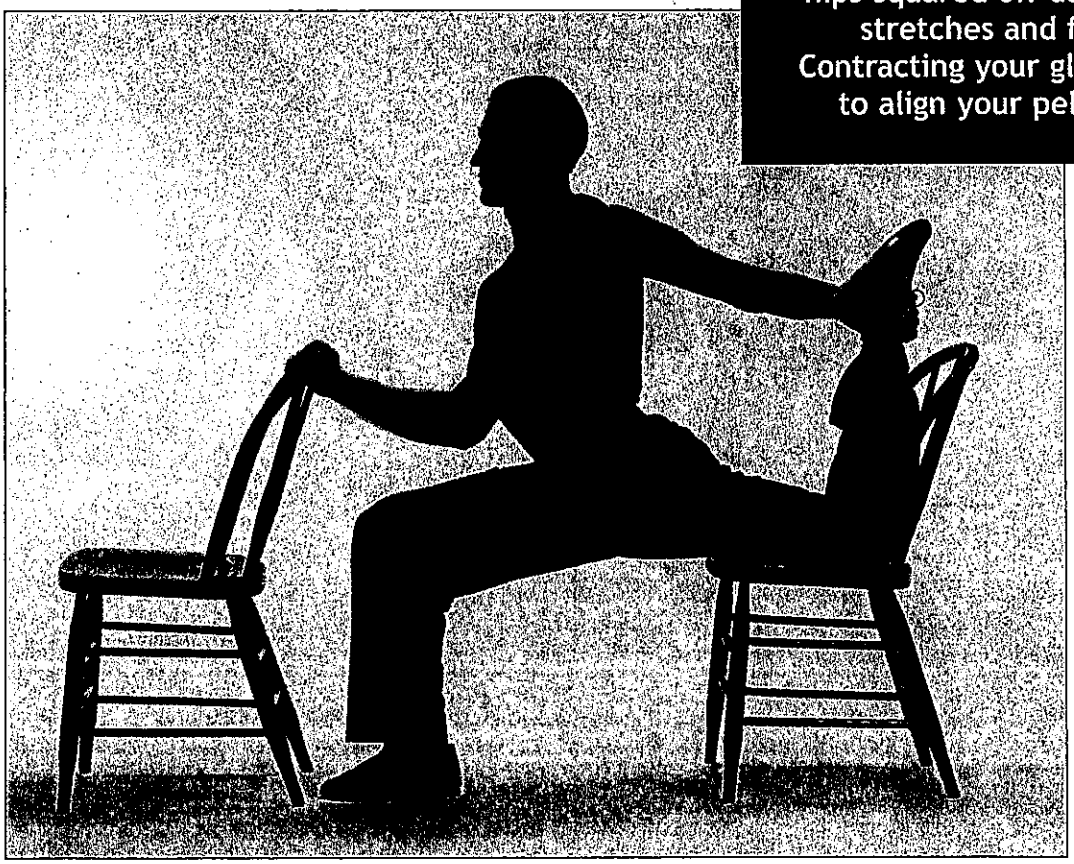
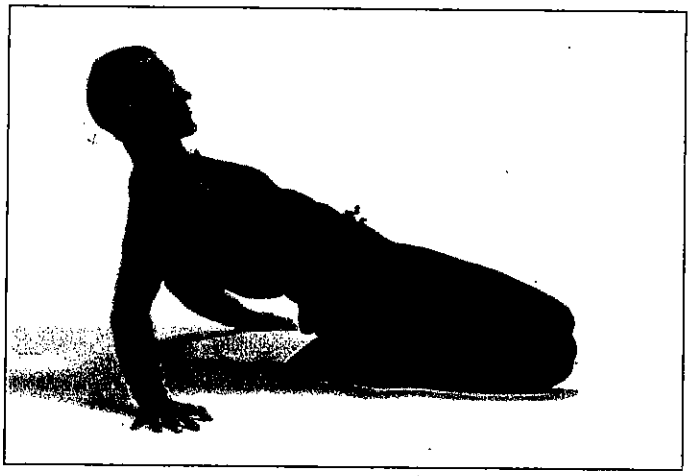
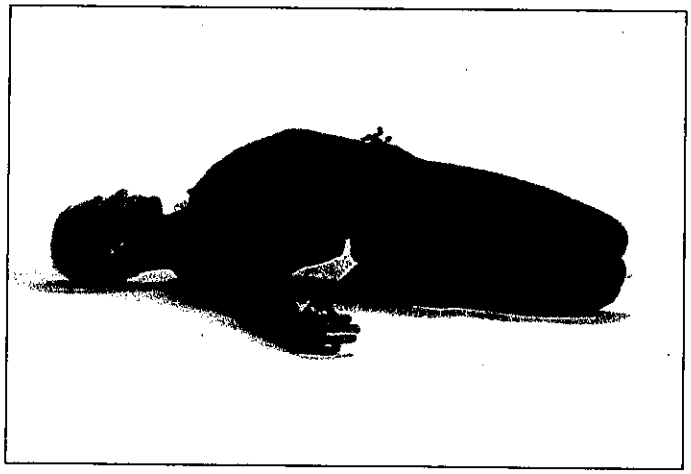








It is essential, for safety and effectiveness, to keep your hips squared off during hip flexor stretches and front splits. Contracting your glutes hard helps to align your pelvis properly.



Some advanced trainees with a compelling cause may try the kneeling quad stretch. Clear it with your doctor; this stretch is way too rough on most comrades' knees! The stretch is initiated by imitating the leg extension strength exercise or trying to straighten out your legs against the floor. Be certain not to spend much time in a relaxed position when performing this stretch, to minimize the loading of the knee ligaments.