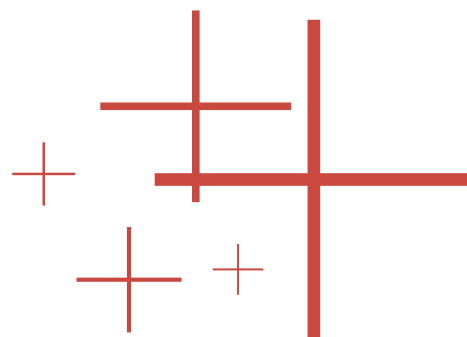


# the great barefoot debate



## minimalist footwear models question traditional designs

By Lou Dzierzak

**F**ueled by mass media reporting, the pros and cons of barefoot running have split runners and shoe companies into two camps. “You are either a believer or a skeptic, says Andre Kriwet, director of footwear merchandising at Brooks. “It’s a very emotional discussion. Brooks loves that because it makes people think about running. The grass roots people stir up this fire.”

Doug Clark, CEO, Go Lite Footwear reflects on historical footwear designs, “There have been developments in the last few years that have got a lot of us old shoe dogs to open our eyes a little wider and open our ears more and see if everything we thought we knew about making shoes may not actually be 100 percent right. Today there is a convergence of wellness companies talking about rocker soles being a more natural gait. And now barefoot companies saying your foot wasn’t intended to be in a shoe in the first place. I look at all of that together and have to admit there is a great deal of validity to the comments, observations and criticism of modern day shoes.”

Some products catch fire because of inspired marketing. Others, like the current minimalist trend, start with the consumer’s voice. Katherine Petrecca, senior outdoor product manager at New Balance reports, “There is a serious core user group that has been at the heart of this and driving the initial stages of it. It’s not marketing driven its people driven. And there are a lot of passionate people driving it.”

Dr. Paul Langer, a podiatrist Minneapolis, MN is a clinical advisor for the American Running Association identifies a hot topic in the debate. “The biggest misconception is that running shoe companies have been “poisoning” us with these bad shoes for years as if there was this big conspiracy. In fairness to the manufacturers, attempts have been made to introduce minimalist footwear prior to the recent frenzy. Nike’s Free

has been around for many years. I never saw a big frenzy for those and the racing flat category of shoes that are very minimalist when compared to the average trainer, have not been popular with anyone except the fleetest of foot.”

Mentioned in Christopher McDougall’s ‘Born to Run’ bestseller, Vibram’s Five Finger footwear fueled the latest round of interest in the minimalist running approach. Tony Post, CEO of Vibram USA notes that Five Fingers were launched at the Boston Marathon in 2006. The Five Fingers buzz has been growing ever since. While benefitting from the attention, Post believes there are opportunities across brands. He says, “There’s a big gap between Five Fingers and traditional shoes and that part of the market is open to be filled.”

The opportunity to exploit a new source of consumer need isn’t going unnoticed.

This spring, Vibram is launching the Bikila, the first Five Fingers product specifically designed for running. Post says the Bikila will use a new platform, last shape, upper pattern and materials.

The introduction of the Bikila is another step by Vibram in its curious development from a component company known for its bright yellow logo on outsoles to a shoe brand in demand with specialty retailers. Post told Footwear Insight he expects the company to rack up \$30 million in VFF sales this year.

As the company’s sales grow at a rapid rate, VFF will be challenged to keep up with demand. Some retailers report that VFF missed its May 1st shipment date on the Bikilas, but as is the case with most hot brands and products, retailers and consumers will wait. VFF’s real impact in the market may not so much be evident in dollars and cents but in the influence it has had in shaping the debate on

**“The minimalistic drive has allowed us to open our minds”**

**PAT O’MALLEY, SAUCONY**

## ANALYSIS



● Name / Brand / MSRP

barefoot running.

This spring Saucony introduced the ProGrid Kinvara a lightweight and minimally constructed shoe for everyday training. Pat O'Malley, svp of global product, Saucony notes the development of the model began more than a year ago. He says, "In the 16 months since the design brief, the interest in minimalist has taken off. It's good for the industry. It's allowing us to look at running footwear differently. In the past, it's always been that footwear is done this way. The formula has been in place for quite a few years. The minimalistic drive has allowed us to open our minds and since the consumer is more receptive to it to build shoes a little differently."

Three-year-old Newton Running has targeted this segment since the beginning. Stephen Gartside, president, Newton Running says, "We're not building shoes for every segment. We're building shoes for natural running. We believe that's an exploding segment. Our thinking is the natural

running segment is one of the fastest growing segments in the overall running market. We challenge people to mimic that barefoot running style with a running shoe designed to support that style."

Footwear companies outside the traditional running market are also introducing minimalist footwear models for runners.

Rachelle Kuramoto, co-founder and director of marketing kigo footwear, LLC, says, "We see the trend taking hold as more and more runners talk about how natural running increases their running efficiency and decreases injury. And as anyone who runs knows, runners are passionate about their gear and shoe and athletic wear choices are often motivated by word of mouth. We think that natural running will follow that same kind of viral uptake."

Over the past few months, kigo footwear has worked with numerous natural runners, many of whom are ultramarathoners, to discover what works and doesn't work about the brand's running models. Kuramoto reports, "We have taken their suggestions and have designed the second generation of our shoes to address many of the priorities of barefoot runners. The next generation, arriving in June, will also feature more room in the toe and vamp,

increased stretch and a more deeply cut foot hole, which are the primary concerns we have heard from our test group."

Marketed by Terra Plana, VivoBarefoot is another option for retailers to consider. Galahad Clark, ceo of Terra Plana says, "We try to make products that are as close to barefoot as possible—a second skin to the feet. Our products have an ergonomic last and a patented puncture resistant rubber sole. They give unrestricted movement and all the health benefits of barefoot but the same protection of normal shoes."

Minimalist thinking isn't limited to road running. Brands more associated with trail running segments have taken note. Brian Hall, product manager, Vasque explains, "The trail running consumer is still going to buy a built shoe but over the next couple of years you will see the definition of a built shoe change because of this."

He continues, "People are looking for the step up from Five Fingers. They want the minimalist shoe that is the lightest possible but they do

● Name / Brand / MSRP



## the great barefoot debate



● Name / Brand / MSRP

want some protection from rocks and roots. The natural running trend has helped accelerate [our designs] towards going even lighter than we have already done. The shoes we have out now are a great all-around shoes but I think there may be a need for that more competitive runner for something lighter and minimalistic.”

Go Lite Footwear’s Bare Tech design elements address that need. Clark explains, “We believe that there is a way to design a shoe that does not artificially alter the human gait. The way to do that is to build geometry that is much more similar to your actual bare foot and not these artificially engineering midsoles, flare angles and heights. You should build shoes that are exactly like your bare foot is and have exactly the same height under your heel as you do under your forefoot. So when you put a pair of

shoes on your gait is just the same as if you were barefoot.”

Looking to future designs he says, “We’re so convinced in our earliest studies and wear tests that we might adopt an approach where every shoe we make in the future has a neutral last and no heel lift. It’s so obvious and compelling that it’s smooth out the human gait. I think there is a lot of truth to these testimonials that your foot is healthier when you don’t change the way you were intended to move.”

### **Backlash?**

While brands and retailers alike see positives in consumer’s reaction to minimalist running there are concerns that injury-prone runners will rush into the minimalist footwear options.

# BALEGA AD

# 27

the  
great  
barefoot  
debate



● Name / Brand / MSRP

Kriwet says the enthusiasm about minimalism should be tempered. “We should be cautious about making over-generalizations. One side says shoes are good, the other side says shoes are bad. Both are wrong. You can’t answer these questions like that. What happens to the majority of runners is that they don’t understand and get confused. They don’t know what’s going on. They can’t really translate it to themselves.”

Jim Monahan, VP Footwear for ASICS offers, “When the information first began to break and become a hot topic in the media there was a lot of misinformation that could potentially lead to people getting injured. That’s the last thing we want as an industry. We need to be very clear on where this type of product fits and who it’s for. It’s not an end-all be-all.”

“At the end of the day our job as manufacturers and especially the retailer is to work with the consumer to educate them and try get them in the shoe that is right for them. We want to keep as many people running injury free for as long as we can.”

Rod Foley, director of marketing at Mizuno USA sees a potential for consumer confusion due to mixed brand messages. He explains, “It’s going to be difficult when you have completely different expressions of what a running shoe should be in the market place at the same time. Take the big billowy soft shoe with an alternative that’s almost like running barefoot. That’s a tough one to get across with people as to why one is right and one is not right without making either one wrong. That’s a tough message to get across. People are excited and you are deflating them a little bit by saying this isn’t the solution to everything.”

He adds, “There’s a lot of trepidation on both retailers and vendors. Let’s talk about barefoot running but let’s not let them have their first experience with being running down a sidewalk in something that feels like they are running barefoot. We could end up losing new runners who are coming into the marketplace.”



THE BIG QUESTION

How is the Barefoot Trend Impacting Shoe Walls Around the Country?

The store’s shoe wall may get more crowded but specialty running retailers look at the minimalist trend as another opportunity to sell more shoes.

**Garry Gribble of Garry Gribble Running** in Kansas City, MO, says “ I see this as a separate product category. I don’t think it’s going away for a while.”

**Eric Sach**, owner of **The Balanced Athlete** in Renton, WA, has seen several cycles of interest in barefoot running in 30 years of business. While interested in the Saucony Kinvara, Sach isn’t rushing out to expand his shoe wall. Instead his philosophy will be to continue help his customers with proper shoe selection. He explains, “ There are a lot of people talking about it. But there’s a big misconception that is a cure-all. Perception is if I buy this minimalist shoe I will run better. We try to teach people to run more efficiently. We teach people how to run here. I don’t think running shoes cause injuries. I think the way people run causes injuries.”

**John Clark, Skinny Raven**, Alaska has added three styles from VFF for 2010 as well as “barefoot” styles

from Nike and INOV-8. “We had no ‘barefoot’ last year but we will have Vibram, Nike Free and will bring in the f-lite 195 from INOV-8 . Three models KSO, KSO Trek and the Bikila, which I feel will be the ‘true’ running silhouette for running specialty in the future and truly designed for ‘running’. We are also making sure we have other low-profile options for customers to consider that provide the effect of barefoot without the extreme jump from traditional profiles.

The trend is both challenging and an opportunity for our store to provide not just the product but more importantly guidance and options that will ultimately reinforce our leadership as a premiere resource for service and information, not just product. It would be easier to hide our heads in the sand and pretend that the ‘fad’ will pass, but accepting that the consumer wants information and guidance allows us to be the source rather than a retailer who simply sells the product without regard for whether its proper for that person or not.”

Curt Munson, owner of Playmakers in Okemos MI says, there is concern about backlash. “We’re Americans. We want it tomorrow. If we think two aspirin are good so what about 10-12? Every good retailer understands that you don’t make dramatic changes overnight.”

Instead of being lauded for performance improvements, runners may return to retailers with more injury issues. Langer points out, “The misconception is that injuries magically disappear when the shoes come off like they did for Barefoot Ted in “Born to Run”. For some people it is just the opposite. Calf, Achilles heel and metatarsal injuries are common in those who make the switch to minimalist too suddenly or who simply do not have the ability to run barefoot at all.”

Eric Sach, owner of The Balanced Athlete in Renton, WA tries to shift the discussion away from minimalist footwear to technique. He says, “There’s a big misconception that is a cure-all and running barefoot or with minimal footwear will solve all your problems. The perception is if

**I don’t think running shoes cause injuries. I think the way people run causes injuries.”**

**ERIC SACH, BALANCED ATHLETE**

I buy this minimalist shoe I will run better. I don’t think running shoes cause injuries. I think the way people run causes injuries. We try to teach people to run more efficiently.”

Garry Gribble, owner of Garry Gribble Running Sports says, “We need to make sure our people are well trained and prepared.

This should be done with caution. Most people will get a shoe like that and take off and run 3 miles. You can’t do that. The running stores have to do a good job to make sure the buyer knows how to break the shoes in.”

Brands are building communications materials to help educate. Stephen Gartside, president of Newton Running is addressing the transition issue with seminars and a series of technique videos. He explains, “We’re starting to talk more about what the adaptation stage looks like. The average person will spend 2-3 weeks with very small runs and building up. Other people may take a 2-3 months getting comfortable with that style of running without any soreness.”

#### Looking ahead

As summer running season approaches, consumer interest in barefoot or minimalist running will put more emphasis on the question, “Which is the right shoe for me?”

Monahan of ASICS says, “The positive buzz around the topic has made the consumer more curious. That’s great for our industry. It’s still about getting the right shoe for the customer. Not necessarily following the buzz or trend in the industry but taking an educational role and making is sure the consumer is in the right product.”

Future product designs will reflect the shift to a minimalist mindset. O’Malley reports, “It may allow us to do things now because the consumer is now asking more questions about footwear. Even in shoes

**“We try to make products that are as close to barefoot as possible”**

**GALAHAD CLARK, TERRA PLANA**

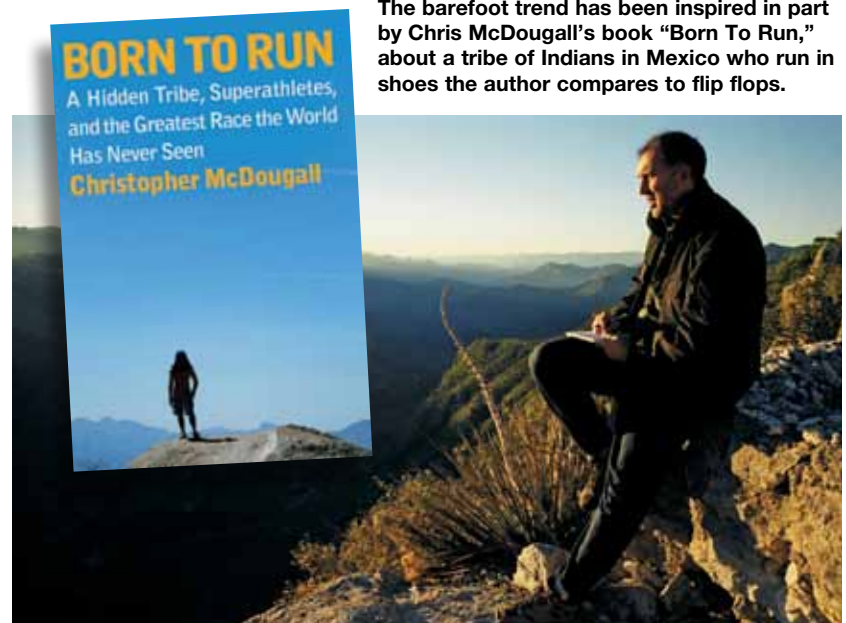
that aren’t minimalist, we may be able to engineer stability different than we had in the past because consumers are open to different ways of shoes being constructed.”

Clark agrees, “I believe whether it is a category or an approach to how every shoe should be made we’ve had an epiphany. It doesn’t make sense to soft midsoles on

your foot and it doesn’t make sense to have a lot of heel height. It makes sense to let your foot work in your shoe the way it was intended to work as if you didn’t have a shoe on at all. I hope that that kind of realization will have an impact on how every designer and developer in the footwear industry considers how they will make their next shoe.”

Munson says, “It’s an evolution for our industry. It will provide more runners with some healthy positive options. Runners will become more aware and questioning things more. It’s one of the best times in our indus-

The barefoot trend has been inspired in part by Chris McDougall’s book “Born To Run,” about a tribe of Indians in Mexico who run in shoes the author compares to flip flops.



try. It’s an incredible opportunity to keep more people healthy.”

Foley adds some perspective adds, “I don’t think there will be that many people who will be running in this stuff on a regular basis. What I’m fearful of is that 2-3 years from now there is a glut of this kind of product in the market that nobody wants. As a vendor community, we have to be careful that we don’t over-saturate the market.”

Jay Duke, president, Karhu says, “The best thing that will come from this is that it is forcing the consumers to ask questions and think about their running stride. Its very performance oriented which I think is great. That kind of dialogue is healthy. It forces manufacturers to be more honest and it requires the product to be improved.” ●

## What’s black and white and read all over?

NSRA’s 2010 Business Performance Report is the only comprehensive financial and statistical report on owner-operated retail shoe stores. And now, *Footwear Insight* magazine will publish a continuing series of articles exploring the data, including analysis and commentary to help readers hone their market strategies.

Benchmark by business benchmark. Issue after feature-packed issue.

**We call it business insight.  
You will call it useful, timely and informative.**

Find the answers to what might be puzzling you.

For more information on advertising opportunities, contact Jeff Nott, Publisher, 516-305-4711 or email [jnott@formula4media.com](mailto:jnott@formula4media.com)

Ad close: July 1, 2010



To order your copy, visit [store.formula4media.com](http://store.formula4media.com) (available September 2010)