

the opposite direction to your movement,” says Dreyer. “When you heel strike you’re putting on the brakes with every stride, which creates impacts to your body from the lower back to your plantar fascia. When you strike with a mid-foot behind your center of mass, it significantly reduces any chance for impact or braking to happen.”

“Most coaches and scientists like to think that we can’t beat the Kenyans because of their talent,” says Dreyer. “In truth, we will never beat the Kenyans until we start using the same highly efficient biomechanics they are using ... which includes a significant lean and an immense amount of relaxation.”

Eric Blake, a member of the U.S. Mountain Running Team and the head coach of Central Connecticut State University’s Cross-Country and Track programs, supports McDougall and Dreyer’s opinions, saying, “When you land on your heel, your mid-foot still has to touch and take off. The end result is that you end up being on the ground *longer* when you heel strike, and that is never a good thing,” says Blake. He also adds that the heel strike puts more pressure on runners’ legs. “You want that force moving forward, not back into your legs,” he says.

Ian Hobler, an elite Canadian trail runner, promotes the mid-foot strike as well, which he believes increases running efficiency and reduces stress on the body. “Regardless of how far or fast I’m running, I try to land softly and have my feet on the ground for as little time as possible, so I have to land on my mid-foot,” says Hobler. “My entire foot can absorb the shock, followed by my knees and hips, which are more aligned bottom to top with a mid-foot strike than with a heel strike. This soft landing spares my muscles, connective tissue and joints from undue strain.”

Several running companies have also jumped on the mid-foot bandwagon, de-

signing products that contrast with the common, heavily padded motion-control shoes. Creating a product that essentially forces the foot to rely on its own evolutionary design, Vibram has developed a “shoe” called FiveFingers, basically a shoe sock offering zero cushioning or support, only minimal protection.

Similarly, Newton Running has developed its entire line of running shoes based upon the mid-foot strike concept. “Recent research and news reports are confirming what those close to the sport have known for years: running shoes with thick midsoles, extensive anti-pronation devices and large heel crash pads don’t prevent injuries,” says Danny Abshire, co-founder of Newton Running. “The tenets of good running form include running with short strides and a quick cadence, landing lightly on the mid-foot-forefoot area, and

quickly lifting your foot off the ground instead of pushing off with excessive muscle force. A slight forward lean and a relaxed arm swing are also key components.”

It’s Your Call

With so many different ideas and opinions from elite athletes and experts in a variety of fields, runners are faced with a tough decision when they hit the trails: run with a heel strike or change to a mid-foot strike. One piece of advice that seems consistent among elite runners is simply for individual runners to do what feels right. “I think that the difference we are discussing is more than just foot strike,” says elite trail runner Rickey Gates. “We are talking about two different running styles. Try out both styles and pay close attention to what the rest of your body is doing.”

“In my opinion, running is a highly subjective science, so experiment to figure out what works best,” adds Hobler. “If a heel strike keeps you happier and more successful than a mid-foot strike, why change?” ■

Strike out on the mid-foot

If you’re one of the overwhelming heel-strike majority, here are some tips for trying a mid-foot strike.

- First, simply ditch your shoes and run barefoot on grass at your local park or golf course. You will naturally revert to a mid-foot strike, which you can carry over to the trails, with practice.
- Start in small increments of five minutes per day and add more distance gradually.
- Most of us can’t run on grass all the time, and you might not want to either! Changing your stride takes time, so practice your barefoot running form that you have learned on the trails with your shoes. After a couple of weeks, the mid-foot technique should feel natural.
- For mid-foot running shoes, look for models with a low heel, such as most inov-8s, Newton running shoes, the New Balance 100 Race Flat and 840 and the La Sportiva Skylite.



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