

HEALTH & FITNESS

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Eschew the shoe



Barefoot runners Efreem Rensi, left, and Noah Elhardt, compare their feet at the Civic Park in Davis, Calif.

Scripps Howard News Service

Barefoot runners go toe-to-toe with the competition

By Sam McManis
The Sacramento Bee

All types of runners turn out at the annual Turkey Trot 10-kilometer run in Davis, Calif. But even spectators who've become accustomed to the sight of costumed runners and people pushing multiple strollers were startled at the sight of Noah Elhardt motoring along at a sub-40 minute pace, followed a few minutes later by Efreem Rensi.

"Hey, look at the guy with no shoes!"

"It's a barefoot runner!"

"All right, man. Keep it goin'."

But this was no freak show, and certainly not an attention-getting ploy.

Elhardt, 22, and Rensi, 35, are serious recreational athletes and part of a running subculture — too small, perhaps, to be labeled a movement — that eschews shoes.

They run the way they say man was meant to tread and, in fact, did tread for centuries — unshod and unfettered.

This, of course, goes against societal norms, not to mention the medical advice from the vast majority of podiatrists and biomechanical experts.

Runners of all calibers spend billions per year on high-tech running shoes meant to correct faulty foot strikes and to cushion the pounding of the pavement. Many an orthopedic physician's second home in the wine country has been paid for by recreational runners' injuries from insufficient footwear.

But for runners such as Elhardt and Rensi, the answer is exceedingly low-tech. Make that no-tech, actually.

For Rensi, a graduate student in mathematics at the University of California, Davis, the decision to run barefoot was an act of desperation after years of knee pain.

"I went to a doctor, finally, and he told me I was overpronating," Rensi says. "He said I needed a motion-controlled (running) shoe. After a year of buying the most (sturdy) shoes out there, I still had problems. So I did some Web research about barefoot running."

It's been three years since Rensi doffed the running shoes, and he's run a series of 10Ks and half-marathons without pain caused by overpronating, or having too much inward rolling motion of the foot during a stride. Sure, he says he occasionally steps on something that gets lodged in the soles of his feet, but he says he carries tiny tweezers with him everywhere.

The transition to barefoot running was eased, he says, because running actually had been the only time he consis-

tently wore shoes. And that conditioned his soles to endure stray pebbles or glass shards.

See, for Rensi and Elhardt, going barefoot is a 24-7 activity. They call it a lifestyle choice, not an overtly political statement.

"You can't just take off your shoes and run a marathon," says Elhardt, a UC Davis undergraduate. "I was a barefoot first, then I started running. I've done some orienteering barefoot and play ultimate Frisbee. So my feet are used to it."

Rensi walked the streets adapting his soles to the terrain before running. He said he quickly developed a thick layer of skin on the bottom of his feet that feels more leathery than calloused.

That, he says, gives him the support to run long distances barefoot. And the unfettered foot strike makes his form more natural. His over-pronation problem has vanished, he says.

"The higher level of sensory perception on the soles forces you to run way easier on your body," Rensi says. "With shoes, you're striking your heel first and it jars your body. Now, you kind of roll on the ball of your foot."

Elhardt: "It just feels more natural."

Proponents of barefoot running tout the accomplishments of 1960 Olympic marathon winner Abebe Bikila and 1984 Olympian Zola Budd, and also point to two research studies to support that belief.

In 2001, Australian researcher Michael Warburton reported in the publication *Gateway Physiotherapy*: "Running barefoot is associated with a substantially lower prevalence of acute injuries of the ankle and chronic injuries of the lower leg in developing countries." But, he added, "Well-designed (research) of the effects of barefoot and shod running on injury are lacking."

And, in a 1987 article published in *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, Steven E. Robbins and Adel M. Hanna concluded: "The solution to the problem of running-related injuries could be as simple as promoting barefoot activity."

Jack Cady, a physical therapist from Missouri who analyzes runners' strides, says barefoot running promotes a more efficient form.

"One component of efficient running form is a soft, mid-foot landing with initial ground contact being below your center of gravity," Cady says. "In contrast, inefficient runners tend to land out on the heel with the toes pointing up in the air. This produces a violent impact that has potential to inflict injury. The braking action created by this heel strike

also slows a runner down.

"Modern cushioned shoes are enablers of poor form. Without the soft cushioned heels, a runner either develops proper form or they will end up injured."

Not so, says Dr. Mary Beth Crane, a Dallas podiatrist, veteran marathoner and spokeswoman for the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons.

"If you have perfect (running) biomechanics — and I've yet to meet many people who do — then absolutely you can run barefoot and be fine," Crane said in a phone interview. "But the reality is that most people do not have perfect biomechanics. It takes a lot of strengthening and cross-training to get the strength in the areas that you'd need to run more biomechanically sound barefoot."

"More likely than not, you'll wind up with puncture wounds, stress fractures, shin splints and tendinitis due to the fact your biomechanics are more faulty because you don't have cushioning of shoes."

Crane says a regimen that involves some barefoot running on a synthetic track can be beneficial for high school- and college-age runners.

"But once you're fully developed and running on concrete surfaces, there's more risk associated with barefoot running than benefits," she says.

Crane and other physicians say most runners land on their heels first and roll the foot because it's less jarring. She points to a higher incidence of muscular injuries for runners landing on the balls of the feet.

"Are there anomalies? Absolutely," she says. "But I'd bet they've been running barefoot a long, long time and have a relatively normal foot type."

"Listen, the whole barefoot craze has come from looking at the African runners. But those guys grew up in pastures running on packed dirt. They didn't have the availability of cushioning systems, and their feet were used to walking barefoot all the time. If we went back to that type of culture and never wear shoes from the minute you're born and develop a gait that's right, then it might work."

Currently, barefoot running hardly qualifies as a "craze." Though a hardy community of barefooters has congregated on the Internet, where one Web site boasts 1,000 members, the practice still is considered alternative and marginal.

If it seems at times that barefoot runners are zealots for their cause, it's because they firmly believe in a shoeless society. Most of the barefoot runners contacted for this story go shoeless full time.

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