



Sole survivor: Missouri marathoner shuns shoes

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) -When winter temperatures in the Midwest head into their single-digit death spiral, Rick Roeber goes for a run wearing tights, a turtleneck, sweat shirt, hat and gloves.

But that's all. Yes, he skips the shoes.

Roeber runs barefoot, and has been doing it that way since 2003. He's logged more than 13,000 unshod miles, including about 40 marathons. (In the first, he wore flip-flops for six miles because it was 110 degrees on the Boston streets, and his soles weren't conditioned yet.)

As of Thursday, he'd put in 558 consecutive days of running barefoot; even a little Arctic air mass doesn't stop him. Snow might, but frigid, face-numbing weather, no way. Roeber's personal best is running outside when it was 6 degrees, but he's had to resort to a treadmill a couple times since his streak began on July 28, 2007.

"I can't go when the snow is over my ankles because then my feet just can't warm up fast enough," he said. "But that's pretty much it."

The 53-year-old from Lee's Summit started running barefoot because he was having trouble with his knees from "running stupid."

"I was very discouraged because I thought I was going to have to quit running or have my knees scoped," he said. "And then I read how this guy was running marathons barefoot, and then learned it could help with knee problems."

Roeber tried it, liked it and built up his barefoot training to the point where he averaged about 50 miles a week in 2008. All to the benefit, he says, of his knees - and his wallet.

"Running shoes give you this false sense of security," Roeber said. "They have so much padding you think you can run as hard as you want and then they start breaking down. But smaller, quicker steps are better for your legs.

"Besides, a good pair of running shoes costs \$100 to \$150. I could never really justify spending that kind of money."

Roeber believes running shoes encourage overstriding, which he says transfers the impact to the heel, causing "blunt force trauma up the calf and shin" and on to the knee.

When runners use a shorter stride, he says, the impact is displaced evenly around the foot, allowing "very little impact to travel vertically up the leg to the knees."

But Dr. Lewis Maharam, a sports medicine specialist in New York and medical director of the ING New York City Marathon, said he is "skeptical."

"Barefoot runners show up in my office very often because they're not getting any control (of their foot strike)," Maharam said.

While running barefoot once or twice a week for shorter distances - about 5 miles - could help strengthen foot muscles, running shoes are designed to address biomechanical issues that most people face, Maharam said.

Also, Maharam said rather than running completely barefoot he would suggest for those shorter runs wearing one of the shoe models that aims to mimic a bare foot but provides protection from cuts and scrapes.

Roeber was examined for a new barefoot running study, partially financed by Vibram FiveFingers, which manufactures footwear designed to encourage the mechanics of barefooting while providing some protection.

Daniel Lieberman, professor of evolutionary biology at Harvard University, is conducting the study and said while he has not yet drawn conclusions, barefoot runners do run in a "much more conservative way to avoid injury."

"People like Rick, or anybody who goes out and runs barefoot, learns that it's kind of painful, and so you land with a much flatter foot that may have some kind of benefit. But there is a loss of absorption.

"They change their gait, no question about it, and it might be in a very healthy way," Lieberman said. "But I don't know the answer yet."

Roeber, however, doesn't need convincing. He says barefoot running has helped him and had a minimal effect on his race times. When he was running in shoes, Roeber's fastest marathon, listed on his Web site, was 3 hours, 16 minutes in 2001. His fastest time shoeless so far is a 3:35 finish in St. Louis last year.

A program manager for Sprint Nextel, Roeber gets his share of media attention during marathons. At first he liked it.

"But then it felt yucky," he said. "I'm a Christian and a believer, and I said, 'Lord, can I turn this around for you?'"

Now Roeber often runs for charities, including those that benefit the homeless and schools. Last weekend, he ran the Surf City Marathon in Huntington Beach, Calif., on behalf of an organization that provides wheelchairs to disabled people in the developing world.

"This way is much better," he said.

Roeber gets asked a lot about his shoeless pursuit and tells people it takes some time to get the feet ready to take on the streets.

"The main thing is conditioning the soles," he said. Beginners should try it out first on grass. He recommends soccer fields.

He also has advice for shoe manufacturers.

"If I had to say anything to Nike, I would probably say 'Teach people to run, rather than just handicapping them,'" he said. "Teach them to run properly without all the fancy shock absorption. It's not doing them any favors that's for sure."

Roeber thinks just about anyone could benefit some from barefooting. The streets, after all, haven't been too hard on his feet, which he says resemble "moccasin leather," and are "not hard as a rock."

"I've probably only had to pick a half-dozen pieces of glass out of them in the last five years."

On the Web:

www.barefootrunner.org/

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