

SPECIAL "TOES OUT" EDITION

Dear Loyal Readers,

By now you have all seen the articles circulating across the internet touting the benefits of barefoot running, and the study whose data provides the foundation for the criticism of the modern running shoe.

The original *Globe* article is [here](#), and the study published in the journal *Nature* is [here](#). Read and digest.

If you ask us, having running back in the news headlines is the best thing that could happen to our sport, and we praise the media for providing such delightful dialogue.

What follows is an open letter to our readership, and an attempt to explain the position of Marathon Sports as a little old footwear retailer in a world gone barefoot. Read on.

Barefoot Running and Marathon Sports

An Open Letter to the Running Community

Regardless of what you call it ---barefoot running, POSE running, Chi running, good-lord-my-calves-are-killing-me running, etc. --- what was once passed off as a fad adopted by an elite few and an assortment of loonies is now garnering national attention thanks to a few hard-hitting publications.

First, author Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run* introduced the idea of barefoot running form to the masses, praising its injury-prevention benefits as salvation to a long history of running pathologies. The theory closely parallels the typical eyeglass wearer's journey: man has bad eyes, uses corrective lenses to adjust vision, becomes dependent on prescription, eyes become weaker, prescription strength increases.

In running, man, it is postulated, uses footwear as an adaptation, relying on increasingly corrective support structures to do the work, thereby weakening muscle and connective tissue and ultimately creating a greater need for support. However, by removing footwear from the equation many of the smaller stabilizer muscles in the lower extremity can actually become stronger, and the risk of injury can, somewhat counter intuitively, be reduced.

And the theory is sound.

More recently, a human evolutionary biology professor from Harvard University by the name of Daniel Lieberman (whom McDougall quotes extensively in *Born to Run*) has been one of the lead researchers in a well-funded study which attempts to scientifically quantify the benefits of barefoot running form. Lieberman's study has suddenly been catapulted into the limelight, with an appropriately-timed article in the journal *Nature* hitting newsstands mere weeks into the 2010 Boston Marathon training season, and a subsequent media flurry, being quoted in the *Times* and *Globe* and Tweeted to kingdom come.

Clearly, this whole barefoot thing has a captive audience. Just look up "barefoot running" in your Google News search bar and you'll find over 300 articles published within the last week discussing Lieberman's findings.

So how does Marathon Sports weigh in on the debate? Is barefoot really the way to go, or is it another passing fad?

First, let's clarify some terminology. Barefoot running, from our perspective, is the pursuit of a minimalist, natural running form. It may or may not include running truly unshod on a variety of surfaces, but at its core it is a minimalist movement. Henceforth, we will call it "minimalist running."

As a highly-regarded running specialty retailer, and winner of the coveted Best of Boston award an industry-leading 11 times, we take our integrity very seriously. And as evidenced by our early adoption of "minimalist" footwear like the Nike Free (introduced in 2005 to much buzz and acclaim), Newton, and now Vibram Five Fingers (scheduled to deliver in March '10), we feel that we are uniquely positioned and qualified to enter the ring.

The fact of the matter is this: we have always been proponents of the "less is more" philosophy, in that we are firm believers in using the most basic tools in our footwear toolbox to get the job done. Not every overpronator is in need of a motion control shoe, just as not every 180+ lb runner is in need of a high-cushion shoe. But finding the footwear that allows runners to meet the demands they place on their bodies is our full-time job, and we think we're pretty good at it.

The minimalist running phenomenon is no different. Not every runner who comes into our store is going to be ideally suited to jump right in with both feet (pun fully intended) to an exclusively barefoot training regimen, and our role as educators is to emphasize the importance of proper training and equipment to achieve whatever fitness goals a given runner is pursuing. If that goal is to be running with minimalist form 100% of the time, the proper tool to achieve that may be the Nike Free, Five Fingers, or Newtons, or it may be a matter of decreasing the overall level of support in their normal training footwear gradually over time.

From a training perspective, we feel that Moderation, Adaptation, and Progression (MAP) are the keys to improvement. Anytime a given training program is rushed, without using moderation or taking adaptation and progression into consideration, injury is a likely end result. With that in mind, anytime you see a pair of minimalist running shoes leave our store, you can trust that our staff has taken the time to explain the benefits and potential drawbacks of their use to the consumer.

We accept that, through careful use and diligence on the part of the runner, minimalist running is a fully legitimate form, and over a long period of time with proper training, is likely to yield less repetitive-stress injuries than a more pronounced heel striking gait. The evidence supports this, and frankly it stands to reason on its own.

Do we feel that every runner who steps through our doors can and should be running in minimalist footwear? Of course not; every runner is as unique as his or her fingerprint, and individual biomechanics and form can vary to an enormous degree from case to case. Going back to the eyeglasses analogy, would a lifelong eyeglass wearer simply stop wearing their glasses one day and suddenly be able to see clearly? Not likely. But for those who are ready to take on the challenge of adopting a new running form, or willing to put in the work to get there, we are more than happy to offer guidance, suggestions, and ultimately to provide product to suit their needs.

To those who view minimalist running as the ideal solution to injury-free running, we invite you to come in and pick our brains on the topic. Our staff is well-trained, knowledgeable, informed, and fully equipped to handle the coming tide. We believe minimalist running is here to stay, and we as leaders in the running industry have embraced it.

-Marathon Sports-

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