



THE LAB RAT

Shoeless Joe

> When it comes to running footwear, sometimes less is more

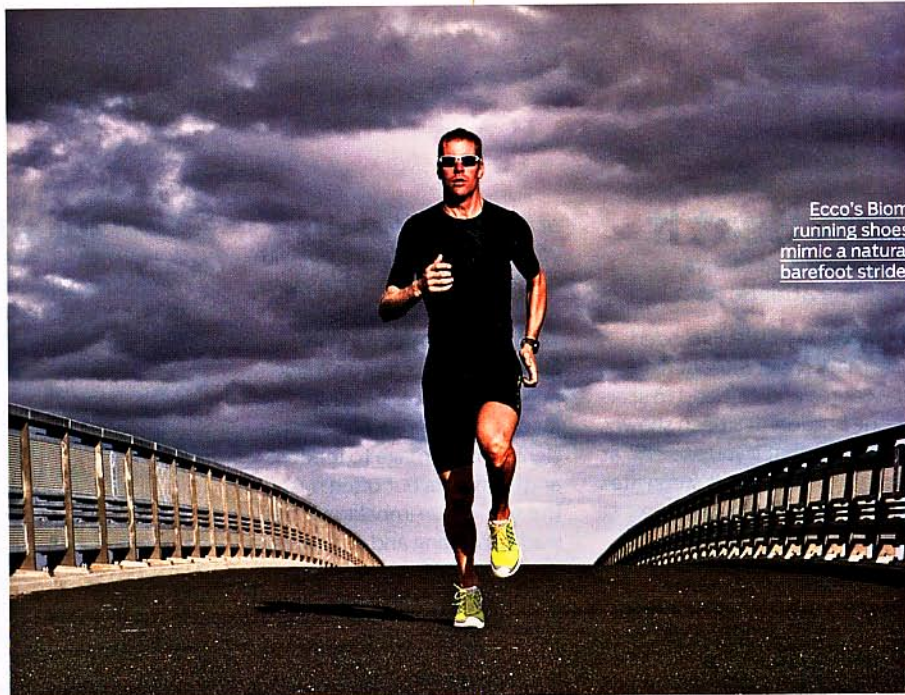
BY NICK HEIL

ON A WARM MARCH DAY, in a fit of spring fever, I drove to a nearby park, whipped off my shoes and socks, and set out for a run. I wasn't just trying to get in touch with my inner Tarahumara; I was investigating the new trend in "natural-motion" running, the purest embodiment of which involves jogging sans shoes.

I didn't make it very far. After dodging dog droppings and rusty beer cans land-mined across a baseball outfield, I hit a dirt path that immediately began to flay my feet. Even at my tenderfoot pace, my calves knotted up like Chuck Liddell's fists. Forget this, I thought, giving up after less than a mile, and limped back to the car to recover my smelly old kicks.

For around 40 years, running shoes have been evolving into a \$4 billion industry of ever-more-sophisticated support systems involving techy foams, air bladders, springs, rubberized padding, and gel. Recently, however, there's been a back-to-nature movement, with runners opting for minimalist shoe designs or, in extremis, no shoes at all. "Cushioning gets oversold," says Dr. Stephen Pribut, a biomechanics expert in Washington, D.C., and former president of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine. "Thinner-soled shoes can give runners important proprioceptive feedback and encourage a shorter stride and midfoot strike, all of which helps prevent injury."

Natural-motion evangelists believe our feet have become "lazy," overswaddled in unnecessary layers of fabric and foam. This allows runners to strike heavily on their heels, driving the impact of each foot plant straight up into their ankles, knees, and hips. With less shoe, the argument goes, you land on



Ecco's Biom running shoes mimic a natural barefoot stride.

your midfoot, so your ankle and knee joints work more like shock-absorbing springs, warding off joint problems, plantar fasciitis, and even sprains. A 1997 study published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* concluded that the more heavily engineered (and, typically, more expensive) the shoe, the more likely it was to contribute to an injury.

Some proponents, like "Barefoot Ted" McDonald, of Seattle, take the trend to its limit: If less shoe is better, no shoe must be best. "The beauty of barefoot running is that there is nothing forcing your foot to do something other than what it wants to do," says McDonald, who's run 20 marathons and ultramarathons unshod.

The first company to chase this small but growing community was Nike. In 2005, it released the Free, a shoe with so many flexible, underfoot grooves that it mimicked barefoot running. More recently, a raft of companies have followed suit with models that have lower heels and less cushioning, encouraging a barefooter's short, springy gait.

After my discouraging attempt to go bare in the park, I eased toward full foot nudity by

test-driving some of the latest: the New Balance MR800, the Newton Motion, and the Ecco Biom B. Within a few weeks, I was converted. I ran longer and faster, and with less soreness afterwards.

I decided to up the ante with the wild-looking, barely-there Vibram FiveFingers. The sole is just half a centimeter of Vibram's sticky rubber glued to a stretchy, socklike nylon upper, with individual sleeves that wrap each toe like a tiny condom. First released in 2006 for boaters, they were quickly adopted by barefoot runners who don't like picking shards of old Mickey's bottles from their feet.

It took me a while to get used to the VFF's simian appearance, but soon I began wearing them everywhere—walking my dog, going to the store, hiking nearby trails—much to the amusement of my fellow pedestrians. I still couldn't manage to run more than a few blocks in them, but I soon felt the actual bones, tendons, and ticklish soft spots under my arch getting stronger.

It dawned on me that while I've long heaped attention on my core, arms, legs, and shoulders, I'd neglected the foundation of the entire system. Strong feet provide essential balance, power, and speed for a variety of sports, not just running. I began deploying the FiveFingers during drills and gym workouts, rehab exercises after spraining an ankle in a soccer game, and while padding around my house battling writer's block.

It seems unlikely I'll ever join the tribe of barefoot runners, but I do intend to refocus on my feet as a woefully overlooked link in my fitness chain. Sometimes it pays to rethink your basic assumptions about training. This time, my overhaul is happening from the ground up.

THE LATEST IN NATURAL-MOTION SHOES

New Balance MR800

HIGHLIGHTS: Light, spongy midsole; reinforced midfoot strike zone **FEELS LIKE:** A flatter, low-heeled version of a traditional running shoe **BEST FOR:** Bare-curious joggers who've embraced Chi Running. \$110; newbalance.com

Vibram FiveFingers

HIGHLIGHTS: Hey, these shoes have toes! **FEELS LIKE:** Being a kid again **BEST FOR:** Barefooting beginners; sailors; the prehensile-toed. \$70–\$85; vibramfivefingers.com

Newton Motion

HIGHLIGHTS: Breathable mesh uppers; prominent lugs that act like springs in the forefoot **FEELS LIKE:** A light, flexible racer with a kinetic pop **BEST FOR:** Competitive forefoot striders. \$175; newtonrunning.com

Ecco Biom B

HIGHLIGHTS: Biomechanically accurate last; ultradurable yak-leather uppers **FEELS LIKE:** A stable, wide-body cross-trainer **BEST FOR:** Eight-minute-milers; wide feet. \$220; ecco.com