Why sports and outdoor footwear brands are going back to nature. The popularity of products such as the Reebok EasyTone, Nike Free and Vibram FiveFingers is challenging the idea that running shoes need to have high levels of cushioning.



These feet were made for walking

by Shari Shallard

Can a body part be trendy? Can mankind's original means of getting around now be the hottest new thing in footwear? Nike has recently launched its latest generation of shoes designed to emulate the experience of being barefoot, and one of this year's most high profile marketing campaigns is based on a toning shoe from Reebok designed not so much to facilitate a sport, but rather to *be* the sport—harnessing the biomechanics of the human foot so that the mere act of wearing the shoe can strengthen the body attached to it.

Smoothing the trail for both of these are recently published studies, which have found that housing our feet in sturdy, traditional footwear deprives them of intricate and natural movements. The aforementioned shoes represent two distinct takes on revolutionary footwear: Nike's Free line aims to capture the benefits of walking barefoot, while Reebok's EasyTone aims to change the way a person walks. These shoes represent new ideas about feet—ideas about how coverage might affect everything from gait to knee pain to sagging rear ends to state of mind.

Consumers are paying attention to these

Model Kelly Brook flexes her fashion muscles in Reebok's EasyTone shoe campaign.

Reebok

ideas. Daniel Sarro, senior manager of corporate communications for Reebok, says that the company is currently projecting sales of more than five million pairs of toning shoes in the US this year, and potentially 10 million pairs globally. "In the US we have enjoyed great success, selling out product everywhere," he says. "In fact, at Nordstrom, some stores are reporting waiting lists with more than 100 people for EasyTone. In other markets around the world, such as Germany, UK, Russia, India and Japan we're seeing very similar sell-through numbers."

Interestingly, Reebok's EasyTone isn't the first toning shoe on the market, yet this year consumers seem unfazed by the shoe's eccentricity and are hungry to buy. And although the Nike Free line seems somewhat anomalous within the famously sophisticated brand, the company expects it to flourish. Let's look at why.

Meet the foot and its biggest fans

Some facts are hard to dispute: the foot has 26 bones, 33 joints, and more than 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments (plus plenty of blood vessels, nerves, skin, and soft tissue). How best to protect and make efficient use of those components is less straightforward. But what has recently caught the industry's attention are studies published within the last year—Harvard's 'Foot strike patterns and collision forces in habitually barefoot versus shod runners', published in *Nature*; and the University of Antwerp's 'The effects of habitual footwear use: foot shape and function in native barefoot walkers', published in *Footwear Science*. These have confirmed that the way human feet strike the ground tends to differ based on whether or not shoes are worn. With shoes (shod), feet tend to strike heel first; unshod, feet tend to strike first on the ball or center of the foot. Such factors have implications on how the rest of the body handles and responds to the impact of each step. The publication of these findings, along with the storm of media coverage surrounding them, has been very welcome by individuals who oppose the traditional trainers that currently rule the market – primarily advocates of barefoot running.

Ted McDonald—better known as Barefoot Ted—is a particularly famous advocate. His website, www.barefootted.com, is a sophisticated hub with forums, a store, information about coaching, and Barefoot Ted's own blog. His musings range from barefoot running's philosophical aims: (regaining connectedness, mindfulness, and presence in your running and in your body) to proper form (stable upright posture: balanced head, core engaged, unbent torso, the feeling of balance, relaxed, yet strong).



The EasyTone Curve uses instability pods to encourage toning through increased muscle activation in the gluteus maximus, hamstrings and calves.

Reebok

He also points visitors towards the book Born to Run, in which journalist Christopher McDougall examines the running techniques of Mexico's Tarahumara Indians, who have for centuries managed to run hundreds of miles at a time without rest and without incurring what we deem to be typical running injuries. Mr McDougall has his own website, www.chrismcdougall.com, devoted largely to the barefoot running debate; one impassioned essay opens with a nod to the recent attention given to barefoot running: "We're lucky," he writes, "2010 is going to be a great year, because we're watching one of the most harmful myths in human performance explode before our eyes." This myth, Mr McDougall argues, is that humans need cushioned running shoes.

It should be noted, though, that while some individuals take strong stances on one or the other side of the 'barefoot running debate', the authors of the Harvard paper have issued a statement acknowledging the waves their study has created, stating: "Please note that we present no data or opinions on how people should run, whether shoes cause some injuries, or whether barefoot running causes other kinds of injuries. We believe there is a strong need for controlled, prospective studies on these problems."

Not quite barefoot

Nonetheless, even Nike, a name synonymous with sophisticated fitness footwear, has given its blessing to the barefoot movement. The website blurb for Nike Free reads: "Barefoot running. Everyone's talking about how great it is, but is it truly beneficial? We think so. And here's why. Barefoot running frees up your foot's range of motion, allowing you to strengthen muscles you don't normally use in a typical running shoe. But we understand that you aren't crazy about squishing your toes in mud or dodging broken glass with bare feet."

Enter the Nike Free Run+, the latest generation of the Nike Free line, with a flexible design promoting natural movement of the foot. They're stylish, they're Nikes, and they're even promoted by videos featuring a lot of good



Vibram's award winning FiveFingers foot glove.
Vibram

looking people jogging naked (the Bear Butte Running Camp series on Nike's website is a must-see), so they will undoubtedly continue to bring the company great success. In fact, a press release introducing the company's 2015 global growth strategy states that Free footwear is a major driver of growth in the category of women's training, with nearly $740 million in sales as well as a number one spot in the US and the top five European markets.

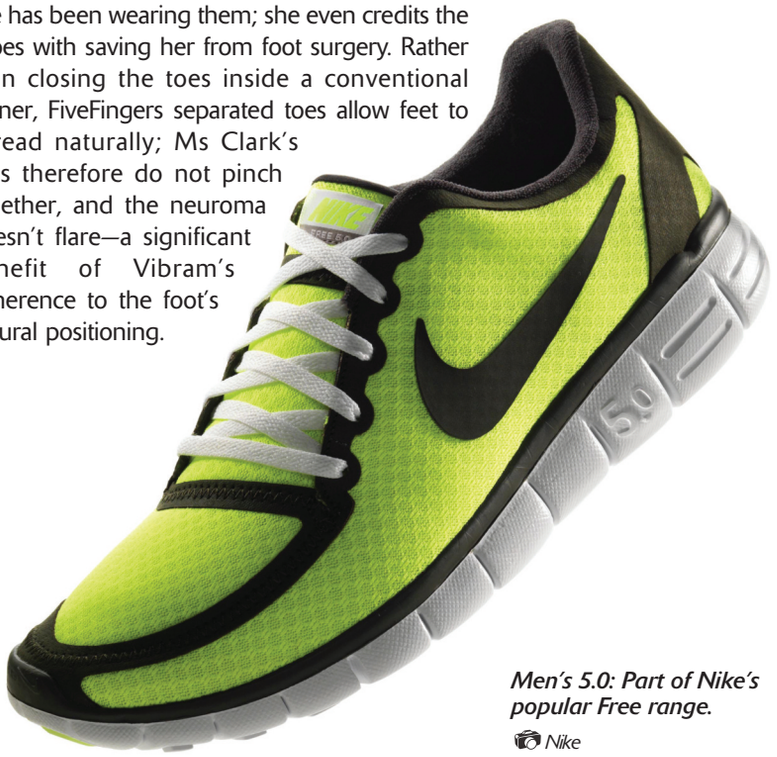
There are some online murmurs of scepticism from hardcore barefooters, who feel that the latest Nike Free design misses the minimalism of barefoot running—that while it certainly provides less constraint than traditional trainers, the support it offers is still too significant. But for many others, as evidenced by sales figures (and a perusal of many running forums), Nike Frees offer an ideal balance: stripped yet substantial, harnessing the benefits of barefoot running with the reassurance of cushioning.

Meet the almost-foot

Even more stripped is the Vibram FiveFingers, a thin and flexible shoe that fits the contours of the foot, offering the experience of going barefoot but with the protection and grip of a rubber sole. Even Barefoot Ted has been known to don FiveFingers, and blogs about what these shoes offer: "I remember how excited I was to get my first pair," he writes, "they were the first shoes that I felt came close to a true barefoot feel and would also allow me to run more comfortably on tough mountain trails. Furthermore, they were the first minimal shoe that I tested that didn't fall apart after 20 miles of hard trail running."

The FiveFingers made *Time* magazine's list of top inventions of 2007, and has since transformed the fitness experience for countless individuals—including those for whom barefoot running is irrelevant. Today Priscilla Clark, a 53-year-old retired accountant from Florida, is an active woman: between zumba, spinning, weight training, and other cardio classes, she works out at least seven hours per week. Yet, before discovering FiveFingers, she struggled to maintain her workout schedule because of a neuroma. "I was often not able to complete an entire class, particularly weight training, as my neuroma would become too painful," she says. "I would have to stop, or would have to take off my shoes and continue barefoot, or in some cases, leave class."

Ms Clark says she has not had to take off her Vibrams or leave class once in the eight months she has been wearing them; she even credits the shoes with saving her from foot surgery. Rather than closing the toes inside a conventional trainer, FiveFingers separated toes allow feet to spread naturally; Ms Clark's toes therefore do not pinch together, and the neuroma doesn't flare—a significant benefit of Vibram's adherence to the foot's natural positioning.



Men's 5.0: Part of Nike's popular Free range.
Nike

Better than barefoot?

Improved strength is also among the other benefits of barefoot running being reported by both Vibram and Nike; without the sturdiness of a regular trainer, muscles in the feet and legs are stimulated into action as they work to keep the body steady and balanced. It is this aspect of the foot's workings that Reebok's toning shoes tap into—exaggerating that instability to increase the workload of those muscles.

The company has spent the last couple of months rolling out the remarkable Ree campaign in various markets. This enormous investment in playful television commercials and colourful print ads, as well as digital and in-store manifestations, asks customers to "rethink" existing ideas about fitness. At the campaign's centre are EasyTones, made with balance pods of moving air to turn everything (whether through a park or down the grocery store aisle) into a workout, yielding improved muscle tone in the hamstrings, calves and 'glutes'—up to 28%, according to the company.

"Most of our competitors in this category use rocker bottoms soles. We believe this limits them and they do not have the same flexibility to go forward as Reebok," says Mr Sarro. Those competitors include Shape-ups from Skechers, which use a soft kinetic wedge insert and dynamic rolling bottom, and MBT, a pioneer in destablilising shoes. (MBTs can cost twice as much as Shape-Ups—a price consumers may be happy to pay following MBT's big screen appearance in The Joneses; Demi Moore's character power walks around her neighborhood in a pair, eliciting envious looks from the neighbours.)

Both Shape-Ups and MBTs are recognisable by their signature rounded soles, while EasyTone more closely resembles a typical Reebok trainer. "[Our moving air technology] not only resulted in dramatic improvements when tested in the lab," says Mr Sarro, "but the design was such that it could be worked into a shoe without compromising the look."

This technology also has a versatility that lends itself to new products: "JumpTone, RunTone and TrainTone will hit the market this year," says Mr Sarro, "and will broaden the consumer base and help athletes who want to get more out of their sport or workout." RunTones, which are already available, have eight pods of moving air designed to offer a softer run while forcing muscles to work harder—encouraging increased muscle activation, toning, strength and endurance.

Reebok's expanding range of toning footwear, propelled by an irresistibly cheeky campaign, is expected to continue creating new enthusiastic customers "We believe that in other markets around the world, while they are behind the US right now, we will see a significant jump in sales as awareness grows."

The year of the foot?

How consumer awareness of the ways in which human feet function—and manufacturers' efforts to both feed and capitalise on this awareness—will affect the industry remains to be seen. Barefoot running may very well emerge from its cult status to become a more mainstream sport; Vibram FiveFingers might hold strong as the shoe of choice for purists while Nike Free attracts the curious and newly indoctrinated; EasyTone and RunTone might just change the calibre of legs and butts as we now know them.

If these predictions are in any way true, a new question arises: how, and to what extent, must conventional trainers reassert their value?



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