

Footloose and fit

BAREFOOT TRAINING – LITERALLY TRAINING WITHOUT ANY SHOES ON – IS THE HOTTEST NEW FITNESS TREND IN NORTH AMERICA



If you're like most adults, bedtime and bath time are probably among the rare occasions when you find yourself with nothing on your feet. But remember those childhood pleasures of running free and feeling the cool tiles, warm sand or green grass underfoot? After a certain age it seems we won't do even a slow trot without getting into a runner that has pronation or supination control, air, support and cushioning. That may not be all bad but some believe that in shoeing our feet all the time we have lost much more than childish play.

Enter barefoot training. No need to search for meaning behind the words, it is literally that: physical training without runners. The concept does seem a bit odd since it is so ingrained in us to wear runners for any form of workout, and to don appropriate ones for any given activity, but some say it's the feet that are losing out in the process. "If you're not exercising your feet you're missing out a whole area of the body," says Shannon (Griffiths) Fable, a fitness educator and consultant based in Boulder, Colorado.

Barefoot training is said to keep your feet from becoming too dependent on shoes, improve running technique and help prevent injury. "The idea behind it is running on grass, or other soft surfaces, for training purposes, rather than all the time," says Dr. Roy Mathews, a Vancouver-based podiatrist with a kinesiology background. "Done once or twice a week, it helps strengthen the small muscles in the foot."

Going barefoot isn't just the realm of runners, however. Balletone (www.balletone.com) and Nia (www.nia-nia.com) are relatively new forms of fitness that borrow from dance and are meant to be practiced barefoot. Nia encompasses both Eastern and Western movements and brings together concepts from healing arts, martial arts and dance. Balletone combines ballet exercises with Pilates concepts and stretching techniques.

While not an entirely new method, barefoot training has probably received more attention since athletic shoe manufacturer Nike ironically developed Nike Free – a sneaker that is said to emulate running barefoot (www.nike.com/nikefree). But they are not the only ones selling "barefoot"

alternatives. Swiss-designed Masai Barefoot Technology (MBT) shoes are engineered to resemble unshod movement, and the company has developed Rolljogging, a training method that is meant to simulate running barefoot in sand (www.swissmasai.ca). Vibram Five Fingers (www.vibramfivefingers.com), originally designed with rock climbers and sailors in mind, has also found a market among barefoot runners.

The heart of barefoot training appears to be within the running community, and a certain level of inspiration is found in past Olympic gold medalists Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia and Zola Budd of South Africa, who were renowned for their awesome speed and the fact that they ran barefoot. Lots of information from those who practice it can be found on the Internet. The topic is found on running blogs, and some barefoot runners have created their own websites dedicated to the cause (www.barefootrunner.org). Some runners will just dabble in it, and others will do a portion of their running unshod because they feel it gives them an edge.

But some barefoot runners will do it just about anywhere, in just about any weather and over very long distances. "I have always loved going barefoot, so it seemed very logical to me," says Rick Roeber, aka Barefoot Rick, of his decision to throw off his runners just over three years ago. "Since I have run almost exclusively barefoot I have not experienced an injury of my knees or legs. That was not true when I wore shoes." An avid runner, Roeber has run some 43 marathons, 25 of which he has completed since deciding to run unshod.

But many, including Roeber, would caution that this level of barefoot running isn't for the average person and that there simply isn't enough research to support that there is any benefit to it at all. Mathews agrees that more research is required but says barefoot training will make you a stronger runner.

Before leaving your runners at the door, do your research (check out www.sportsci.org/jour/0103/mw.htm), discuss it with a trainer, talk to someone who does barefoot training and – most importantly – take it one step at a time.

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