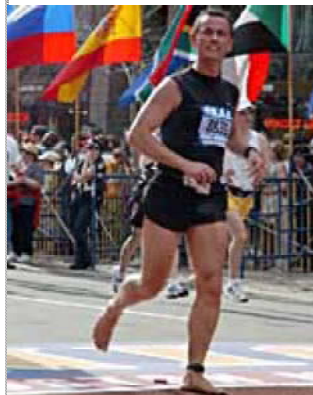




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Kathleen Nelson: Marathoner hits his stride in bare feet

Kathleen Nelson
POST-DISPATCH
03/18/2006



Rick Roeber has run more than 5,000 miles barefoot over the past three years. (Courtesy photo)

Even though thousands will take the starting line for the Spirit of St. Louis Marathon and Half-Marathon on April 9, Rick Roeber should stick out like a sore thumb. Or at least a big toe.

Roeber will be the barefoot guy.

Naturally, your first reaction is shock. Why would anyone want to deal with the possibility of hot pavement and shards of glass, rusty nails and loose pebbles, step after

step after step? But thinking about what comes naturally gives Roeber's stance some credence. All of our predecessors on the evolutionary ladder did just fine without shoes.

Consider T-Rex. Big T relied on his teeth, which evolved into such efficient shredding machines that he didn't need to rip his prey apart with his front paws or legs, or whatever they were. Eventually, his front appendages shrunk to those pathetic little stubs. Feet haven't slipped a rung on the devolutionary ladder just yet, but ...

"Shoes lull us into a false sense of security, and they encourage bad running technique," said Roeber, who claims to have shed chronic knee pain when he kicked off his shoes. "If you give someone enough support and padding, they can run any old goofy way they want."

The word "goofy" pops to mind when first talking to Roeber, but, really, it's unfair. He remembers in loving detail the joy of running through the grass barefoot as a kid.

Roeber has racked up more than 5,000 barefoot miles since 2003. He swears that the worst injury was "this recurring pain in the heel, the result of a piece of glass that had been in there for three weeks. Got a needle and dug it out. It was no big deal."

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Even modern medicine isn't ready to debunk his position. Dr. Mark Halstead, a sports medicine specialist at Washington University, is a runner and has many patients who are runners, though "none admit to running barefoot." He hasn't shed his own shoes but sees the benefit of barefoot running as a training tool.

"Shortly after we learn to walk, we're put in shoes, so we can't tolerate the hot pavement or pebbles," Halstead said. "The foot really is bio-mechanically efficient in and of itself. It's reflected in the shoe companies now."

Researchers at Nike have discovered that a bare foot lands more evenly than a shod foot, spreading the impact and pressure over a larger area and forcing the body into proper alignment. The company has developed a shoe, called the Free, the sole of which provides more flexibility and less structure.

Makes one wonder whether Phiddipedes, the guy who keeled over after running from the plains of Marathon to Athens in 490 B.C., had so much as a pair of sandals to his name. Barefoot running has a couple of contemporary advocates in Abibi Bikila, who won the 1960 Olympic marathon barefoot, and Zola Budd.

Neither was as vocal as Ken Bob Saxton, Roeber's mentor, who should have played Tom Hanks' stunt double in the running scenes of "Forrest Gump." Saxton has been featured on TV and in magazines, touting the virtues of barefoot running.

Roeber, on the other hand, shuns evangelizing about the joys of barefoot running. He'll be happy to talk to anyone who notices. The chatter never interferes with his run, though, because he's not out there to rip up the course.

"If I'm an evangelist of anything, maybe it's of having fun with running, not taking yourself too seriously," Roeber said. "Unless you're an elite runner, you're basically not going to win any prize money. So you might as well go out and have fun."

Halstead agrees with Roeber that a weekly barefoot run, worked up to gradually, could be a good training tool, and some people will adapt easier than others. Roeber and Saxton are among the lucky ones.

St. Louis will be Roeber's 16th barefoot marathon and 34th overall. A resident of Kansas City, Roeber, 50, ran the St. Louis Marathon in 2001 - with shoes.

"I like the course," he said. "What I've noticed is that the hills aren't steep but long. It's very well-attended, especially through the West End. The alternative lifestyles like to get carried away."


On April 9, they'll find a worthy and likable hero.

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