

A True Fit

A Primer on Buying Running Shoes.

BY TOM PECORARO

This article was written with one purpose in mind: to educate runners on the degree of service and expertise to expect when buying running shoes. As a tech rep and now an independent salesman, I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of shops throughout the United States, and I have noticed a disparity in the quality of experts and their advice to runners. If you believe you already have a trusted store where you can buy running shoes, I urge you to keep reading, because you may be surprised at what you are missing.

I started my career in the footwear industry five years ago as a tech rep for Saucony. My job was to travel to a specific region of the country and teach the staff and store owners about the technology of Saucony shoes and foot biomechanics. Two and a half years ago, I made a transition to independent sales, representing a number of top brands, including Saucony and Powerstep, an over-the-counter orthotics company. My experience has led me to draw a few simple conclusions on what separates the good running stores from the great ones: informed staff, running evaluations, and a decent return policy.

It's important to be familiar with the industry because, as a rule of thumb, running-shoe styles change about every 12 months. The good ones may last up to 15 months, and the real dogs are finished in a year or less. To keep track of these changes would be a daunting task for any runner. Rest assured that there are people who are tracking these changes—the sales staff at your local running shop. The question is What running shops are giving reliable advice?

When I refer to a running store, I am not referring to the large sporting goods stores. The large sporting goods stores occasionally have someone knowledgeable on staff to discuss footwear, but they rarely specialize in running footwear. Most local running stores, however, are owned and operated by a local runner, selling only running-related items.

In the past, a running store's credibility was judged by the number of marathon T-shirts or first-place medals that were hanging on the wall. Those days are long gone. The old way of fitting running shoes was simple: if it feels good, then it's the right shoe. Although this is still a key ingredient to finding the right shoe,

many other factors help determine if there is a good fit between you and your running shoe. Shoe manufacturing has become a science, and companies are now addressing specific foot types when designing shoes. Each shoe has a specific purpose, and it is up to the running store to match your foot with a shoe.

HOW SHOE SCIENCE HAS EVOLVED

The evolution of the running store includes a change in staff from underpaid part-time high school help to serious runners with a true passion for the sport and an in-depth knowledge of footwear and biomechanics. A runner should be asked three questions before trying on a shoe: (1) what activities do you plan to do in the running shoes? (2) what is your estimated weekly or monthly mileage? and (3) what shoes are you using now, and are you happy with their performance?

These are basic questions that give the fit expert a place to start. This is followed by a basic examination of the foot, looking for characteristics such as forefoot and heel width, bunions, and toe abnormalities. Next on the fit expert's list is a discussion of past foot and ankle injuries. After you lace up your first pair, the fit expert will watch your gait (your heel-to-toe motion as you run) and foot biomechanics. Many runners are misled on how to evaluate a gait. First, a normal gait consists of an outside heel strike moving through the arch area, known as the midfoot, followed by a centered toe-off. The negative movement, if you have any, occurs in the midfoot or toe area, not the heel.

Every runner strikes on the outside of the heel; excessive heel wear is not a sign of foot abnormalities but an indication

► Gait analysis at Body n' Sole Sports (in Champaign, Illinois) helps the staff evaluate their clients' biomechanics.



Peggy Stierwalt

of a heavy striker. The two terms used to diagnose foot movement are pronation and supination. Pronation, usually a characteristic of a flat foot, is used to describe those runners who, after initial heel strike, roll over to the inside of the arch and end up toeing off at their big toe. Supination, usually a characteristic of a high arch, is just the opposite; the runner again strikes the outside heel but rides the outside of the foot and has a toe-off on the fourth and fifth toes.

The gait analysis can be done with a trained eye, but larger shops have a treadmill and video camera set up so that both you and the expert can view your biomechanics. The key to figuring out what type of stability you need, the basis to which most running shoes are designed, is the degree of pronation your foot possesses. There are three basic categories of running shoes: neutral for the normal or supinating foot, stability for the mild pronator, and motion control for the severe pronator.

Another misconception is that the most expensive shoes are the best. This is not always the case. A shoe is typically more expensive because it has more parts or control devices. These devices often inhibit the natural motion of your foot, which is counterproductive when diagnosing your gait. When I fit people, I always start out with a very basic shoe such as the Nike Free or the Pegasus. These two very basic models lack any stability devices, thereby allowing the foot to be analyzed in a normal stride. Some runners are perfect in the neutral category, and others should be offered more stability until a desired level of control is found.

THE MATTER OF RETURN POLICY

Before making your purchase, ask about the running shop's return policy. The true experts realize that sometimes a run is the only true test. A no-return policy means the store is not very confident in its shoe-fitting abilities.

Finding the expert dealers may be your hardest task. My suggestions are to visit brand Web sites and look for stores that manufacturers consider their best dealers and to ask running buddies where they get their shoes and what type of fit process they receive. Use local and national industry magazines to find local dealers. It may be a simple case of trial and error until you find the store that performs to your expectations.

Finally, understand that offering this service with knowledgeable employees in a brick and mortar store does not allow the specialty store to discount product like a chain store or Internet mail-order company. A shoe fit to the wrong foot could cause discomfort, pain, and irreversible damage. A pronator left uncorrected or in the wrong shoe may suffer permanent ankle, knee, and hip damage. Reward your running store with repeat business and good word-of-mouth advertising. You are now armed with the knowledge to discover one of the many great running stores around the country. Good luck—and happy and healthy running.

