

The Evolution of a Running Shoe (Mine)

When I became a runner, I was clueless about running shoes and tended to go with whatever happened to be on sale. While my shoes weren't exactly the Blue Light Special, back then I didn't know a Nike from a Nokia.

Not surprisingly, the shoes I chose weren't the best, and they weren't necessarily good for me either. And sooner rather than later I began to experience a sharp, stabbing pain in both knees.

When I called a doctor who specialized in sports injuries, his nurse told me to bring my running shoes to the appointment. "He'll want to see what you're running in," she said.

That he did.

"Get some better shoes," were the first words out of the doctor's mouth when he walked into the examining room and saw my running shoes. His eyes said, *What an idiot!*

Along with some strengthening exercises for my knees, he suggested shoes with more stability and support to keep things from wobbling around as I ran. When I began running again, my shoe of choice was a ponderous grey pair by New Balance (can you say clodhoppers?). But they were stable.

How stable were they? An elephant could safely have run in those things without twisting an ankle, I am sure.

For the next few years I bounced from brand to brand as one favorite model after another was either discontinued or dumber

down with more and more bells and whistles that I neither wanted nor needed. Either the fit changed or they became too clunky or too stiff or too soft. But every one was designed to provide a fair amount of stability.

Then one morning the problem was not in my knees any more. While running comfortably during a 12K race, I began to notice a slow burn behind my right ankle that would not go away no matter what I did. A quick stop to stretch provided some temporary relief, but the last few miles were painful indeed.

Damn you, Thetis! Why couldn't you have held your son Achilles by the pinkie when you dipped him in the Styx?

One problem with Achilles tendonitis is that you still look normal and so people don't understand why you can't run anymore. But with all the self-inflicted damage that I have managed to do to my body over the years, I have found no other area that heals so maddeningly slowly. Stretching, ice, rest, massage, anti-inflammatories, cursing, chanting – they all seem to provide some measure of relief, albeit temporary, but that little puppy is still going to take its sweet time in getting better, and there doesn't seem to be a thing you can do about it.

At some point I discovered heel cups. They raise your heel a bit so the Achilles tendon doesn't have to travel quite so far, and this is supposed to lessen the strain and promote healing. They aren't a cure-all, but they help. Finally I could run without pain again, most of the time, anyway.

"You're putting a temporary patch on a very crucial part of your running

anatomy,” my obviously disgusted doctor spat out. “Give it a month to heal.”

A month? Not possible, I thought, but deep down I knew he was right. And a month later I was better. I probably would have improved even more had I not started running again after three weeks, though, and back in the heel cups went. “To let it finish healing,” I told myself. Things were better, but no cigar.

Later a friend suggested orthotics and I was pain-free almost immediately, but again the pain crept slowly back. Then it was more experimentation with varying combinations of shoes and inserts as I desperately sought a fix. At one point I was working with more than half a dozen different pairs of running shoes and several sets of orthotics.

As an afterthought, I sat down with a trainer at my gym who listened patiently to my tale of running woe. She then had me take off my shoes and walk across the room several times, followed by an easy jog.

“Why are you wearing those shoes?”

Say what?

“Those slabs,” she said, gesturing at my shoes. “Your feet need to pronate – that’s the way the body is designed – and you pronate quite normally and naturally barefoot. But those running shoes of yours are designed to keep you from pronating, which in turn stresses your Achilles tendons because your feet are trying to do something your shoes won’t let them. And these rigid orthotics simply compound the stress. It’s no wonder you’re having problems.”

Her theory was that the stability shoes that I had been wearing for the past 15 years were absolutely the wrong shoes for me. What I really needed was a shoe that would let my feet pronate naturally, something my stability shoes have been preventing all along, a plain and simple cushioning shoe.

I went out and bought just that, a basic pair of running shoes whose predecessor probably came out sometime during the Reagan Administration. But after all these years of running with one crutch or another, I couldn’t quite bring myself to run without one, so in went the heel cups. Not bad, but not good either.

Orthotics? Better for a while, but soon the pain was back.

There was nothing left to do but go bare. No heel cups. No orthotics. No Pain? No pain!

ARR News, April 2006
Albuquerque Road Runners Club