

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: MERRELL

Footwear brand Merrell recently teamed up with a professional barefoot runner to promote its first range of 'barefoot' shoes, showing that sometimes the old proverb is true – if you can't beat them, join them.

The bare necessities

US outdoor footwear brand Merrell launched its first range of so-called 'barefoot running shoes' at this year's OutDoor trade show in Friedrichshafen. The brand is by no means the first to create such minimalist shoes, but its insistence that the barefoot genre should now have a place in mainstream footwear, alongside running, cycling and tennis shoes, poses an interesting idea.

Although the earliest known use of shoes dates back 10,000 years (according to an article published in 1999 by Connolly and Cannon), barefoot running as we know it today first entered the public sphere in 1960, when Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia won the Olympic marathon in Rome barefoot after deciding that his team-issued shoes hurt his feet. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, a number of prominent professional runners threw off their shoes in favour of running barefoot but, even at the beginning of the 21st century, the style remained on the fringe of a larger running community.

Proponents of the 'barefoot movement' claim that most athletic shoes, with their strong soles, structured sides and cushioned inserts, keep feet restricted so they might be making the wearer's



feet lazy, weak and more prone to injury. They argue that barefoot running is healthier for feet and reduces the risk of chronic injuries, including repetitive stress injuries due to the impact of heel strike in padded shoes. But even those who run barefoot professionally say that people trying it out for the first time should start slowly. The launch of Merrell's barefoot range suggests that increasing numbers of people are buying minimalist 'barefoot' shoes to ease their way into running barefoot, or perhaps to test drive the idea of it.

Merrell's Barefoot Trail Glove features a lightweight mesh upper with a fused rubber toe bumper for protection, as well as 4mm compression molded EVA midsole cushions.

 Merrell

Merrell claims its Barefoot range mimics the sensation of running barefoot, providing protection for the feet without impeding their natural movement

 Merrell

A happy coincidence

It seems that footwear companies did not initially set out to create shoes which would mimic barefoot running; rather, consumers chose the closest thing on the market to barefoot and used it for their own purposes. A quirky foot-glove called the Vibram FiveFingers was developed by Vibram in 2006, as a way for sailors to have improved grip on their boats. The shoe was quickly spotted and adopted by barefoot trainers. Clearly, other footwear brands noticed this growing consumer trend, and not long after the launch of the FiveFingers, Nike launched its own product called the Nike Free, which it claimed mimicked the sensation of barefoot running. Since their launch, sales of the FiveFingers have tripled every year and reached 11 million in 2009.

More than a dozen other brands followed suit, and there are now 'barefoot' shoes by Fila, New Balance and adidas, as well as a number of other companies. Merrell's new range, called simply 'Barefoot' was developed in partnership with Vibram and comprises six models for both men and women. Merrell has perhaps taken a leaf out of Vibram's marketing book in calling the footwear not shoes but 'gloves' – a description which befits the idea of the minimalist shoe as something that should protect, but not inhibit, the feet of the wearer.

Merrell says that the benefits of its minimalist footwear include lower impact, a more efficient and aligned gait and stimulated muscles increasing core strength, improving ability and building "the body's ability to burn more calories". Although there has not been much study on barefoot training, research has shown that wearing shoes to exercise takes more energy, and that barefoot runners use about 4% less oxygen than shod runners. Other studies suggest barefoot athletes naturally compensate for the lack of cushioning and land more softly than runners in shoes, putting less shock and strain on the rest of the body. Barefoot runners also tend to land in the middle of their foot, which can improve running form and reduce energy use.

Michael Warburton's review of barefoot running in *Sports Science* stated: "Running barefoot is associated with a substantially lower prevalence of acute injuries of the ankle and chronic injuries of the lower leg in developing countries, but well-designed studies of the effects of barefoot and shod running on injury are lacking. Laboratory studies show that the energy cost of running is reduced by about 4% when the feet are not shod, due to the lack of extra mass on the foot. In spite of these apparent benefits, barefoot running is rare in competition, and there are no published controlled trials of the effects of running barefoot on simulated or real competitive performance."¹



Embracing barefoot

At a time when barefoot running is becoming increasingly popular, it is interesting that Merrell has decided to embrace the idea, rather than avoid it altogether for fear of reduced sales. After all, the very concept of barefoot running negates the need for athletes to ever buy running shoes again. It is a bold and clever move to not only support the barefoot movement, but to create a product which will ensure continuing sales, as people who like the idea of it look for a halfway point before discarding their shoes altogether. Barefoot running expert Jason Robillard collaborated with Merrell at OutDoor in July to explain the ideas behind barefoot running and promote the shoes. However, in his book, *The Barefoot Running Book*, Mr Robillard says that using barefoot shoes to get used to barefoot running is not the way to do it. "It is common for new barefoot runners to have a desire to 'ease into' barefoot running by using a minimalist shoe," he writes. "I have found it is better to learn the proper form of barefoot running first, and then use minimalist shoes as needed."

This sentence will surely not lead to a rush in sales of minimalist shoes – but as the likelihood is that barefoot running will increase in popularity over time rather than decrease, it is probably for the best that sports brands are backing the movement rather than running away from it. 

The Vibram FiveFingers has separate slots for each toe and no cushioning.

 Vibram

The Nike Free line of footwear features a segmented sole which Nike says provides greater flexibility while still having an amount of cushioning.

 Nike

1. Michael Warburton (December 2001). *'Barefoot Running'*. Sports Science 5 (3)

