

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: VIBRAM FIVEFINGERS

Last autumn, Vibram FiveFingers settled a lawsuit, filed by a dissatisfied customer, but not before the idea of barefoot (or minimally-shod) running underwent much unflattering scrutiny. So how is post-settlement Vibram doing today? Has it abandoned the running market and rebranded FiveFingers as quirky yachting shoes? Quite the opposite. The company is continuing to develop running shoes, form partnerships with running organisations, and educate consumers on being safe and effective barefoot runners.

Bare minimum

It's been a complicated six years for the niche of barefoot running and related footwear, so let us begin with a review. Italy-based Vibram has been making rubber soles since 1937, and Vibram FiveFingers (VFF) – the minimalist footwear that resembles a rubber glove more than a shoe – launched in 2006. But it was author and runner Chris McDougall's 2009 book *Born to Run* (which contrasts the running methods of the Tarahumara Indian tribe, who swiftly cross hundreds of miles wearing only thin sandals, with McDougall's own injury-prone experience wearing traditional running shoes) that compelled readers to re-examine their own footwear choices.

Although McDougall didn't write explicitly about running in Vibrams, this book was widely credited with sparking a barefoot running movement. (Or, to be more precise, for Westerners who often contend with broken glass on daily routes, the book sparked a barely-there minimalist-footwear movement.)

Suddenly, heavily padded, thick-soled running shoes looked unnatural and bulky next to the sleek VFF. In August 2009, the *New York Times* quoted Vibram's US CEO, Tony Post, predicting sales to triple to \$10 million in North America alone. In the May-June 2010 issue of *WSA*, we wrote about this exploding popularity. We quoted McDougall's excited blog about the move away from highly supportive running shoes ("...we're watching one of the most harmful myths in human performance explode before our eyes," he wrote) and showed how Nike's five-year global growth strategy named lightweight footwear as a major driver of growth. We wondered, rhetorically, what would become of conventional trainers.

Move forward three years: In September 2013, an article in our sister publication *World Footwear* discussed a slowdown in this trend, pointing out that companies were starting to



Through a partnership with Vibram, Warrior Dash participants can try a pair of Spyridon MR FiveFingers (pictured here) during an actual race.

 Warrior Dash



The Bikila EVO WP is a running shoe released last winter – after the settlement was reached – demonstrating that the company is not shying away from the running market. Intended for keeping feet dry during rainy runs, the waterproof shoe has taped seams and a high ankle collar.

 Vibram USA

omit the word ‘barefoot’ and focusing more on ‘lightweight’ and ‘minimalist’. Researchers at Canada’s University of Calgary had found that claims of barefoot running reducing injury and strengthening muscles were not adequately supported. Indeed, not long before that research was released, consumer Valerie Bezdek had filed a lawsuit against Vibram, saying the company’s claims were “deceptive because FiveFingers are not proven to provide any of the health benefits beyond what conventional running shoes provide”. The lawsuit further stated: “[Running] in FiveFingers may increase injury risk as compared to running in conventional running shoes, and even when compared to running barefoot”.

In May 2014, Vibram agreed to a settlement, saying that the company was not admitting fault but wanted to avoid the expense of a legal battle. The company statement included this: “As with any innovation that ignores conventional thinking, there will always be some scepticism. Vibram’s FiveFingers is no different.”

Critics of VFF greeted the settlement with impertinent headlines, such as The Wire’s “How to Get a Refund for Your Silly Looking, Not Helpful Toe Shoes” and Fittish.com’s “FiveFingers Maker Will Pay Millions to Suckers Who Bought Its Shoes”. This seemed, for some, to be a big I-told-you-so moment.

VFF proponents spoke out too. They turned to social media, sharing passionate, personal stories of lives transformed by the unique shoes through blogs and forums. Others were unmoved by the settlement. Dr Ross Tucker, co-founder of the popular website sportsscience.com, composed a lengthy, thoughtful piece on the topic. “I felt the whole lawsuit was harsh, and the settlement places the blame on Vibram, and does little to acknowledge that people, quite frankly, showed a real lack of common sense in their uptake of this new way to run,” he wrote. “People must not

[confuse] this settlement with a finding that barefoot or minimalist running actually cause injury ... All the settlement says is that Vibram advertised falsely, promising benefits that could not be substantiated. In other words, the evidence doesn’t exist. Yet.”

As for Vibram itself, it prefers not to say much about the settlement. The company declined to answer settlement-related questions for this article, and the only relevant mention on the website is a letter from Mike Gionfriddo, president and CEO of Vibram USA. In it, he thanks customers for the outpouring of encouragement, expresses excitement about the future, and directs questions about the settlement to a different court-approved website.

Undaunted

So, what has changed as a result of the settlement? Well, the website no longer carries its “6 Reasons to Wear Vibram FiveFingers” list – which included bullet points such as “Strengthens Muscles in the Feet and Lower Legs – wearing FiveFingers will stimulate and strengthen muscles in the feet and lower legs, improving general foot health and reducing the risk of injury” and “Eliminates Heel Lift to Align the Spine and Improve Posture – By lowering the heel, our bodyweight becomes evenly distributed across the footbed, promoting proper posture and spine alignment”.

Instead, the benefits of wearing VFF are presented as anecdotal praise from customers – primarily as stylised and compelling videos on the What’s Your Story page. Vibram’s Facebook and Twitter pages also solicit and share stories, photos and encouragement from the enthusiastic VFF-wearing community.

But most significantly, Vibram as a brand is not responding to the settlement by backing down from its role as revolutionary running apparel. In fact, it seems VFF is doubling down

on the benefits of barefoot running by taking control of the conversation and creating a more educated, stronger consumer – largely through Barefoot EDU. Featured on Vibram’s website nearly as prominently as the shoes themselves, Barefoot Education is a virtual area that invites visitors to take a more nuanced look at the anatomy of feet, the act of barefoot running, and how VFF can serve both.

The fitness advisor for Barefoot EDU is Stacey Lei Krauss, founder of The willPower Method (a total-body barefoot conditioning programme). Ms Krauss says that when she developed her own programme over 15 years ago, she “realised that most people never use their feet the way they were intended to move” – a perspective that made her a natural fit for Vibram’s educational efforts. Ms Krauss creates materials and videos for the Vibram website and works at Vibram-sponsored fitness and wellness conventions, leading workshops for fitness professionals. Use your feet correctly, her message is, and the potential benefits abound.

“I think I’ve literally spoken to thousands of fitness pros about this subject. It’s polarising!” she states. “The debates sometimes get sticky, but in the end, no one can debate this: To truly move our bodies correctly, we must gain stability and mobility in our joints, flexibility in the muscles, and flexible strength at the connective tissue. Muscles should be strong; adhesions, scar tissue and painful trigger points must be addressed. This includes the feet – and you can’t do this stuff in traditional athletic shoes.”

The Barefoot Running section of Barefoot EDU guides runners through four key areas: from creating a personal plan, to factors to consider, to barefoot running technique – plus a suggested training schedule. The site balances mission statements such as ‘Wearing FiveFingers for running, fitness training, water sports or just for fun will make your feet stronger and healthier – naturally’ with cautionary advice such as ‘Listen to your feet!’ and ‘Stop if your arches or the top of your foot are hurting!’.

As Ms Krauss emphasises, it seems the shoes



Stacey Lei Krauss, founder of a barefoot-conditioning programme and fitness advisor for Vibram’s Barefoot EDU, helps consumers transition from conventional footwear to VFF.

 Stacey Lei Krauss

themselves are neither hero nor villain, but rather a catalyst for experiencing a more natural foot experience. “As we know,” she says, “the ‘shoe’ doesn’t make feet strong or flexible – the design of the shoe just allows the foot to act the way it was intended to.” To reap those benefits, however, slow acclimatisation and often foot exercise (specifically Ms Krauss’s sensory exercises) are essential. “Considering most people have had their feet stabilised, cushioned and supported for years and years, they need to make their feet strong, flexible and agile before they start to run,” she says. “We’ve seen dozens of articles discussing the dangers behind barefoot running. In the end, the solution is proper acclimatisation or slow progression.”

Product and partnership development

Beyond its educational efforts, Vibram is continuing to develop new shoes and new partners. This spring, two core shoes were released: the Trek Ascent and the KMD EVO. The KMD EVO (which the company describes using phrases like “defying gravity” and “maximum flight potential”) is a fitness shoe,



This spring brought more VFF releases, including the Trek Ascent, which is designed primarily for indoor fitness.

 Vibram USA

designed for leaping, climbing and balancing. The Trek Ascent is “a great spring or summer shoe,” according to Kristen Murphy, marketing manager for Vibram USA. Emphasising grip and traction, the shoe is “perfect for hiking and just being outdoors,” she says.

Lest cynics point out that neither of these are running shoes, it’s worth noting that this past winter – not long after the settlement was announced – Vibram released the Bikila EVO WP, a newer version of an existing runners’ favourite, the Bikila. The new Bikila EVO WP – WP for ‘waterproof’ – has taped seams and a higher boot-style ankle to keep water from sneaking in over the top. (Yes, all Vibrams can be worn in and out of water and easily tossed into the washing machine, but most allow water permeation.) This is an example of where VFF are most distinctive; traditional sneakers feel awful when wet, squishing noisily with each heavy step – but the Bikila EVO WP offers an alternative experience. Innovation at Vibram does not appear to be slowing.

You can also get a sense of a company’s strength by who its friends are, and at the moment Vibram is pretty tight with Warrior Dash – the cool, tough and thriving mud obstacle course that takes runners on a gruelling (but fun!) 5K race through challenging obstacles and messy terrain. The multi-year partnership was announced last year and, as part of the agreement, Vibram will bring a mobile washing machine station to select events so participants can clean their muddy VFFs after the race. Additionally, a trial programme will allow participants to try out a demo pair of Spyridon MR

FiveFingers (the MR stands for ‘mud run’) during an event before deciding whether to purchase them.

An even newer, if perhaps gentler, partnership was announced earlier this year, with the group Girls on the Run (GOTR). GOTR is a non-profit organisation designed to teach girls life skills through interactive lessons and running-based games. Each season concludes with a 5K, run by the girls and their respective running buddies. (One participant’s mother told WSA that GOTR “really helped build her daughter’s confidence and got her thinking about long-term goals”.)

Vibram will help connect individual chapters with their local sporting goods stores and, for every pair of Vibram-soled shoes sold at these retailers, will make a donation to GOTR. The organisation’s CEO, Elizabeth Kunz, praises the partnership, saying it will create “greater awareness of the work our local councils do to impact the lives of girls and their families in the communities they serve”.

A story of perseverance

This is where the VFF brand is positioning itself: innovative, productive, forming partnerships that encompass tough, muddy adults and young, ambitious girls, and countering cynics with an assault of information. When Ms Kunz describes why Girls on the Run feels so aligned with Vibram, she could also be describing why the footwear company is emerging from these last few years on such solid footing: Vibram, she says, is an “aspirational story of perseverance, confidence and strength”. 

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