

# Barefoot Boy, With Cheek of Tan

Lately, the hysteria surrounding running barefoot has been reaching decibels usually associated with a Shuttle launch. Everywhere we turn there are lectures being given on barefoot running and articles cropping up



that require the cutting down of whole forests of trees to make wood pulp for paper. The phenomenon is also spilling over into the world of regular-walking-around-type folks, who are inquiring, “What’s with all this barefoot stuff, anyway? Is it a promotion for taking a vacation at a beach resort?”

The craziness began, of course, when some journalists looked past the dramatic story of the race Caballo Blanco (the White Horse) was putting together between some Tarahumara runners and a small contingent of Anglo ultrarunners as described in Chris McDougall’s excellent bestseller *Born to Run* and glogged onto chapter 25, where Chris discussed barefoot and minimalist running. The chapter made a convincing case that overengineered running shoes potentially were a cause of runner injuries—evil big-profit-running-shoe villains versus the naive little guy, perfect fodder for an expose. And there *is* a case to be made that an overengineered running shoe, replete

with features the average foot does not need, can contribute to eliciting the exact opposite outcome anticipated, meaning more injuries.

Rich Englehart railed against overengineered running shoes in these pages more than a decade ago, instead championing training in what amounted to racing flats—the bare minimum of foot covering a runner could get away with. The kind of running shoes (like the Tiger Cortez and the Nike Waffle Trainer) that were revolutionary in the 1970s when training shoes for long-distance runners were first introduced. Before science and marketing became involved, requiring twice a year that new models feature space-age gobbledygook improvements that had little if anything to do with running. These changes addressed very little that was actually going on with the human foot in the process of running, but they made good ad copy and impressed the novice runner with the obscene comfort he or she felt when slipping on the newest model. “I feel like I’m standing on a cloud,” the new runners would enthuse. “I can’t feel the earth,” the grizzled vets would complain.

McDougall’s chapter went into all of this and did a good job of putting it

into perspective. And the subsequent controversies stirred up by journalists who interviewed him on this subject did nothing to stifle the sales of the book. In fact, they sent it into overdrive, which we hope provided readers with an opportunity to wallow in the terrifically told story of the ultimate race that is at the book's heart.

Its sole? Well, that became confusing, for several reasons.

One, there has long been a small contingent of people who run around on bare feet—besides the Kenyan kids going back and forth to school, that is. The barefoot folks grabbed hold of the controversy and ran with it. They were suddenly in the forefront of stories about running and about running shoes. They were writing articles about the benefits of running in bare feet, they were writing entire books on the subject, and they were being thrust onto the local news, slapping the skin of their soles and heels against the asphalt in low-angle camera shots.

And, to a certain degree, they made some valid points.

We human animals are overshod. Males are encased in hard, unyielding formal shoes that pinch the feet and cause discomfort, or they are in highly pseudosophisticated sports shoes that essentially negate the function of the foot. On the ladies' side, let's face it, however much they have lusted after shoes—and the more the better—the shoes they wore for fashion would have been castigated by Amnesty International if they were forced to wear them as a form of punishment

in repressive societies. How women managed to balance safely on some of those shoes has always been a matter of astonishment and a feat of human gymnastics comparable to walking a slack rope across the Grand Canyon. When fashion demanded high heels, podiatrists began looking at buying vacation homes with the profits gleaned from treating shortened Achilles tendons. And forget the honest podiatrist prescribing that the Achilles problems caused when a woman stepped off the high heels might be alleviated by wearing shorter heels: What was he going to suggest next, "sensible shoes" like Doc Martens? Outrage.

Many of the problems—and confusions—came when the barefoot prophets took the audacious step of bringing in the poor Tarahumara Indians of Copper Canyon, Mexico, some of the best very-long-distance runners in the world. Because McDougall discussed the Tarahumara in his book in the same chapter that he discussed barefoot running and the overengineering of running shoes, the barefoot crowd tried to incorporate the Tarahumara into their campaign.

The fact that was conveniently overlooked was that the Tarahumara don't run barefoot. They go to the junkyard, retrieve a discarded Michelin 165-SR-15 two-ply steel-belted radial tire, cut it up, and make huaraches (crude sandals) out of it. In some ways, the Tarahumara were far in advance of the major shoe companies in that they were using beautifully advanced technologies developed over a century of research by the major automobile tire

manufacturers to shod the Porsches, BMWs, and Mercedes that sped down the German autobahn.

Chris McDougall made the distinction between barefoot and minimalist. In fact, when we went to an appearance he made in Northern California, he arrived wearing—and touting—the gorilla-foot-like Vibram Five Fingers. More like a foot glove than a shoe, the odd-looking footwear was gracing McDougall's feet that night, and he expounded on how going minimalist had recovered his running from the depths of chronic injuries. He was espousing Rich Englehart's decades-old plea that "less is more," touting the age-old wisdom of the Tarahumara, and taking a swipe at the major running-shoe companies. He acknowledged that some of the shoe companies had, within the last few years, begun manufacturing and promoting lighter, more basic shoe models. But he also said it was an uphill battle because the shoe companies had for years put so much advertising and marketing into maximizing shoe features that to undo all of that in a few years was virtually impossible.

Running in minimal footwear makes a great deal of sense, but it isn't something a long-term runner can change to overnight. The bones, muscles, and tendons in the foot are built to serve as an energy-absorbing biological wonder when we thrust ourselves forward in an attempt to move efficiently through our world. The foot and ankle and Achilles tendon are built to absorb the shock of a landing with several times our body's weight behind it. But like the suspension of a car that has not been maintained,

we can't expect to make the changeover instantly. A lot of the bushings in the car's suspension have dried out over the years, and they are ready to give out if we overtax them. The same with feet that have been shod in heavily reinforced running shoes for years.

The admonition to walk before you run is a good one if you are making the attempt to minimize running footwear. Keep in mind that the older we are, the more stiff and dried out are the tendons and connecting tissue in the foot and ankle, and hence, the more lengthy a break-in time we will need.

In the matter of strictly barefoot running, the cautions need to be even more stringent. And this comes from a guy who doesn't wear shoes indoors, not because of a dedication to all things Oriental but simply because it feels better, and it's a habit I borrowed from my mother, who, ever since I've known her, kicked her shoes off as soon as she crossed the threshold.

The world we live in today was not built for barefoot running. In fact, much of the world from the time it was made wasn't built for barefoot running. Roman centurions didn't wear sandals because they were fashionable. Mummies buried in Egyptian tombs didn't have footwear buried with them because they foreshadowed Imelda Marcos. Even Jesus wore footwear (which Mary Magdalene was happy to remove before washing his feet with her hair), because the road was not always paved with rose petals.

Much of the earth was formed by violent upheavals from within that twisted and stressed the layers of rock

ad

into grotesque, painful, sharp-edged outcroppings. Hit one of those exposed rocks on a mountain trail the wrong way while you are running barefoot, and your running days are over. Encounter a lava bed while running barefoot, and there aren't enough Band-Aids in the world to staunch the bleeding. Run barefoot through the grass in a park and encounter a discarded hypodermic needle, and the results could be disastrous.

The practical aspects are legion. Running barefoot on ice can have devastating results, as can the opposite: running on asphalt where the sun has heated it to 200 degrees or more. Similarly, folks in the Deep South will tell you not to walk barefoot through the fields for fear of chiggers boring into

your feet looking for a new home. Even running on beach sand for an extended period of time can take its toll on the Achilles tendon.

In all things, common sense should prevail. Think through the trend you want to embrace before taking the plunge. And if you decide to take the plunge, do so gradually.

And please, please, please avoid self-parody. Don't chuck all of your high-tech shoes in favor of a pair of Five Fingers and then run around with an iPod, heart rate monitor, and GPS strapped to you. When you get home and feed your workout into your computer, even your computer will tell you: Image does not compute.

—*Rich Benyo*