

Author Christopher McDougall during a long-distance run.

Born to Be Barefoot

The next wave in running shoe technology is here.

And it's 3,000 years old. *By CHRISTOPHER MCDUGALL*

Mexico: Two men in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a meltdown over a pair of shoes. One is a former pro fighter called “the White Horse.” He’s roamed Mexico’s canyons for years. The other is “Barefoot Ted” McDonald. He’s wearing lifeguard shorts, a monkey necklace, and goat bells around his ankle. We’re supposed to be hiking into the canyons, but the Horse erupts when he sees what Ted has on his feet.

“The cactus thorns out here are razor blades,” he snarls. “You get one in your foot, we’re all

screwed. Those trails are dangerous enough without carrying you on our backs.”

“If someone gets in trouble out there,” Barefoot Ted fires back, “I guarantee you it won’t be me!”

My money was on the Horse. Seven of us had trekked into Mexico in March 2006 to test ourselves in a 50-mile race the White Horse had arranged with the Tarahumara Indians, the world’s greatest ultra-distance runners. Barefoot Ted showed up wearing these weird rubber ballerina slippers with individual pockets

so each toe could wiggle on its own. No way those survive, I thought. But in the days ahead, Barefoot Ted and his wacky foot-gloves would outlast two elite ultra-runners on a mountain climb; out-hike me on a 30-mile canyon crossing; and out-perform even some of the Tarahumara by finishing the 50-mile race despite having to replace his fluids with sips of his own urine.

That was my first look at the Vibram FiveFingers minimalist shoe. It was also my first hint that Barefoot Ted, strange as he is, might have

a better understanding of running footwear than anyone on the planet. He's not a scientist, a coach, or a biomechanical engineer. Basically, he's just a philosophy student-turned-barefoot adventurer. But over the past five years, Ted has added three ticks to his resume that few other experts can match: he's consistently right; he's consistently ahead of the market; and he's personally tested his predictions with his own two feet under extraordinarily harsh conditions.

Take the Vibram FiveFingers. Now they're a worldwide sensation and a \$40 million (and growing) annual business. But when Ted wore them into the Mexican canyons in 2006, they were an unknown novelty item designed for yacht racers. Ted was the first to envision their use as true-feel running shoes, and he convinced Vibram to outfit him for his trial by fire in the Mexican outback (Ted's fall-back footwear on that expedition: flip-flops). Since Ted's pioneering experiment, the FiveFingers have been embraced by marathoners, mall walkers, martial artists, special forces fighters, and legions of others around the world who are just realizing what Ted figured out long ago: the best shoes are the ones that let your feet do what they want.

Ted had his own breakthrough in 2003, back when he was still wearing cushioned running shoes and wondering why he had back pain every time he ran more than two or three miles. One afternoon, he kicked off his shoes in frustration and began limping home in his bare feet... only to suddenly realize his back felt better. He began digging into research, and discovered that while humans have been running forever, they've only been landing on their heels since modern running shoes were rolled out in the 1970s. Know what else debuted in the 1970s? Modern running injuries. The knee, heel, and tendon problems that are epidemic today were virtually unheard of before we began to over-cushion and over-correct our feet. Go barefoot and you'll instinctively get off your heel and adopt a lighter, gentler, forefoot landing.

But there's nothing wrong with a little protection from rough roads and rotten weather, Ted knew. The trick was finding footwear that didn't alter your foot's natural movement. So after his success with the FiveFingers, Ted continued looking. The next frontier would be something more naked, less manufactured,



Vibram FiveFingers running shoes.

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Ted McDonald's Luna Sandals.



Ozark sandals

closer to Einstein's "supreme goal of all" theory: Make it as simple as possible but no simpler. Rather than looking into the future this time, Ted began searching the past. When people do something for a long time, he believed, there's a reason. And that led him to the one shoe that has been around since the beginning of time and is still in action today. It was worn by ancient Greek messengers, Roman Centurions, Tibetan monks, and Hopi braves: the lash-on sandal. To this day, it's the go-to shoe for Tarahumara Indians. Even when they were given new running shoes at a 100-mile race in Colorado in 1994, the top Tarahumara slipped right

back into their homemade huaraches—and won.

Ted learned the art of huarache-making from Manuel Luna, a Tarahumara elder who took Ted under his wing while we were down in the Mexican canyons. When Ted got home, he remained true

to traditional design but began tinkering with materials. Instead of the leather straps and discarded tires the Tarahumara use, Ted found rubber compounds that were just as tough but dramatically thinner. He also unearthed an out-of-production elasticized cord that vastly improved lacing. For some models, he also layered on a leather insole that softens like a baseball glove. As a finishing touch, he named them after his mentor: Luna sandals.

Right before a 100-mile race he was running last summer Ted presented me with a pair, which I immediately threw under my bed when he wasn't looking. I was supposed to pace Ted for the last stretch at two in the morning, and no way was I running rocky trails in the dark in those things. But just to be polite, I decided I'd strap them on for a few yards and then swap them out for some real shoes. When we crossed the finish line four hours later, they were still on my feet. I didn't have a single blister, bruise or stubbed toe. I was hooked on huaraches.

My timing couldn't have been better. Over the past year, the huarache has undergone the most exciting remake it's seen in 3,000 years. Inspired by Ted, a number of barefoot business people and backroom inventors have added their own twists to the ancient design. Branca Barefoot created a clever pair of side-loops that allow you to simply tie your sandals like regular shoes. Unshoes got rid of tying altogether by deploying the same cinching strap you find on a bike helmet. Over at Invisible Shoe, they've created a sole that's thick enough for jagged stones yet pliable enough to roll up and stick in your pocket. Ozark Sandals dealt head-on with three huarache drawbacks—the toe strap, rubber feel, and dull appearance—by coming up with a durable rope webbing (my wife has lived in hers all summer and only changes them to rotate colors).

Incidentally, I've noticed something else since I began grudgingly following in Ted's footsteps: Like him, the last time I had a running injury was the last time I wore running shoes.