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Local Running: This man says no to fancy footwear

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Runners can shell out quite a bit of money each year for shoes, but that's not an issue for marathoner Rick Roeber. He runs barefoot.



The upcoming Omaha Marathon will be the 38th marathon Rick Roeber of Lee's Summit, Mo., has run without shoes.

Roeber, who lives in Lee's Summit, Mo., ran last year's Omaha Marathon sans shoes and has entered this year's 26.2-mile race, which takes place Sept. 28.

Omaha will be the 38th marathon the 52-year-old has run without shoes.

You're probably wondering: Why would anybody do such a thing?

"There are several reasons why I began running barefoot," Roeber said, "and even more why I continue."

He ditched the shoes five years ago, "fascinated by the idea that one could run without shoes."

"I have always loved going barefoot," he said, "so this seemed very logical to me."

He's not alone. Last year's Omaha Marathon drew two others in the newly created barefoot division. Roeber's time of 3 hours, 46 minutes, 50 seconds was second to Julian Romero of Pasadena, Calif., who ran a 3:00:10.

Like many marathoners, Roeber used a "pacer" for the Omaha race. A pacer volunteers to help runners stay on track for a particular time.

Roeber was in the group using a 3:45 pacer, but things didn't work out as planned.

"The 3:45 pacer had to drop out at about mile 20," he recalled, "so I took his sign and led his group in to the finish."

Running without shoes isn't just economical. It's easier on Roeber's body, strange as that seems.

"I read up on barefoot running and discovered that barefoot runners experienced far less injuries because of the ball/heel foot strike," he said. "Shoe companies have always built the heels up too much on their products — even running shoes. The result is heel striking, which can cause knee and leg problems."

"Since I started running barefoot in October 2003, I have not experienced an injury to my knees or legs."

Roeber feels blessed to have run 55 marathons (18 with shoes), and gives back to the sport by raising funds for the 2008 Soles For Souls donation drive. It's a charity for the Free Wheelchair Mission Organization, an outreach program to help provide transportation for crippled individuals. (The organization's Web site is <http://barefootrunner.org/fwcm/fwcm.htm>.)

Roeber's personal-best times are 3:15:59 with shoes in 2001 and 3:34:46 without at this year's Go! St. Louis Marathon.

You might assume that barefoot running comes with risks of stepping on things, like glass for instance.

Not necessarily, Roeber said.

"Stepping on glass is not really as much of a problem as one would think," he said. "Sure, you need to watch out for large pieces, but I run over small pieces all the time. They are just like stepping on a small stone."

The bigger problem, he said, is being out in unusually warm or cool weather.

Omaha Marathon

When: Sunday, Sept. 28

Where: 601 N. Riverfront Dr.

Time: 7 a.m.

Information:
www.omahamarathon.com

"I can run successfully in temps ranging from 105 degrees to 10 degrees Fahrenheit," he said. "If the wind chill is below zero and there is more than ankle-deep snow, I can't run outside but have to revert to my treadmill in the basement of our home."

Roeber found that out the hard way by suffering frostbite the first couple of winters running barefoot.

Weather shouldn't be a problem when Roeber competes in this month's Omaha Marathon. The normal temperature for a late-September morning is around 50 degrees.

Roeber said he's looking forward to the challenging Omaha course.

"Omaha is a wonderful venue for a marathon with the right mixture of hills and flat running to make it a great course," he said. "The diverse neighborhoods and scenery, including the jaunt through the Henry Doorly Zoo, are also a great offering.

"I thought the course was 'barefoot-friendly.'"

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