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Barefoot running: the best trainers money can't buy

There is a growing trend for barefoot running. Now it has been suggested that runners get fewer injuries without shoes

Taking my shoes off in public is almost as excruciating as the thought of removing my clothes. I have ugly feet, white from winter, lumpy and misshapen. On this barefoot running course, however, no one has pretty feet, especially not the coach John Woodward, who has been pounding the moors, rocks and tarns of the Lake District barefoot for 25 years. He first went barefoot "as a free and hippy sort of thing" and has never really put his shoes on again.

He is rather bemused to find himself at the sharp end of a growing trend to run barefoot — or at least without the inches of padding, arch support and stability supplied by traditional running shoes.

Latest research suggests that runners might get fewer injuries if they run in the way that Nature intended. "Survival of the human race depended upon being able to run long enough to catch lunch or avoid becoming it," Woodward says.

Although he has never told anyone outright to take off their trainers, he invites them to do so "in the most inviting of settings" during the weekend Natural Running courses that he runs from his home in the village of Kirkby-in-Furness beside the Duddon Estuary on the northwest coast of England, near the Lake District.

Today, our first spin without shoes, we stay on kind ground: turf from nearby Silverdale Bay was judged so fine that it was once used on Wembley's pitch.

Our feet,Woodward vows, will go to places that they've never been before. By the end of the session we'll have run the four or five miles across turf and sand to the mouth of the estuary. But it's the quality rather than quantity of running that Woodward's after. Our first stage is "playtime" — which sounds toe-curling until you try it. Shoes off, we run on spongy turf, squelchy mud and firm sand, with a splash to round things off. "You recall the joy of throwing off shoes and socks and having a run around," Woodward says. Sure enough, I'm soon leaping from tussock to tussock, throwing in a little cartwheel for luck.

Which is all very well in a terrain perfect for barefoot, but the idea of running shoeless along paved streets or stony bridleways back home has me mentally mincing back to my trainers.

The rationale for running barefoot is this: modern running shoes damage your body. They warp your stride. You land on your heel with a straight leg, sending shockwaves through your joints. Ditch the shoes and it's too painful to land on your heels. Instead you land on the ball or mid-part of your foot with your leg slightly bent, absorbing the strain. Your foot rolls

naturally and only slightly from the outside in, you take shorter steps, your stride is lighter, your posture more aligned. Think of how you'd walk over shingle to retrieve your shoes, says Woodward. "You start to be careful."

Most runners on his courses come because they're injured and want to run again. Woodward recently helped an 18-year-old with shin splints desperate to get into the Army and a man of 86 just keen to have a go. On this course is Lorien Slaughter, principal dancer with the English Youth Ballet. He broke his foot and was told that he'd never dance again. Deciding against surgery, he began to train with Natural Running and was able to return to dance full-time within 18 months. "Barefoot running has given me something extra in ballet," he says.

"It all starts with the feet," explains Gerard Hartmann, a physical therapist in Ireland who works with Paula Radcliffe. He claimed years ago that deconditioned foot muscles, caused by restrictive shoes, were the biggest factor in injuries. He compares running shoes with a plaster-cast that causes feet to atrophy. "The bulkier and more supportive the shoe the greater the sensory deprivation."

Hartmann has worked with more than 100 world-class African athletes. "Most never wore shoes until their late teens," he says. "They have few foot defects."

Research by evolutionary biologists at Harvard University appears to bear this out. Dr Daniel Lieberman, who published his findings this year in *Nature*, says that striking the ground heel first is "like someone hitting your heel with a hammer with up to three times your body weight". He adds one note of caution: if you switch to barefoot, do it slowly and carefully (if you are diabetic, you should also seek medical advice before attempting it).

Skilful barefoot runners lift the toes and drop the ball of the foot in a natural arch to strike the ground with their leg underneath them rather than striding out in front. "Think of it as stroking the ground before you lift your foot off again," Woodward says. Your stride falls shorter and faster and you look as if you're prancing on tiptoes. To make the point, we are filmed running in trainers. In my mind I am like a gazelle; to my dismay, I'm more of a clumsy rhino. But a natural barefoot runner is poetry. Woodward's method — as a teacher of the Alexander Technique — is to work from the inside out, a "head to toe" approach. In a treatment received by each of us, he attempts to coax reluctant muscles into discovering a natural stride. Pathways in our brain controlling movements are well worn, he says. Relaxing my shoulder becomes possible if I visualise ripples from a pebble landing in a pond. The physical benefits are only half the picture. As a recreational runner, I'm intimidated by the focus on gear and timings and bored by the same old routes. I'm after the joie de vivre described by the author Christopher McDougall, whose book *Born to Run* has led the interest in barefoot running. He was told by leading US sports medicine doctors that his injuries would force him to quit running. He looked to native Mexican runners for inspiration, lost the shoes and it clicked. "I found the easy light sensation felt as if I could outrun the sun." Mindful of this, instructors take pride in a non-directive style of instruction.

After an hour or two of contact with the ground my toes have turned puce; there's still ice in the dips and hollows, but they don't feel painfully cold. Prancing about has kept my circulation going. In Woodward's studio, we embark on exercises to "wake up our feet". Mine have been weakened by stiff-soled shoes for 40 years, I'm told. One exercise aims to open up a natural twist in our gait. "Swing your body like a girl who's proud of her new skirt," says the co-instructor Janet Dutton. Bingo, I've got it.

Get carried away — it's a rush to run barefoot over frosty turf — and you risk doing too much too soon. Every expert advises a slow advance. "Your foot will regain its natural movement in a shorter time than the years it takes for shoes to degrade it," Woodward says. Within four to six weeks, he estimates, you can retrieve 80 per cent of your natural movement if you run without stiff-padded shoes. Initially, your running will slow otherwise you put yourself at risk of stress fractures and strains.It is also perfectly safe to run barefoot on a treadmill.

More immediately, my calves are killing me, and I've barely run five miles. All this landing on the balls of the feet has engaged unfamiliar muscles. As for ripped feet, it just doesn't happen. I've experienced more danger stepping on Lego bricks at home. Sports shoe manufacturers, responding to the barefoot boom, have devised thin, glove-like shoes — the Vibram, Nike Free or Terra Plana's Vivo Barefoot — for more unfriendly ground or night-time runs.

Runners switching to barefoot like to use these, or cheaper thin-soled neoprene beach shoes as they make the transition. But even urban barefooters don't report many hazards such as dog poo or glass. "People exaggerate the dangers," says Anna Toombs, a movement therapist from South London who has been running barefoot in the city for nearly a year. "You just use your eyes." And there are benefits to not running in straight lines — dodging obstacles tones and trains muscles you wouldn't touch in a repetitive stride.

Self-consciousness, for me, is the greatest barrier. Going shoeless is weird. "Run barefoot through a crowd of teenagers and you'll find the limits of your comfort," Woodward says. He once took a bag of shoes for his group — just so they could wear them on the train journey back and avoid commuter stares.

But as I gaze at my comfy trainers, I see again the jarring heel strike that spells death to my rickety knees. There may be no going back after this course. Which leads to another problem. If runners no longer have injuries, bunions, fancy shoes and orthotics, what will we talk about?

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