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Barefoot in the Park, but Mostly in the Streets

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — When winter temperatures in the Midwest head into a single-digit spiral, Rick Roeber goes for a run wearing tights, a turtleneck, a sweatshirt, hat and gloves.

But he skips the shoes.

Roeber, 53, runs barefoot, and has been doing so since 2003. He has logged more than 13,000 unshod miles, including about 40 marathons. (In the first, he wore flip-flops for six miles because it was 110 degrees on the Boston streets, and his soles were not yet conditioned.)

As of Thursday, he had put in 558 consecutive days of running barefoot; even a little Arctic air mass does not stop him. Snow might, but frigid, face-numbing weather does not. Roeber once ran outside when it was 6 degrees, but he has had to resort to a treadmill a couple of times since his streak began July 28, 2007.

"I can't go when the snow is over my ankles because then my feet just can't warm up fast enough," he said. "But that's pretty much it."

Roeber, from Lee's Summit, Mo., started running barefoot because he was having trouble with his knees from "running stupid."

"I was very discouraged because I thought I was going to have to quit running or have my knees scoped," he said. "And then I read how this guy was running marathons barefoot, and then learned it could help with knee problems."

Roeber tried it, liked it and built up his barefoot training to the point that he averaged about 50 miles a week in 2008. All to the benefit, he said, of his knees — and his wallet.

“Running shoes give you this false sense of security,” he said. “They have so much padding you think you can run as hard as you want, and then they start breaking down. But smaller, quicker steps are better for your legs.

“Besides, a good pair of running shoes costs \$100 to \$150. I could never really justify spending that kind of money.”

Roeber says he believes that running shoes encourage overstriding, which he says transfers the impact to the heel and causes “blunt-force trauma up the calf and shin” and on to the knee.

When runners use a shorter stride, he said, the impact is displaced evenly around the foot, allowing “very little impact to travel vertically up the leg to the knees.”

But Dr. Lewis Maharam, a sports medicine specialist who is the medical director of the [New York City Marathon](#), said he was skeptical.

“Barefoot runners show up in my office very often because they’re not getting any control of their foot strike,” Maharam said.

Running barefoot once or twice a week for shorter distances, about five miles, could help strengthen foot muscles, Maharam said, but running shoes are designed to address biomechanical issues that most people face.

Roeber was examined for a study about barefoot running, partly financed by Vibram FiveFingers, which manufactures footwear designed to encourage the mechanics of barefooting while providing some protection.

Daniel E. Lieberman, a professor of biological anthropology at Harvard, is conducting the study. He has not yet drawn any conclusions, he said, but barefoot runners do run in a “much more conservative way to avoid injury.”

“People like Rick, or anybody who goes out and runs barefoot, learns that it’s kind of painful, and so you land with a much flatter foot that may have some kind of benefit,” Lieberman said. “But there is a loss of absorption.”

He added: “They change their gait, no question about it, and it might be in a very healthy way. But I don’t know the answer yet.”

Roeber, however, does not need to wait for an answer. He said barefoot running had helped

him and had a minimal effect on his race times. When he was using running shoes, Roeber's fastest marathon, listed on his Web site, was 3 hours 16 minutes in 2001. His fastest time shoeless so far is 3:35 last year in St. Louis.

Roeber, a program manager for Sprint Nextel, receives his share of news media attention during marathons. At first he liked it, he said, "but then it felt yucky."

Now he often runs for charities. Last weekend, he ran the Surf City Marathon in Huntington Beach, Calif., on behalf of an organization that provides wheelchairs for disabled people in the developing world.

"This way is much better," he said.

Roeber said that he was often asked about his shoeless pursuit and that he told people it took some time to get the feet ready to take on the streets.

"The main thing is conditioning the soles," he said. Beginners should try it out first on grass. He recommends soccer fields.

He also has advice for shoe manufacturers.

"If I had to say anything to Nike, I would probably say, 'Teach people to run, rather than just handicapping them,' " he said. "Teach them to run properly without all the fancy shock absorption. It's not doing them any favors, that's for sure."

Roeber said he thought just about anyone could benefit from barefooting. The streets, after all, have not been too hard on his feet. He says they resemble "moccasin leather," and are "not hard as a rock."

He added, "I've probably only had to pick a half-dozen pieces of glass out of them in the last five years."

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