

The Barefoot Shoe

What do shoes have to do with freediving?



Before we arrived in New Zealand, when I was five, I don't know if I ever owned a pair of shoes. Sandals maybe - they were compulsory for exploring reefs and wading in the stone-fish territory of the Pacific islands - but nothing that bundled the toes up away from the sunlight.

Fortunately, New Zealand is footwear optional. As kids, shoes were just an annoying part of a school uniform, to be wrenched off on Friday afternoon and flung to a corner of the living room where they would remain until Monday morning. We hopped across oyster-encrusted rocks, made huts in gorsebushes and explored grassy islands, all barefoot. Even at high school

and university it was easier and more comfortable to go to the supermarket or cinema barefoot than find a pair of clean socks.

I guess this lifestyle has lived on to a certain extent in my choice of sports. Unassisted freediving (CNF) is the only discipline where you use your bare feet to propel you through the water. Part of my attraction to CNF is the sensation of being in *direct* contact with the water, and your ability to 'communicate' with it, without any intermediary.

So anything that preserves this direct contact in my day-to-day life is going to have my attention. The Vibram Fivefingers did just that. I met Matt Wallden, the director of Primal Lifestyle, UK's importer for Vibram footwear, and he filled me in on the essence of a barefoot shoe: our feet are designed by millions of years of precise evolution, and a few decades of profit-driven shoe manufacturing has left us with soft, easily injured feet, and bad running and walking habits. Vibram fivefingers give your feet only enough protection from glass and sharp rocks, without removing the barefoot experience, and, most importantly, the communication with the earth.



As Matt told me, when you can feel the contours and details of the ground you are moving on it makes you a more humble person, bringing you into intimate contact with the planet, rather than floating above it on a cushioned interface.



After using a pair of Vibram Fivefingers for two weeks now in gym-training, hiking, and anywhere else I would normally be pulling on my cross-trainers, I can confirm all this and more. Going barefoot strengthens the arch of your foot, develops the myriad of muscles that control the foot and toes (which will pay dividends on a no-fins kick), and wards off leg and back injuries by coaxing you into a more natural bipedal position.

If you still need convincing then the book "Born to Run" by Christopher McDougall is not only an incredible and inspiring story about the Tarahumara indians of Mexico, who run ultramarathons in thin sandals (beating the best the world has to offer), but also an incredible insight into the ultimate motivations of sport and how any discipline should be grounded in pleasure.

All Vibram products are available in the UK from Primal Lifestyle and throughout the world from Vibram International.

The photos above are off the Vibram KSO, which stands for 'keep stuff out'!

I have owned Vibram KSO's since 2009... I like them but my big toe hurts if I wear them too long. Stig also uses Vibrams.

by Eric Fattah on 2011-07-31 01:39:24

Great shoes, brilliant concept. I have webbed toes though and find that any toe separators are uncomfortable, guess I'll just stick with barefoot running. Our feet are so important and yet mostly overlooked when we think about our fitness and health. After working extensively on the rehabilitation of the elderly and infirm I have come to really appreciate

how valuable our feet are, maintaining good mobility and flexibility of our feet can help prevent an old age confined in a wheelchair!

by sarah on 2011-07-31 21:21:49

That's way more clever than I was expecting. Thanks!

by Cactus on 2011-08-16 08:01:51

We are very proud to sell these shoes on our online store. We try our best to be as helpful as possible and send out your shoes fast. We sell lots of other items too and we are constantly acquiring more products, all in which we think will bring you one more step closer to a healthier lifestyle. www.everfree.co.uk

by Lee Porter on 2012-02-01 04:27:02

Good Concept.....

by kiran chikkala on 2012-02-23 05:35:38

While i appreciate the benefits of barefoot running in theory, in practice it falls flat. Those big cushy running shoes that have been developed in the last few decades have been developed because, unlike the Tarahumara, we are frequently running on pavement. I fully support running barefoot on nice trails or grassy fields, but running barefoot or in vibram's on concrete and asphalt is just asking for injury, especially if you do it often. Want qualitative evidence? Go beat a 2x4 against the dirt for 10 minutes, notice the lack of vibrations and deformation of the 2x4. Now go beat the other end against a sidewalk or driveway for 10 minutes. Feel the vibration travel up into your arms and notice how rough the end of the 2x4 looks. Our feet evolved to run on dirt, not these man made surfaces most humans are running on. It is dangerous to suggest people should be running barefoot or in vibrams, and has caused tons of injuries and misconceptions in the past few years.

by ian on 2012-05-31 12:19:39

Hey Ian, Thanks for your contribution. I'm no runner or expert on the subject, but from what I understand the idea of not having cushioned soles is that it forces you to change your style of running so that you strike with the forefoot rather than the heel. After all, the cushioning in even the springiest shoes isn't going to absorb the impact to the spine from the weight of the body falling onto a heel and straight leg. It would be the equivalent of wrapping that 2x4 in a half-inch of rubber - you'll still feel the vibration travel straight into your arms. In 2004, Dr. Timothy Noakes conducted a study comparing the impact of forefoot strikers and heel strikers. The study concluded that the forefoot strike used by barefoot runners has less than 50 percent shock through the knees than a heel strike.

by William on 2012-05-31 13:52:58

The only problem with them.. they don't make them for ppl with webbed toes.

by ashley on 2012-11-16 22:48:37