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Posted on Sun, Feb. 27, 2005

No agony of da feet

Shoo shoes: All this marathoner needed was heart and sole

By Ray Buck
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Only the patter of well-calloused feet on pavement distinguished 49-year-old barefoot runner Rick Roeber from everyone else at Saturday's Cowtown Marathon.

This was Roeber's 25th marathon overall.

His seventh without shoes.

Or, as he likes to call them, "foot coffins."

A self-proclaimed RSR (Recovering Shod Runner), Roeber is as serious as a shin splint when it comes to running barefoot.

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"You're not pounding down so hard," he said. "You tend to glide along, so the impact is minimal."

Roeber has competed and trained *sans* footwear for 16 months now.

On Saturday, he ran a personal barefoot best of 3:54.58.

And because he was the only barefoot runner on the course, Roeber could quip afterward: "I won my division today."

He never stopped. He never walked.

And the only injury he could report after 26.2 miles was one small "rub wound" on the big toe of his left foot.

"You'd be surprised," he said, "just how quickly you develop your eye-foot coordination when you run barefoot. It just happens."

Employed as a telecommunications officer in Kansas City, Mo., near his hometown of Lee's Summit, Mo., Roeber has found barefoot running to be kinder to the knees and more fulfilling to the spirit than conventional shod running.

"I really can feel a genetic connection to the past when I run now," Roeber said. "I get so much sensory perception from the bottoms of my feet."

And a few strange looks from others.

Clinical skepticism

But not all of Roeber's skeptics are runners.

"Personally, I wouldn't recommend it," said Dr. Christopher Mann, a sports-medicine specialist working the Cowtown Marathon medical tent Saturday. "Barefoot running was intended for nature running, not urban running."



STAR-TELEGRAM/ALISON WOODWORTH

Rick Roeber completed the Cowtown Marathon in just under four hours, making him feet-down the best -- and only -- runner in his division.

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Mann, of the University of North Texas Health and Science Center at Fort Worth, noted that "hot tar, cement, gravel and glass" can increase the risk of injury.

He added: "Your risk for stress fractures increases if you don't wear shoes. These surfaces are very unforgiving. Plus, you're expending extra energy because you're losing heat through the [uncovered] tops of your feet."

Roeber can concur only with the latter part of Dr. Mann's statement.

Experiencing some pre-dawn shivers before the race, Roeber said: "I understand now why mammals grow hair on the tops of their feet. The heat runs right out."

California barefoot-running authority Ken Saxton has emphasized that proper technique, such as landing on the ball of the foot -- not the heel -- can be developed easily outside the shoe.

"My recommendation for a barefoot runner just starting out would be to try it first on a golf course or a soccer field -- somewhere soft," Roeber said.

Other than heading up an occasional discussion group on the Internet, Roeber has found the lonely sport of running to be even more lonely as a barefoot runner. There are no known barefoot running clubs.

"I think barefoot running will always be fringe," Roeber said. "I think Saxton holds out hope for something more, but there's too much social stigma attached to the bare foot."

Roeber looked down at his blackened bottoms.

"Hey, I wash my feet. I bet you don't wash your shoes," he said. "Besides, what's the best breeding ground for germs? A warm, moist environment, right? Shoes!"

Easily encumbered

Roeber has Texas ties. He attended Sam Houston High School for two years in the early 1970s.

His mother, Ruth, still lives in Arlington.

"Where are your shoes?" someone asked him Saturday.

"Somebody stole 'em," Roeber replied, disarming the probe with an easy smile.

He is asked all the time about dirty feet, calloused feet, flat feet, even pedicures.

He can assure everyone that he still wears a size 9 shoe.

That is ... when the spirit moves him.

"I try to wear shoes as little as possible," he said.

He wears closed-toed sandals at work. And if he runs to the store, even if it's cold, he goes shoeless.

But if he goes out to dinner with his wife, Rebecca, he covers his feet every time.

"I don't want to embarrass her," he said.

But it's not Roeber who feels out of place on a marathon course.

Despite dozens of double-takes Saturday morning, he felt logical all over.

"Look around. How many people do you see wearing gloves?" he asked. "Not that many. Well, you can't feel anything with gloves on. ... The same goes for shoes."

To him, unconventional wisdom is buying a pair of \$100 running shoes.

"Rubber-soled shoes allow you to run any goofy way you want," Roeber said. "Running without shoes forces you to use proper technique."

Ironically, Roeber's personal best of 3:15.59 came with shoes on his feet in the 2001 Quad Cities Marathon in Moline, Ill.

"I think maybe I could do that [time] again barefoot running," he said. "I just need to continue to improve on my technique."

One popular shoe company uses "footstrike management" as its selling point.

Others use words and catch phrases such as "seamless," "weightless," "waffled for traction" and "meshed for breathability."

Truth is, of course, nothing breathes like Roeber's feet.

Online: www.barefootrunner.org
Ray Buck (817) 390-7096 rbuck@star-telegram.com



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