

# G Good Weekend W

NEIL PERRY'S  
FLAVOURS  
OF JAPAN

## Smooth operator

AN AUDIENCE WITH  
THE VERY SUAVE  
JOHN MALKOVICH

## Dead men walking

THE AUSSIE LAWYERS  
FIGHTING TO SAVE  
DEATH ROW INMATES



**THE \$20-BILLION  
RUNNING-SHOE INDUSTRY  
WANTS YOU TO BUY THIS SHOE,  
BUT WOULD YOU BE  
BETTER OFF IN BARE FEET?**

BY JOHN VAN TIGGELEN



ARE ATHLETIC SHOES WITH THEIR EVER-EVOLVING IMPACT-CUSHIONING TECHNOLOGIES ONE OF MODERN SOCIETY'S BIGGEST CONS? JOHN VAN TIGGELEN LOOKS AT THE MERIT AND SCIENCE BEHIND THE INCREASINGLY POPULAR PRACTICE OF BAREFOOT RUNNING.

ONE OF THE WORLD'S BEST-PERFORMING middle-distance runners lives in the basement flat of a tall apartment building just down the hill from Sydney's Royal Randwick racecourse. His name is Keith Bateman, and he holds the world records for all five official distances between 1500 and 10,000 metres. Sponsors don't come knocking, though. It's his age, partly – he's 56, and the records are age-group specific. But more than that, Bateman's not big on shoes. He believes barefoot is the way to go, which rather limits his endorsement opportunities.

In a runners' world bought, sold and controlled by the likes of Nike, Brooks, Adidas and Asics, it remains a little-known fact that many elite athletes train with next to no shoes. Bateman's coach, Sean Williams, says about three-quarters of his elite running squad, which includes Olympic athletes, train either barefoot or in "minimalist" shoes, which are essentially slippers with grip. In competition, they'll wear narrow "racing flats", or exceedingly lightweight running shoes, but unless recovering from injury or a hard race, they won't go near the high-heeled, cushioned, stabilising running shoes that the rest of us pad about in.

One of Williams's most talented young runners, Harry Summers, even spurns "flats", preferring to race either barefoot or, on the road, in a rubber-soled sock that fits each toe like a glove. In August, sporting these foot-gloves, he finished fourth in Sydney's *Sun-Herald* City2Surf, in a field of 85,000. Summers will likely cause a stir in them at next year's London Olympics, too, if, as expected, he takes his place in the 5000 metres.

Still, these are elite runners. They are built to run. The rest of us, so the thinking goes, are not. Unlike elite runners, who make up about a fifth of one per cent of competitors in fun runs such as the City2Surf and next month's *Sunday Age* City2Sea in Melbourne, we need shoes to cushion our ankles, buttress our arches, spare our knees and align our legs. We don't need a salesman to tell us we're not naturals – we sense intuitively that our tender, desk-bound bodies are easily damaged by running on bitumen and concrete. We're hacks, and we need all the protection we can get.

Running, as a sport, was largely left to elite competitors until the early '70s, when a surge in health and body consciousness saw hordes of people take up jogging. Sports doctors noted a sharp increase in foot injuries and, in response, helped design the modern running shoe. Based on the assumption that the more impact the shoe absorbed, the better it was for the foot,



# BEST

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEOFF BOCCALATTE



the new shoe bore three key innovations: the heel was raised about a centimetre, a thick, cushioning layer was added mid-sole and the instep was fortified to prevent the foot rolling in.

Over the past 40 years, the big shoe companies have tweaked the prototype in myriad ways. Today there are hundreds of models, many of which are “improved” and reissued annually to provide your individual foot type with even better protection, or so the marketing campaigns would have you believe. The industry line is that there is a “right” shoe out there for everyone, and that if you’re getting injured – as roughly 60 per cent of Australia’s 700,000 recreational runners do at least once every year – chances are you just haven’t found it yet. Asics, for instance, has 38 different running shoes to choose from, or 19 for every man and woman, including the 17th edition of one and the 13th of another. Rival cushioning technologies (air, gel, plastic, springs, computerisation) are endlessly talked up, with Nike now boasting of employing an “intelligent” foam, developed by NASA (marketing slogan: “Actually, it is rocket science”).

The modern running shoe’s key selling points – stability, motion control and “a smooth ride” – make it sound, and look, like the SUV of footwear. One popular shoe, by Brooks, is even called the “Beast”.

And yet, like the SUV, it seems safety is in the eye of the beholder. For all the engineering and embellishments, injury rates among runners have not decreased in the past 40 years.

Three years ago, a young Australian doctor from the University of Newcastle, Craig Richards, reviewed the medical literature for studies testing the capacity of running shoes tailored to particular foot types to either prevent injury or improve performance, as routinely claimed by the major sports shoe companies, retailers and podiatrists. He found not one. Publishing his review in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, he concluded that running shoes were “unproven technology” and that their prescription was “not evidence-based”.

Indeed, independent researchers are increasingly finding what veteran champion runners, like Australia’s Ron Clarke, have always maintained – that hefty running shoes have made us soft. Irene Davis, director of Harvard Medical School’s National Running Centre, contends that the foot, when shod, loses its natural shock-absorbing function. Meanwhile, her Harvard colleague, evolutionary biologist Daniel E. Lieberman, has shown that the force of sudden impacts when running in raised, cushioned shoes is actually sharper than when running barefoot, because these shoes have changed the way we run.

“A natural running technique involves landing on your midfoot or forefoot, rather than your heel,” explains Richards. “The arch of the foot, Achilles tendon and musculature act like a spring; the anatomy of the foot is a wondrous thing.”

“But the raised heel in modern shoes encourages runners to land on their heels, and the extra cushioning allows them to get away with it. That’s why you see 80 per cent of recreational runners land on their heels. They wouldn’t be able to do that barefoot – it would be too painful.”

Richards suspects modern running shoes may in fact be making runners more susceptible to foot, knee and lower-leg injuries. Shin splints, for instance, are related to heel-striking. Still, he cautions, the science is out. “All we know is that there is no evidence that running shoes are good for you,” he says. “There is only hype, and the health-



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**FREE FORM:**  
 (above) barefoot  
 enthusiast Keith  
 Bateman, at right,  
 leads Harry Summers  
 on a training run.

care professions have been carried along. They’ve helped sell the shoe as a therapeutic device because they assumed the research has been done, but that’s not the case. Or if the shoe companies have done the studies, they haven’t been happy enough with the results to release them.”

I’VE ARRANGED TO MEET KEITH BATEMAN, THE world-beating veteran, at his Randwick flat for an early-morning run along the coast. I’m in luck; Bateman’s coach has pencilled in a slow seven-kilometre run because he is still recovering from his victory in the marathon, hardly his pet event, at the 2011 World Masters Athletics Championships in Sacramento. (He also won gold in the 1500 metres, the eight-kilometre cross country and in the 10 kilometres.)

I’ve turned up in my usual gear: a standard pair of highly cushioned shoes, fitted with customised orthotics, and extra-thick socks for added cushioning. Meanwhile, Bateman pulls on a pair of thin foot-gloves, made by Vibram. They look hilarious, like monkey feet, or something a cat burglar might wear.

We jog down the hill to the coast at Clovelly, and around Gordons Bay to Coogee. Every now and then, Bateman glances at my feet, which are slapping the pavement rather more loudly than his. Bateman, a web designer who nowadays makes his living as a running coach, is worried about my reliance on orthotics. “Like big shoes, they might support your foot but they also keep it weak, so that you need them more and more,” he says. “I’ve never understood why podiatrists should be permitted to prescribe and sell orthotics [which cost about \$500], when, for obvious reasons, doctors cannot sell medicine.”

Bateman, a jaunty, silver-haired chap who goes by the nickname of Fossil, came to running late, in his 30s, in shoes not unlike mine. At 47, he joined Sean Williams’s Centennial Park running squad, with a fastest time over 10 kilometres of 36 minutes – speedy, but hardly elite. Williams told him to expect to plateau within a year or two. Three years later, Bateman began transitioning to barefoot. His stride improved sharply, as did his times. Last year, at 55, he clocked 10,000 metres in 31 minutes. And he’s still getting faster.

At Coogee, he stops to analyse my gait, with and without shoes. “Oh dear,” he says. “You don’t land on your heels, exactly, but you need to lean forward more, without bending at the waist. When you run you need to lift the feet, not the knees. That’s why good runners have tight arses, and bad runners don’t – you use your glutes.”

“Also, your feet are weak. You can’t throw out the heavy shoes and orthotics right away, but if you incorporate barefoot running into your training, little by little, you’re going to get stronger and faster. People like you, middle-aged people, think that they have peaked. But they’re wrong. Taking my case as an example, they have at least 10 years of improvement left in them.”

BAREFOOT RUNNING HAS LONG ATTRACTED A fringe fan base (see *Happy Running*, page 20) outside of competitive running. For them, barefoot running is not about running fast, but about reconnecting with the earth. Minimalist shoes won’t do, because running barefoot is a personal “journey” – bees, broken glass, bitumen and frost be damned. For years, these barefoot evangelists have unwittingly served the \$20-billion shoe industry well, by deflecting the debate about barefoot running from a question of biomechanics to a quest for self-improvement.

But barefoot running, in its minimally shod form, is on the cusp of going mainstream, and the shoe companies know it. Almost all have released, or are about to release, a “barefoot-inspired” running shoe. The market leader, Nike, has the “Free” (ad slogans: “Run barefoot” and “58 foot muscles – awake them all”), Brooks has the “Pure” range and New Balance the “Minimus” – though all retain some heel cushioning.

In the United States, sales of these shoes have quadrupled in the past 12 months, to about five per cent of the overall running-shoe market. (Accurate Australian data is unavailable, because many runners buy their shoes cheaply online. Geoff Webster, sales and merchandise director of The Athlete’s Foot, says most of the chain’s 140 stores are yet to stock the product.)

Meanwhile, trade in genuine minimalist shoes is picking up sharply. This year, Vibram expects to sell four million pairs of its “FiveFingers” foot-gloves



globally, a tenfold jump in two years. Max DeLacy distributes the product in Australia and business in his Sydney shop is very brisk. Several rugby league clubs are customers. Even Robert de Castella is padding about in rubber monkey feet.

DeLacy, a Brit who grew up in east Africa and previously tossed in a corporate job to work as a personal trainer, has the ravenous charm of Richard Branson. His formidable sales patter is part "paleo" – we were evolved to hunt barefoot – and part physio – it's better for us. "Cushioned shoes with the built-up heel are the billion-dollar con," he says. "They're there to protect you from the impact of heel-striking, but without shoes with a built-up heel you won't heel-strike."

"Running barefoot forces you to run lightly. That's why the Africans dominate world distance running. They know if you kick the earth, it will kick you back, through your heel, through your knee, through your hip and through your back."

DeLacy, it has to be said, walks the walk. His office, located above his Sydney shop, smells like feet, and he recently ran a three-hour road marathon in his FiveFingers. Running without them, he's also cut his foot on glass, quite badly. He shows me the scar. "Barefoot runners don't litter because they care," he reckons. "If you wear shoes, you don't give a shit."

Still, there's something faintly discordant about middle-aged men arguing in favour of caveman biodynamics. After all, back in the Stone Age, their hunting days would be over. Also, for a business called Barefootinc, DeLacy's shop looks uncannily like a shoe shop. The foot-gloves aren't cheap – at upwards of \$150 a pair, they're on a par with traditional running shoes. And they're not simple – some of the upper-end models, such as the Bikila (named after the late Ethiopian champion Abebe Bikila, who won the 1960 Olympic marathon barefoot) are highly engineered and padded, as are many of the other minimalist shoes on display.

It all makes Craig Richards, the University of Newcastle researcher, slightly uneasy. Minimalist shoes, he points out, are hardly new: think Dunlop Volleys. "There are a whole lot of shoe companies now jumping on the bandwagon of minimalist shoes. In a way, we're seeing the same thing happening as when the modern running shoe evolved. They're switching from one paradigm to another, but it's still untested. So far, it's pretty much all just marketing."

Richards gets annoyed by the fanaticism of some barefoot runners. "Not all runners get injured in cushioned shoes. But even if the current footwear is not ideal, transition [to barefoot/minimalist footwear] is a dangerous period, and the benefits may not outweigh the cost. People's feet are really quite weak now."

There's another confounding factor: what about runners' footwear outside running? Might that not affect their risk of injury? "Sure," says Richards. "If you're in well-heeled shoes all day, you're effectively shortening your Achilles [tendon] when you could be stretching it. That's not going to be helpful."

**O**F THE BIG SHOE COMPANIES, ONLY one is holding the line by refusing to release a low-heeled, minimalist running shoe. If anything, Asics is going in the opposite direction. Two years ago, it raised the heel-to-toe gradient in its women's shoes by 25 per cent, or a further three millimetres.

Simon Bartold, an Adelaide podiatrist who has been Asics's global research co-ordinator for the past 11 years, contends the push for minimalist



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**RUNNING BAREFOOT FORCES YOU TO RUN LIGHTLY. THAT'S WHY THE AFRICANS DOMINATE WORLD DISTANCE RUNNING. THEY KNOW IF YOU KICK THE EARTH, IT WILL KICK YOU BACK.**

**FANCY FOOTWORK:**

(above) Harry Summers models the increasingly popular FiveFingers "foot gloves", designed to promote a more natural running style.

**HAPPY RUNNING**

BAREFOOT RUNNING IS AS OLD AS HIPPIES, but two years ago it acquired almost cult-like status following the release of *Born to Run*, Christopher McDougall's best-selling account of his "journey" to run injury-free. The book is part rollicking adventure story, part barefoot polemic, but at its core it's a classic self-help tale of a man who finds the secret to happiness among a remote tribe of natural-born distance runners, the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico's Copper Canyons.

The book won many disciples, including David Hotz, a South African accountant who advertises barefoot running workshops in Sydney. If that sounds like teaching someone to breathe, that's precisely Hotz's starting point. During a two-hour, shoes-off session one chilly morning in Sydney's Centennial Park, Hotz has me exhaling with a scream, treading gingerly across jagged gravel, jumping from a park bench and jogging up a grassy knoll, eyes closed. "Shoes are a disconnect between us and the earth," he tells me. "I want you to move your attention to your feet. What can you feel? Is the grass slippery? Is it wet? Can you feel mud?"

Instructed to run lightly along a strip of gravel, I do my best to please, but Hotz is onto me. "You are manufacturing softness," he says, peering at my foot strike. "Stop running with your head. Trust your feet. Keep them soft, sensitive."

Hotz, who runs the Barefoot Runners Society's Australian chapter, tells me he likes to run on gravel roads in the dark, for hours. "It's like meditation. I can happily run in my sandals, too, but running without shoes is like having sex without a condom."

"The more your body is used the way nature intended, the better for your mind. Dude, the powerful, instinctive parts of our being have been blunted. It's not about running fast. It's about the persistence hunt, about trailing prey until it tires. That's what we were born to do."

He removes his leather sandals to demonstrate his technique. "Watch how my head stays level at all times," he says, taking off across the dewy grass. He completes a boomerang's arc with little steps, his arms paddling by his side, his upper body rigid as an Irish step dancer. "It should feel effortless," he says, smiling blissfully. "It should feel joyous."

And I smile, too, because I've just realised that he wants me to run like Cliff Young, the Victorian spud farmer who, at 61, jog-shuffled his way to victory in the inaugural Sydney-to-Melbourne ultramarathon. Of course, "Cliffy" never ran barefoot. He honed his style rounding up sheep in gumboots.

shoes is downright dangerous. "We've not seen a shred of evidence it's the responsible thing [to lower the heel]," he says. "I am genuinely concerned that we are going to see people getting injured on the basis of a fad that has virtually no foundation in science, that is being flogged and blogged by a whole bunch of people on the internet with absolutely no accountability."

Rankled by online slurs likening him to a climate-change denier, he insists it is barefoot running proponents who are "twisting facts and feeding lies". The focus on injury rates is meaningless, he says, because there are too many variables. It is quite conceivable, for instance, that the average recreational runner today is bigger and heavier than 40 years ago, and thus more likely to get injured, were it not for the cushioned shoes he or she is wearing.

Yes, he says, injuries happen. But that's sport. He extols the modern shoe as the "end product of really highly sophisticated science". At the same time, he concedes, shoes, including Asics ones, have been "over-engineered", at least for a time. Bartold says Asics realised 10 years ago that the pursuit of "motion control" (through inflexible shoes with a stiff, raised instep to prevent the foot from rolling in, or pronating, upon landing) was misguided. "People said we were crazy, motion control was where it was at, but it's a concept that can't be supported because it just doesn't work. You can't stop pronation."

The future, as Asics saw it, was "motion enhancement", through more flexible shoes and what Asics now calls "structured cushioning", in order to support the pronation, rather than halt it.

If that sounds like a concession to the barefoot brigades, Bartold acknowledges barefoot running has a place as part of a balanced training program. "To put the foot through a greater range of motion is, as far as we can understand, quite a positive thing to do from an injury-prevention perspective. This thinking has been around for years and years."

But he does not accept that shoes weaken the foot. "Anyone who plays sport gets injured. Running is dangerous, because runners endure the same repetitive load with every single step on the same surface. It's the reason runners get far more

NICK CUBBIN



overuse injuries than orienteers. Modern athletic footwear attenuates those loading patterns.”

Bartold insists landing heel first is anatomically normal, because “we’ve evolved to adapt to a shod situation”. He points out some people spend their entire lives in sneakers. “It’s different for elite athletes. But for 75 per cent of recreational runners, they need cushioned shoes, or they couldn’t run at all.”

Sports shoe companies influence podiatrists much like pharmaceutical companies grease doctors, and Asics is backing itself to defeat the barefoot trend. The day we speak, Bartold has just returned from a trip to New York, where he addressed gatherings of podiatrists and magazine editors on the “dangers” posed by barefoot running and minimalist footwear. A few days later, he’s hosting a similar seminar at an Asics-sponsored meeting of Sports Podiatry Queensland. As he writes in the blurb: “For the first time in the history of athletic footwear, manufacturers (other than Asics) are moving to a tendency to base product on what ... might fit the market rather than what fits the athlete.”

But as any runner knows, finding what shoe fits has never been simple. In the course of preparing this story, I visited three different sports shoe stores. In the first, The Athlete’s Foot, I was prescribed a “neutral” cushioned shoe, for “normal” pronation, after walking across a pressure mat to assess my arch. In the second, a salesman observed I needed a “stability” shoe to counter my “mild over-pronation”. And in the third, an upmarket boutique staffed by final-year podiatry students, I was recommended a “motion control” shoe for serious over-pronation based on a video recording of the back of my legs while running

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**NOBODY KNOWS WHAT SHOE TO BE SELLING. YOU COULD GO TO THREE DIFFERENT PODIATRISTS AND GET THREE DIFFERENT RECOMMENDATIONS.**

on a treadmill. (The recommended shoe’s brand, incidentally, was Asics; although Asics might have stopped using the term “motion control”, hardly anyone else has.)

When I recount this experience to Bartold, he’s not surprised. “Consumers, retailers, sports medics have never been more confused,” he says. “Nobody knows what shoe to be selling. You could go to three different podiatrists and get three different recommendations. It really has become a very sophisticated field and there aren’t many people in the country who can really talk the talk at a technical level.”

Yet at least some of the complexity appears manufactured. Several recent studies of American military recruits have shown that prescribing a shoe type on the basis of someone’s arch type – as Asics itself does via its “shoe finder” function on its website – does not affect injury risk one iota.

Ron Clarke, the former Olympian, running-shoe designer and now Gold Coast mayor, accuses the industry of gimmickry. He tells me over-pronation is primarily a side effect of wearing raised shoes, and of heel-striking, in the first place. Fifty years ago, in Clarke’s heyday, over-pronation was a pathology restricted to people with flat feet. Today, 90 per cent of runners are prescribed corrective (stability/motion control/structured cushioning) shoes: over-pronation is the new normal.

Simon Bartold concedes the shoe categories (stability, etc) are misleading. “The athletic footwear industry, including Asics, is trying to simplify things by saying, ‘You’re a pronator, you need this particular shoe’, when there is a spectrum of footwear that might suit any particular runner. Fact is, pronation is normal. It’s to be encouraged.

Those categories actually mean nothing at all.

“Look, one of the few positive things in the [barefoot/minimalist] debate is that we’ve started to look at how complex our product has become and whether, instead of constantly adding more stuff to the shoes, we can do things better simply by taking stuff out. And there’s probably something in that.”

**W**ITH SCIENCE LARGELY SIDELINED in the debate, I seek out Sean Williams, the experienced coach, for a final word. “Barefoot running is not a fad,” says Williams, as his elite charges, including Harry Summers and Keith Bateman, warm up in Centennial Park. “The bottom line is that transitioning to barefoot makes your stride more efficient. Almost everyone pronates but when you run barefoot, you pronate much less. Put me or Harry or Keith in big shoes, and we’ll run knock-kneed.”

“So yeah, I think there are a lot of people out there who would go a bit quicker barefoot. I also think it reduces the risk of injury and it’s good for recovery and rehabilitation, because it stretches the tendons better than static stretches do. But it’s not for everyone. A lot of people have been conditioned to land on their heels. Maybe they can’t go back.”

He nods at two passing runners, one of whom is thwacking the ground, heel first. “That’s going to take its toll. Cushioned shoes are for overweight people or people with bad biodynamics, and possibly for runners doing really high mileage. Not everyone is born to run, especially not on bitumen and concrete. But we’re on the cusp of change. The minimalist thing is going to keep rolling.” GW



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