

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'!