US 20090239723A1

(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**

Jovanovic

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2009/0239723 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Sep. 24, 2009**

(54) **FOOT HARNESS TO AID ATHLETIC STRETCHING EXERCISES**

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(21) Appl. No.: **12/330,251**

(22) Filed: **Dec. 8, 2008**

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 60/996,802, filed on Dec. 6, 2007.

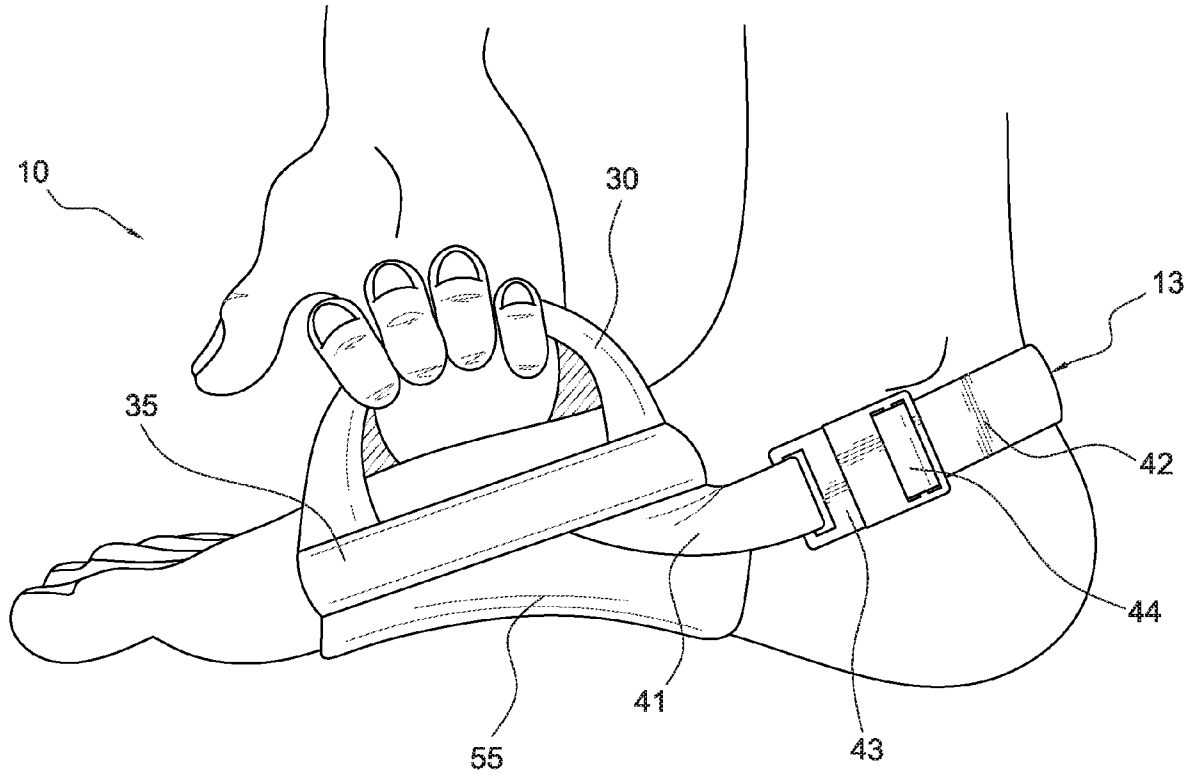
Publication Classification

(51) **Int. Cl.**
A63B 21/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **482/131**

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A foot harness to aid athletic stretching having three adjustable nylon strap members that secure around a user's foot in the areas of the top of the foot, the back of the foot, and the ankle. The harness includes left and right handles and a back loop. A user secures the harness around the foot and then uses the handles and loop to pull the user's foot in a direction to achieve a stretch or pull the user's torso in the direction of the foot to achieve a stretch.



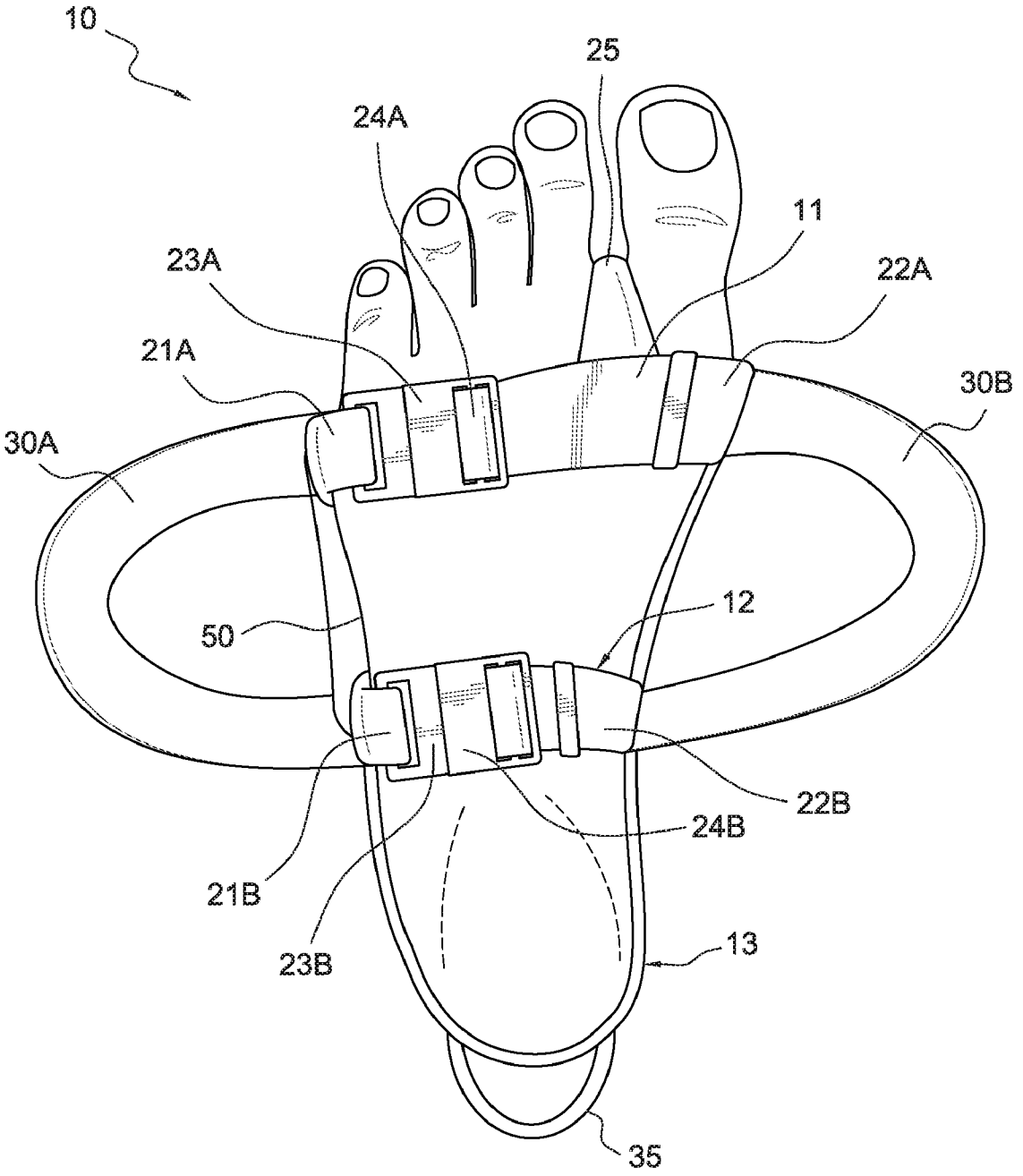
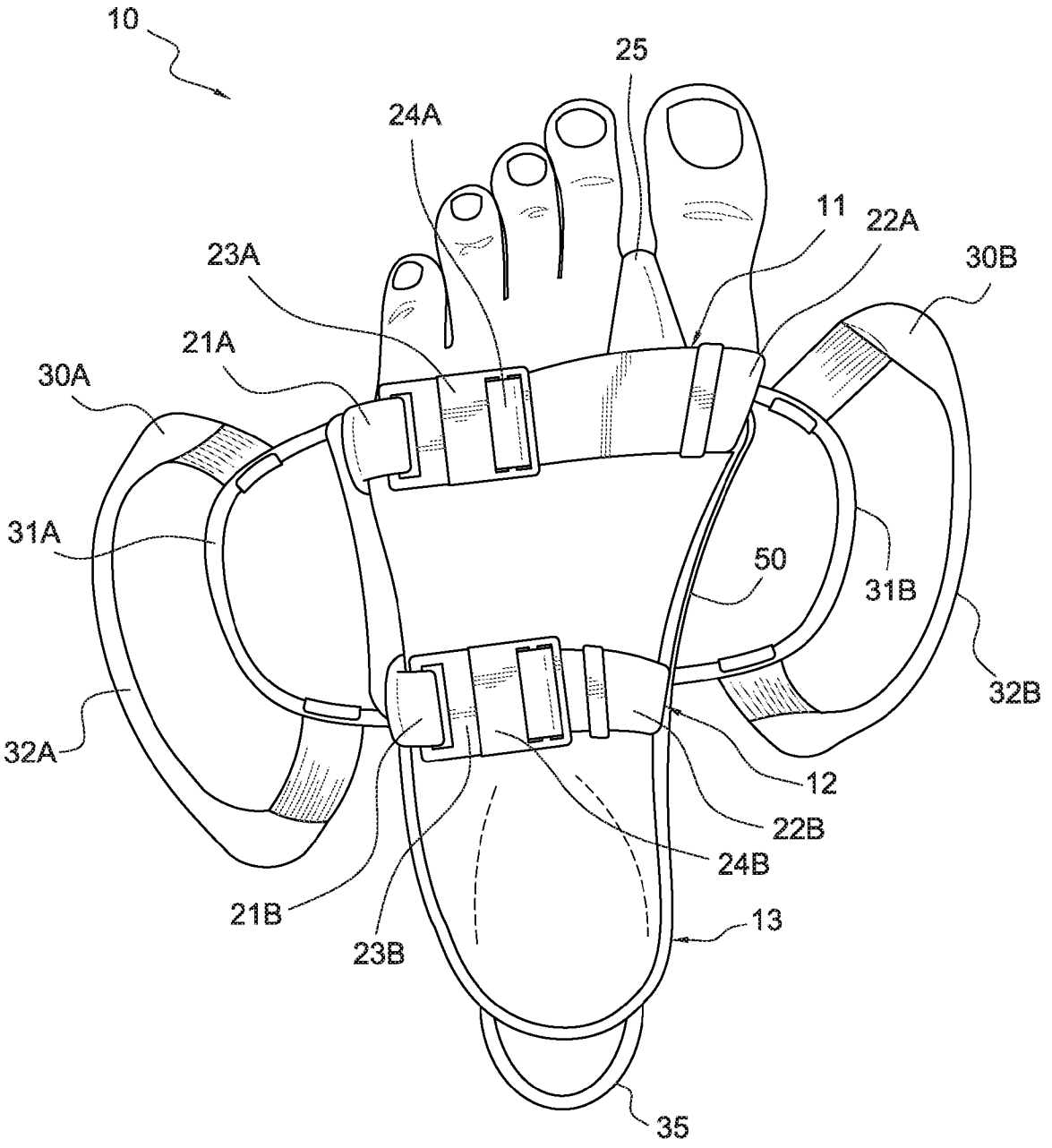


FIG. 1


10
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24A
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22A
23A
30B
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FIG. 2

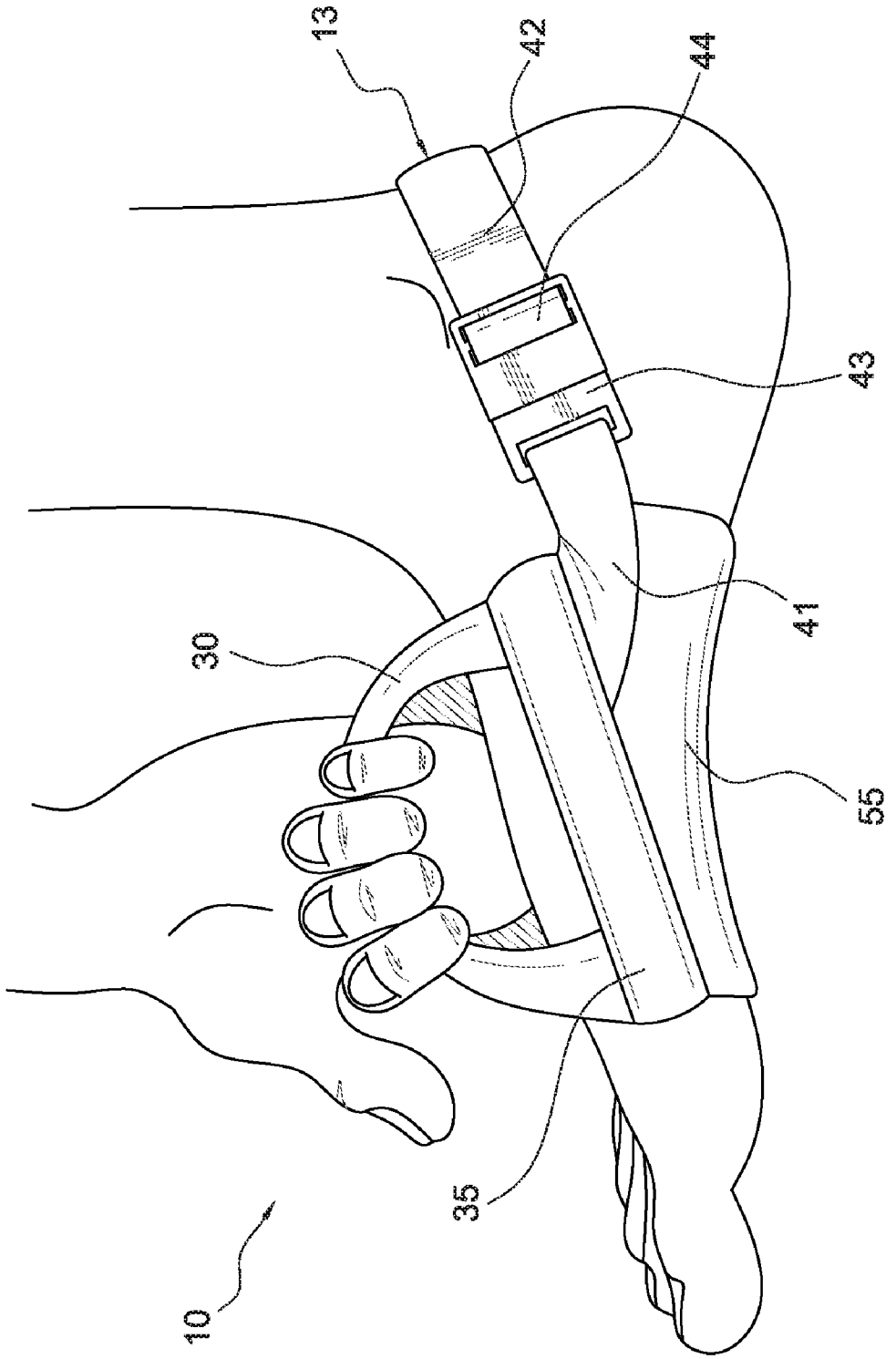

FIG. 3

FOOT HARNESS TO AID ATHLETIC STRETCHING EXERCISES

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The present invention claims priority under 35 U.S. C. 119(e) to U.S. provisional application No. 60/996,802, filed Dec. 6, 2007, the contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to an athletic or therapeutic training aid for static and active isolated stretching exercises. More particularly, the present invention relates to a shoe or foot harness having a plurality of handles or loops adapted to allow a user to grip a handle(s) and pull themselves in the direction of the shoe and/or pull the user's shoe in a desired direction to perform a stretching exercise.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] As will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, stretching is important for every work out. Proper stretching allows the muscles to warm up, fending off unnecessary strain, cramping, and other dangers that can occur when cold muscles are worked too quickly. In addition, stretching your muscles helps you maximize the range of motion of your joints which also allows you to fully contract your muscles. Moreover, stretching can also prevent little tears in a muscle or tendon that occur when you force a joint to go through its full range of motion when the tissues are too tight. A regular routine of stretching will help to increase flexibility that offers a degree of protection from injury over time. Flexible muscles also recover more quickly from injuries, and stretching gently can even help to speed the recovery process.

[0004] However, stretching itself can be dangerous if not performed properly. Trying to stretch out a cold muscle is sometimes painful, feels too tight, and can lead to tearing, pulling, or straining. These problems are particularly acute with world class athletes who have developed, through rigorous and constant training, the physiques of extremely tight and hard muscle fiber necessary for their bodies to perform the feats of amazing athletic prowess required in their endeavors. Proper stretching is extremely important to these individuals that rely on their muscles and joints being prepared to be pushed to their limits during training and competition.

[0005] However, the benefits of stretching are not limited to athletes. Almost all of us may benefit from a regime of proper stretching. As will be appreciated, one of the primary benefits of regular stretching is that it can help prevent muscular imbalances. Because no one has perfectly symmetrical muscular development, and we all tend to use one side of the body more than the other, we create a situation in which some muscles must overcompensate for others. This leads to muscular weaknesses and underdevelopment in some areas of the body. Stretching regularly helps to lengthen tight overused muscles and strengthen underused muscles. Correcting musculoskeletal imbalances can help ease everyday aches and pains, improve posture and alleviate lower back pain.

[0006] As the population ages, many doctors and other health practitioners have begun to stress the importance of stretching in maintaining the range of motion of the muscles and tendons that becomes more limited in the aging process. In addition, it is well known that stretching different muscle groups in the body increases blood circulation which provides the body additional energy. Likewise, proper stretching helps reduce the amount of tension in the muscles and helps the body to relax. In many respects, today's popularity of Yoga is directly attributable to an understanding of the benefits of stretching.

[0007] In sum, stretching provides numerous benefits if done properly. However, there is great debate as to the best method of stretching. It is understood in the art that it is possible to actually injure oneself from over-zealous stretching, so it is very important to practice good form. One kind of stretching that is no longer recommended by the majority of fitness experts is 'ballistic stretching'. This practice involves bouncing while stretching, and can result in muscle strains and tears. Bouncing during stretching not only can be detrimental but also fails to lead to more permanent stretching. Instead, many experts recommend that you stretch slowly, and only as deeply as you can comfortably go, and that you hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds. This "static" stretching is considered by many to be the most beneficial stretches for most people. Static stretches work to lengthen muscles and lead to flexibility.

[0008] Another type of stretching that is used by most elite athletes is called "active isolated stretching" or "AIS." AIS is popular amongst many of today's athletes, massage therapists, personal/athletic trainers, and other professionals due to the regimes ability to allow the body to repair itself and also to prepare for daily activities. The Active Isolated Stretching technique involves the method of holding each stretch for only two seconds. This method of stretching is also known to work with the body's natural physiological makeup to improve circulation and increase the elasticity of muscle joints and fascia.

[0009] The creator of Active Isolated Stretching is Aaron L. Mattes. Aaron Mattes has developed this method of proper athletic stretching over the past 35 years while working with thousands of patients, doctors, and health professionals. Aaron Mattes has been improving people's lives, their health, and their ability to become more flexible. His stretching book, *Active Isolated Stretching: The Mattes Method,* teaches an individual how to actively stretch themselves out. He has also produced stretching DVD's, stretching videos, and 2' by 3' poster-sized stretching charts. These are just some of the important tools that can be utilized to improve flexibility and help alleviate problems associated with many over-use injuries such as carpel tunnel, tennis elbow, lower back problems, and other ailments resulting from a lack of flexibility. StretchingUSA.com, the official site of the Aaron Mattes Active Isolated Stretching technique carries a wide variety of stretching books, stretching DVD's, stretching videos, stretching charts, and also materials to aid lay persons in learning proper stretching techniques.

[0010] Whether a lay person interested in performing static stretching or an elite athlete engaged in active isolated stretching, there exist many problems and potential drawbacks in attempting to perform the stretches effectively and safely. For example, with athletes, in stretching out the legs it is common to grasp one leg or both legs, an ankle, shoes, etc. and manipulate the limb in various directions to stretch the various muscle groups. It is also common to grasp the legs or shoes and pull the leg or torso in various directions to stretch muscles. For example, when attempting to stretch out the quadriceps of a leg, it is a common stretch to stand straight and bend one leg at a time backwards and up towards the

buttocks whereby the athlete can clasp his shoe a gently stretch the quadriceps by pulling the shoe towards the buttocks. Likewise, in attempting to stretch the hamstring, it is common to bend the torso towards the legs and pull one's head towards his knee by clasping his legs or shoes and pulling forward. One major problem with these techniques is that the more muscular the athlete's build, the more difficult it is to perform these stretches when cold due to the volume and tightness of muscle making grasping the ankle, leg, shoe etc. potentially problematic. Other drawbacks include the difficulty in assuring constant and slow stretching through the full range of motion and/or the ability to apply slow and constant active resistance.

[0011] In an effort to overcome these problems and drawbacks, some prior artisans have taught the use of elastic or rubber straps that essentially provide and extension of the hand or one's wingspan so that an athlete does not have to grasp his shoe when stretching but rather the ends of a band wrapped around the shoe. Known drawbacks of these bands is that they have a limited lifespan of elasticity, they may be prone to the foot dislodging during a stretch, and they are often slow and difficult to reposition for effective and safe stretching.

[0012] Drawbacks and problems in stretching are not limited to athletes. Many people after years of being sedentary find it difficult to begin a stretching regime. Some people find the inability to reach their feet due to being overweight or generally unflexible as prohibitive in attempting to reclaim lost flexibility. The inability to reach their feet let alone being able to manipulate them to stretch their leg's muscle groups discourages them from even trying to do so. Likewise, while some people would have interest in starting Yoga or the like, this inability to grasp the lower extremities dissuades them from doing so. While the use of prior art elastomeric bands may intuitively solve the problem by adding to one's reach, the drawbacks discussed above are still present. In addition, lay persons and untrained athletes may find manipulating the bands difficult and in fact potentially dangerous.

[0013] The foregoing underscores some of the problems associated with conventional stretching aids. Furthermore, the foregoing highlights the long-felt, yet unresolved need in the art for an inexpensive stretching aid that increases a person's reach without the associated drawbacks of conventional straps. The foregoing also highlights the long-felt, yet unresolved need for an inexpensive stretching aid that facilitates a user's ability to safely reach and manipulate the user's feet and limbs. The foregoing also highlights the long-felt, yet unresolved need in the art for a stretching aid that is easy to use and has a long lifespan.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0014] The present invention overcomes the drawbacks identified above and offers new advantages as well. According to the invention, there is provided a foot or shoe harness adapted to ensnare a user's feet and allow safe reaching and movement of the user's foot and leg.

[0015] One object of at least some embodiments of the invention is to provide a shoe or foot harness comprising a plurality of mateable straps that encircle and secure around a user's foot or shoe and that includes points for grasping the harness to pull the foot in a desired direction and/or anchor the user to allow them to safely pull their torso in the direction of their foot.

[0016] According to another object of at least some embodiments of the invention, the harness includes handles or loops that allow a user to safely, comfortably, and securely reach and manipulate a harnessed foot.

[0017] In accordance with at least one embodiment of the invention, the harness and handle loops comprise nylon strips connected integrally with one another. In accordance with another related object of the invention, the harness includes snap connectors that allow the harness to be quickly adorned and removed from a user's foot or shoe.

[0018] In accordance with at least one embodiment of the invention, the straps are made adjustable so a user can manipulate the circumference and thereby the size or snugness of the harness. One advantageous feature of this aspect of the invention is the ability to make the harness universal, or in other words, make the harness available for use by people having differently sized feet and/or allow a user to adjust the harness for times when stretching bare foot versus times when stretching while wearing shoes.

[0019] In accordance with another advantageous aspect of the invention, the harness may include a toe loop to aid the secure positioning of the harness on a user's foot. As will be appreciated, a toe loop will serve to prevent slippage and other movement of the harness during stretching.

[0020] Another object of the invention is to provide hand straps, grips, or handles at a plurality of locations to allow a user to perform a wide variety of stretches. In accordance with this aspect of the invention, in a preferred embodiment, the harness includes left and right handles positioned on opposite sides of the foot that may be used alone or together to allow user to pull his foot in a variety of directions, and/or act as an anchor point allowing a user to pull his torso in the direction of the harness. In accordance with another aspect of at least one embodiment of the invention, the harness includes a handle or loop on the rear that allows a user to pull his leg towards his buttocks to stretch his quadriceps. Alternatively, the harness may be configured to include a belt loop or the like, or otherwise be amenable to the insertion of a strap that a user may use to pull his foot towards his buttocks. Likewise, an additional feature of various embodiments of the invention is the ability to use prior art stretching straps, belt or the like, in conjunction with the harness to further increase the user's reach and provide for resistance training.

[0021] According to another advantageous feature of various embodiments of the invention is the provision of padding for the comfort of the user. Padding may help prevent chaffing or irritation of bare feet caused by the straps. In one embodiment of the invention, the harness includes a padded arch sleeve adapted for accepting a user's foot.

[0022] The invention as described and claimed herein should become evident to a person of ordinary skill in the art given the following enabling description and drawings. The aspects and features of the invention believed to be novel and other elements characteristic of the invention are set forth with particularity in the appended claims. The drawings are for illustration purposes only and are not drawn to scale unless otherwise indicated. The drawings are not intended to limit the scope of the invention. The following enabling disclosure is directed to one of ordinary skill in the art and presupposes that those aspects of the invention within the ability of the ordinarily skilled artisan are understood and appreciated.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0023] The present invention is described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

[0024] FIG. **1** is a top view of a foot having an embodiment of the harness of the present invention secured thereto.

[0025] FIG. **2** is a top view of a foot having a dual-loop embodiment of the harness of the present invention secured thereto.

[0026] FIG. **3** is a side view of a foot having an alternative foot sling embodiment of the harness of the present invention secured thereto.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0027] The present invention is the brainchild of U.S. Olympian and Engineer Pavle Jovanovic. The present invention now called the "Stretch Shoe" is based on the need in the art to achieve the most efficient and effective way of stretching possible.

[0028] A presently preferred embodiment of an athletic foot harness **10**, or Stretch Shoe, according to the invention is depicted in FIG. **1**. As shown, harness **10** includes three straps for securing a user's foot. The straps included are denominated for illustrative purposes as an upper strap **11**, a lower strap **12**, and an ankle strap **13**. However, the invention should not be deemed limited to a three-strap embodiment. The Stretch Shoe may be composed of a single integrated member that accepts a user's foot, or may include alternate arrangements of straps or the like. The straps may be integrally connected during manufacturing or operate as individual members. Any configuration of a harness that secures the foot and allows for and achieves the utility of the harness described herein should be deemed within the scope of the present invention.

[0029] In the depicted embodiment, the upper and lower strap members **11**, **12** of harness **10** include respective connectors **23**A, **23**B that allow for left strap arms **21**A, **21**B and right strap arms **22**A, **22**B to encircle and connect to each other around a user's foot. Preferably, the upper strap member **11** wraps around a user's foot in the area of the top of the arch or the ball of the foot. Similarly, the lower strap member **12** preferably secures around a user's foot in the area of the back of the arch or heal of the foot. This configuration provides a secure and comfortable positioning of the straps on the foot.

[0030] The ankle strap **13** member as best depicted in the embodiment of FIG. **2** also includes a snap connector **43** for securing a left strap arm **41** and a right strap arm **42**. The ankle strap **13** is configured to secure horizontally around a user's heal in the area just below the ankle. This configuration ensures the harness **10** cannot slip laterally off a user's foot during use.

[0031] While the depicted embodiments depict conventional snap-click connectors, the invention should not be deemed to require any given connector or any connectors at all. A harness could be configured to be custom sized or rigid loops that a user squeezes his foot into like a boot. However, a presently preferred embodiment of the invention as depicted uses connectors to facilitate ease of securing and removing the harness.

[0032] Turning back to FIG. **1**, the upper strap **11**, lower strap **12**, and ankle strap **13** (best shown on FIG. **3**) each include a respective strap adjuster **24**A, **24**B, **44**. The strap adjuster is intended to allow a user to lengthen or shorten an arm of the strap member such that the circumference of the attached straps is increased or decreased. By being adjustable, the harness **10** may be useable by a person when barefoot or wearing shoes, and also, allows a single harness to be used by persons having various foot sizes. As will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, adjustability not only aids the universal use of the harness, but also the ability to mass produce the product instead of having to custom size each harness for an intended user.

[0033] While no specific adjustment mechanism is required to achieve the utility of the invention, a presently preferred embodiment uses standard snap-click connectors or the like having an eyelet and catch for allowing the strap to be threaded through and friction secured at a given length. Alternate arrangements such as belt buckles and the like will be readily evident to one of ordinary skill in the art.

[0034] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. **1**, the upper strap **11** includes a toe loop **25**. The toe loop **25** is simply a loop of material integral with the harness **10** that fits around the big toe to secure the harness **10** from being pulled laterally backwards. While a small loop of material is preferable for bear foot users, the loop may be made larger or wider to cup the front of a shoe. The harness **10** may be sold in one form for bear foot use, another form for use with shoes, or alternatively sold for both uses where the toe loop may or may not be employed.

[0035] As shown in FIG. **1**, a presently preferred embodiment of the invention includes handles **30**A, **30**B of strap material sewn or otherwise integral with the right and left strap arms **21**, **22**. The left handle **30**A has its ends anchored to respective left arms of the upper and lower straps **11**, **12**. Likewise, the right handle **30**B has its ends anchored to the respective right arms of the upper and lower straps **11**, **12**. This configuration thus provides loops for a user's hands when the straps are buckled, whereby the user can grip both handles with one hand and pull the handles to manipulate the user's foot or pull the user's torso in the direction of the foot. Alternatively, the handles are secured such that a user may manipulate a single handle during stretching where desired. As will also be appreciated, the handles may serve as loops for receiving a separate belt of loop that a user uses to extend their reach when stretching.

[0036] FIG. **2** depicts and embodiment of the invention wherein the straps include a pair of loop members **31**A, **32**A, **31**B, **32**B which make up the handle members **30**A, **30**B. By configuring the harness **10** to include multiple loops, a user can choose how much reach they need and which loop aids their stretch. Similarly, as the user gets more warmed up, they may switch from gripping the outer loops **32**A, **32**B to the inner loops **31**A, **31**B.

[0037] Continuing with FIG. **1**, in this embodiment the ankle strap **13** of the harness **10** includes a back loop **35**. The back loop **35** is preferable sized to allow a user to insert at least two fingers so that the foot may be lifted towards the buttocks. Alternatively, the back loop **35** may serve for receiving a separate belt member that a user uses to lift the foot. In the alternative embodiment depicted in FIG. **2**, the ankle strap **13** does not include a back loop but rather is intended to be manipulated with a separate belt laced through the strap. This may be preferable to some users that would need enough slack in a loop provided on the ankle strap to stretch their legs that it would pose a potential tripping hazard. Although not shown, the handles and back loop may be provided with adjusters whereby the circumference of the loops may be adjusted.

[0038] While a presently preferred embodiment that is intended for ease of construction and affordability contemplates that the harness **10** comprises a simple assembly of adjustable nylon straps that snap together and a plurality of

user friendly gripping loops, the invention may include various upgrades in different commercial versions. For example, as shown in FIG. **1**, the straps may include padding **50** for the comfort of the user. Padding **50** may be particularly desirable for users of the harness **10** that intend to use the product bare foot. Likewise, as previously mentioned, the harness **10** may come in a generic version whereby the toe loop **25** is used when barefoot and not when the users wears shoes, a barefoot version including padding or the like, and a shoe version wherein a front cup or the like is provided. The permutations of possible alterations to the basic harness described herein are virtually limited but all such variations should be understood to be within the skill of the ordinary artisan armed with the present specification.

[0039] To further illustrate the ease of altering the basic harness, a modified harness **10** is depicted in FIG. **3**. As shown in the depicted embodiment, the harness **10** includes an arch sling **55** or sleeve that cups a user's foot. Preferably the sling **55** is soft or padded for the comfort of the wearer. The sling may be preferable to some users because the larger surface area allows for a more secure fit around the foot. In this embodiment, the sling includes a handles **30** and an ankle strap **13**. The ankle strap includes a left arm **41**, a right arm **42**, a connector **43** and an adjuster **44** that serve the same adjustability and ease of use describe in connection with similar components above. Although not shown, it will be readily appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art that all of the accessories described above, such as a toe loop, ankle loop, etc. may be used in connection with the embodiment of FIG. **3**.

[0040] In view of the foregoing, one of ordinary skill in the art should now appreciate the aid to stretching the present invention provides. In operation, the harness, or Stretch Shoe, is a series of nylon straps having plastic clip. The harness clips onto a users shoe or bare foot and allows the user to begin stretching. Through use of the harness, static and active isolated stretching techniques are enhanced such that its users can achieve greater range of motion through a more effective method of stretching and more options for the approach of how the onset of the stretch is implemented.

[0041] In operation, the Stretch Shoe is placed over and around the shoe or foot and buckled into place at the three points discussed above. The three straps may then be tightened to obtain maximum comfort and adjusted to form fit. The barefoot user will find comfort in the specially padded areas provided, particularly around the adjustment buckles. The toe loop is used by the barefoot user but ignored and put to the side by a shoe wearer.

[0042] Once deployed on the foot, the user can proceed to stretch while standing or in a seated or lying position either prone or supine by grabbing onto the various loops to achieve the stretch. The use of an additional nylon or belt, preferably with variable strap handles, may be used but is not necessary to achieve all stretching techniques. At this point, the user may apply the necessary amount of force to perform AIS and static stretch techniques in a safe and efficient manor.

[0043] The use of antagonist reciprocal inhibition will be used most effectively for stretching the glutes and hamstrings while lying supine and grapping onto the inside loops and/or top loops. If desired, the additional belt or strap may be employed to achieve a full range of motion. The abductor and adductor/groin area is preferably stretched by grabbing the corresponding loop which is most comfortable while lying in the supine position and applying assistance to acquiring the necessary range of motion through a linear plane while internally and externally rotating to foot through the hip. In the prone position, by using the rear loop, the user can effectively stretch the quadriceps and in a lung position the hip flexors and psoas may be stretched as well.

[0044] In accordance with the invention, the use of stretching programs in addition to the harness is recommended by not necessary to obtain best results. A particularly useful program is Active Isolated Stretching The Mattes Method or alternatively, any static stretch program. Also, as will be appreciated, the harness can be used to perform yoga, rehabilitative yoga, Pilates, and the like. Through use of the harness, individuals that may have been dissuaded from stretching due to the inability to reach their feet may find new motivation and success.

[0045] Those skilled in the art will appreciate that various adaptations and modifications of the above-described preferred embodiments can be configured without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention. Therefore, it is to be understood that, within the scope of the appended claims, the invention may be practiced other than as specifically described herein.

I claim:

1. A foot harness to aid athletic stretching comprising:

a first strap member configured to encircle a user's foot in an area around the ball of the foot;

a second strap member configured to encircle a user's foot in an area around the heal of the foot;

an ankle strap member configured to encircle a user's ankle;

a left handle member integrally connected to said first and second strap members on the left side of the harness;

a right handle member integrally connected to said first and second strap members on the right side of the harness; and

whereby a user may grip the handle members to pull the user's foot in a given direction or pull the user's torso towards the user's foot.

2. The foot harness of claim **1**, further comprising an ankle loop in a back area of said harness, whereby a user may grip the ankle loop to pull the user's foot in a direction of the user's buttocks.

3. The foot harness of claim **2**, wherein said first and second strap members have respective left ends and right ends, and wherein said respective left ends and right ends of said first and second strap members are mateable to wrap around and secure a user's foot.

4. The foot harness of claim **3**, wherein said respective left ends and right ends are joined by a connector.

5. The foot harness of claim **4**, wherein said connector is a plastic clip, said plastic clip comprising a first male end and a second female end that mate to lock said connector and said respective ends in integral engagement.

6. The foot harness of claim **5**, wherein said connector further includes means for adjusting the circumference of said first strap and said second strap.

7. The foot harness of claim **6**, wherein said means for adjusting the circumference of said straps comprises an eyelet and catch for frictional securing the length of said straps.

8. The foot harness of claim **7**, wherein said ankle strap comprises a left and and a right end that are mateable to wrap and secure around a user's ankle.

9. The foot harness of claim **8**, wherein the left end of said ankle strap and the right end of said ankle strap are joined by an engageable and disengageable connector.

10. The foot harness of claim **9**, wherein said connector is a plastic clip, said plastic clip comprising a first male end and a second female end that mate to lock said connector and said respective ends in integral engagement.

11. The foot harness of claim **10**, wherein said connector further includes means for adjusting the circumference of said ankle strap.

12. The foot harness of claim **11**, wherein said means for adjusting the circumference of said straps comprises an eyelet and catch for frictional securing the length of said straps.

13. The foot harness of claim **1**, further comprising a toe loop defining an orifice configured to receive a big toe of a barefoot user.

14. The foot harness of claim **1**, further comprising a shoe cup defining an aperture for receiving the front of a shoe of a user.

15. The foot harness of claim **1**, further comprising a foot sling configured to accept the arch of a user's foot.

16. The foot harness of claim **1**, wherein said straps comprise nylon.

17. A method of stretching comprising:

placing a user's foot in a harness comprising three strap members, left and right handle members, and an ankle loop;

securing the first strap member around a front area of a user's foot;

securing the second strap member around a back area of a user's foot;

securing the third strap member around an ankle of a user's foot;

gripping the left and right handle members with one hand and pulling the user's foot in a direction of stretching or pulling the user's torso in the direction of the foot.

18. The method of stretching of claim **17**, wherein said user is in the supine position.

19. The method of stretching of claim **18**, wherein the user is in the standing position.

20. A method of stretching comprising:

placing a user's foot in a harness comprising three strap members, left and right handle members, and an ankle loop;

securing the first strap member around a front area of a user's foot;

securing the second strap member around a back area of a user's foot;

securing the third strap member around an ankle of a user's foot;

gripping said ankle loop and pulling the user's foot in the direction of the user's buttocks.

* * * * *