



SPORTS FEATURE BAREFOOT RUNNING

# NO SHOES, NO PROBLEM!

Bare Your Sole with Boulder's Barefoot-Running Community

By Peter Bronski

For most runners—road and trail alike—the routine of going out for a run is simple: Pull on the socks, lace up the shoes and head out the door. But for a growing number of local runners, people are skipping steps 1 and 2 and simply heading out the door. They're the latest converts to the barefoot-running movement, which is more or less exactly what it sounds like.

Barefoot running isn't new, and that's exactly the point, proponents say. Humans started out barefoot, without Reeboks on their feet, and got along just fine. Later came lightweight sandals. Only millennia later did high-tech, higher-heeled, supportive, well-padded running shoes evolve, driven especially by the birth of Nike in the mid-1960s and an explosion in running-shoe companies in the 1970s.

Since then, "shod" running has become the norm, while barefoot running was relegated to the counterculture. Even so, there have been notable examples of elite athletes bringing attention to the potential of going barefoot (and the capability of the human body to excel under such circumstances), such as when Ethiopian Abebe Bikila became the first black African athlete to win an Olympic gold medal, winning the 1960 marathon in Rome in a time of 2:15:16 ... running barefoot.

In recent years, no single influence has done more to take barefoot out of the closet and vault it into the limelight and running mainstream than *Born to Run*, Chris McDougall's 2009 international bestseller. The book is a window into the world of ultra-running and Mexico's Tarahumara Indians, who run great distances with nothing but basic huarache sandals on their feet.

Michael Sandler and his wife, Jessica Lee, are two of Boulder's local barefoot gurus rapidly gaining nationwide attention. "When I started four years ago, people looked at me and stayed clear," Sandler says. "Now, people gravitate toward me and want to talk about it."

## 'JUST TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES'

A former pro cyclist and Olympic speed skater, Sandler fell into barefoot running largely by accident. In 2006, a catastrophic training injury left him with a broken hip, shattered femur and obliterated knee. He

finished the Bolder Boulder on crutches, and later, the Denver Half Marathon. But as he got back into running, his body revolted. Pain ruled. Sandler took to the trails in Boulder's foothills, seeking redemption in nature. "I would pray and meditate daily for 'strong, healthy, happy feet,'" he recalls.

That prayer was answered with barefoot running. Sandler was at In-Step, a custom orthotics store in south Boulder, when someone half-jokingly suggested, "Maybe you should just take off your shoes."

"Something clicked," Sandler says. Around that same time, he stumbled across the writings of orthopedic surgeon Joseph Froncioni, who wrote passionately about the link between athletic footwear and running injuries, calling for a return to barefoot-style running. Sandler was sold. He immediately braved Boulder's bike paths sans sneakers, and began building up his strength. Now he runs 10 or more miles per day barefoot, and says he has never felt better.

"It's like I'm running on a pillow of air," he says, "feeling like a 5-year-old child again, with a huge ear-to-ear grin, being light and free."

Lee, for her part, got into barefoot running through Sandler and was an instant convert. In July 2009 she founded the Boulder-based Barefoot Running Club. The first meeting attracted about 15 people. After that, people joined at a rate of about 10 per week. The still growing membership now hovers just under 300, making BRC the largest such club in the country.

Lee and Sandler organized group runs, and started teaching free classes on the grass of Martin Park and the smooth, clean pavement of the adjacent Bear Creek multi-use path. The idea of running barefoot on a hard, paved surface may sound counterintuitive, but Sandler says

that the harder the surface, the lighter you learn to land on your feet. In other words, concrete doesn't tolerate poor form. Chronic heel strikers suddenly become mid-foot or forefoot runners.

The club proved to be just the beginning. In the summer of 2009, Sandler and Lee quit their jobs to launch RunBare, a for-profit barefoot-running academy designed to teach beyond the bounds of the Boulder community. The nationwide reception has been overwhelming, with



Instead of ditching shoes entirely, most barefoot runners opt for minimalist footgear like Vibram's Bikila.





Invisible Shoes president Lena Phoenix (above left) poses with the company's minimalist running sandal. Below, Steven Sashen, creator of Invisible Shoes, admits barefoot running can be a process of trial and error. His advice? If it hurts, do something different until it doesn't!! Right: Downtown Boulder and not a shoe in sight! This fall's Green Streets event gave locals a taste of shoeless running, with Barefoot Running Club's co-founder Michael Sandler (in white) leading the way.

the couple giving 111 talks in one four-month period. Amazingly, their largest crowds have been at conventional running stores, such as Marathon Sports in Boston and FootWorks in Miami. The couple also co-wrote *Barefoot Running*, which has quickly become the sport's bible.

#### FIVE-FINGERED FUN

Strictly speaking, very few barefoot runners are genuinely barefoot 100 percent of the time. In fact, the majority often opt for minimalist shoes, such as the Nike Free or the Vibram Five Fingers—running shoes that are regressing toward less padding, less support and less sole, fostering more connection between foot and earth.

One of the latest people to make the leap is Scott McLean, a student at CU-Boulder. He got into barefoot running mostly out of curiosity, and found himself hooked. Like most, he started with modest distances, and built up his foot strength (and calluses) until he tackled the 2010 Leadville Trail Marathon and the Fort Collins-to-Steamboat Springs Wild West Relay, wearing Vibram Five Fingers in both races.

McLean and runners like him are attracted to the potential health benefits of barefoot-style running, to the greater connection with the earth underfoot (Sandler likens the sensory info coming through the sole of the foot to "Braille running"), and to the fact that barefoot running is just plain fun.

Steven Sashen is another convert. Like Sandler's, his is a story of a runner recovering from injury or dealing with pain, wanting to run, but looking for a new entry (or re-entry) into the sport. "I didn't enjoy it and it didn't feel good," he says. Then he found barefoot running in fall 2009. Also like Sandler, Sashen discovered a serendipitous busi-

ness opportunity. When he experimented with making a modern, updated version of the traditional huarache, it proved so popular with his friends that in December 2009 he launched Invisible Shoes. By March 2010, he realized he had a new full-time job, and so far has served more than 3,000 customers, including many repeats, in 25 countries.

Undoubtedly, Boulder has emerged as a hotbed for the barefoot-running movement. But the sport is not just taking off among runners; it's also gaining traction within the medical community. In addition to Froncioni, neuroanthropologist Greg Downey, podiatrist Michael Nirenberg and sports-medicine physician Marc Silberman collectively represent a growing body of medical professionals who extol the virtues of barefoot-style running and the potential pitfalls of running in conventional sneakers. They're backed by a growing body of anecdotal evidence and scientific research, including the work of Daniel Lieberman of Harvard University's Barefoot Running Lab.

#### THE MIDDLE WAY

Not everyone in Boulder's local medical community is convinced. Podiatrist Yvonne Weber, for one, is staunchly against it. "I don't believe in it," she says. "I recommend orthotics and supportive shoes, and see people do really well." She argues that most people aren't suited to barefoot running for a variety of reasons, and as a result, face "high risks for stress fractures of the metatarsals, tendon injuries" and other problems.

Adam St. Pierre, a running-gait technician at the Boulder Center for Sports Medicine, takes a middle-of-the-road view. "From a medical perspective, barefoot running is a useful tool for some people," he says. It comes down to a balance of foot strength and running form, which can

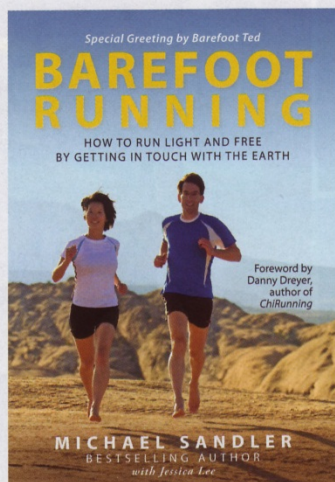


Some principles of barefoot running can be applied to shod running. There's no reason a conventional runner can't stop being a heel striker and learn to run with a midfoot or forefoot gait.

be trained, and biomechanics and structural anatomy, which can't. Some people do fine with barefoot running, some don't, and most people "are somewhere in middle," says St. Pierre. What matters more than whether you wear a shoe or not is "how you shock-absorb and how forces distribute through the body."

Whether you run completely barefoot or not, St. Pierre says, there are "a lot of things we can take from barefoot running into our shod running." For example, there's no reason a conventional runner can't stop being a heel striker and learn to run with a midfoot or forefoot gait while in a sneaker. Bottom line: The principles of barefoot running have value.

Beth Edelmaier, a hardware engineer for Oracle and would-be runner, certainly thinks so, though she calls herself "a klutz with bad running form who's never had much balance or stability." In the past, she says, "I had a hate-hate relationship with running—I could barely go 400 meters without pain in my ankles, knees, hips, calf muscles and quads." Even so, she wanted to get more into running, and her CrossFit trainer at a local gym encouraged her to move toward progressively less and less shoe. Eventually, Edelmaier landed in a



*Barefoot Running*, by local couple Michael Sandler and Jessica Lee, has become the go-to for those wishing to shed their shoes.

pair of Vibram Five Fingers. For her, "It was a complete 180-degree transition. The pain has disappeared completely, and I can now run about a mile, farther than I have since elementary school."

One thing is for sure: Whether you're for it, against it or undecided, barefoot running is not a passing fad. Humans have always run barefoot, to one degree or another. And with local champions like Lee and Sandler leading the charge, it's probably here to stay. ♦

*In late September Peter Bronski raced in a 50-mile ultra-marathon trail run with 10,000 feet of elevation gain, using a more barefoot-style gait while still wearing trail-running sneakers. He credits that change from his earlier heel-striking days with his body's holding up to the pounding.*

#### WEB EXTRA

Assistant editor Rebecca Schneider describes herself as "a fairly unathletic nonrunner who has run into foot/injury problems with running in the past." But she got curious and bought a pair of Five Fingers. Find out about her semi-barefoot experience on [GetBoulder.com](http://GetBoulder.com).