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From the Sunday, March 27, 2005 issue:

Lee's Summit man runs barefoot at Sedalia race

BY TIM DAVIS
THE SEDALIA DEMOCRAT

Thirty-eight degrees, cloudy and a slight breeze with patchy fog still lingering sounds like a great day for Rick Roeber to kick off his shoes and go for a run.

As Roeber crossed the finish line, someone from the crowd said, "He's gonna pay for that someday."

Saturday, Roeber ran the 23rd Annual Sedalia Half Marathon barefoot. With several runners wearing ear muffs and spectators in heavy coats, Roeber cruised the 13.1-mile course in 1 hour, 37 minutes, 46 seconds wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and shorts. No socks, no shoes, just running. Roeber finished 28th overall in the race and was, of course, the fastest of the barefoot runners.

Running 26 miles, 385 yards is like a walk in the park for Roeber. He frequently runs without shoes or socks, using his feet to land on the surface, whether it be grass, rock or concrete.

He has completed seven full-length marathons as a barefoot runner.

Roeber, 49, of Lee's Summit, started running without shoes in October 2003 because of an article he had read. The story talked about how running barefoot can help your technique, according to Roeber.

WEATHER

Sunday, cloudy with a 30 percent chance of rain. Highs in the upper 40s. Northeast winds 10 to 20 mph. Sunday night, partly cloudy in the evening then becoming mostly clear. Lows in the mid-30s. North winds 5 to 10 mph shifting to the west after midnight.

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At the time, he had trouble with recurring knee problems and was worried he would need surgery. The article prompted him to give barefoot running a try.

"I started reading about how barefoot running forces proper technique and I became sold on it," Roeber said. "I've ran exclusively barefoot for about the last year."

Roeber takes his shoes off whenever he can.

"I'm pretty much barefoot as soon as I get home," Roeber said, who works for Sprint. "I'm kind of known around the corporation as the guy without the socks. I mow barefoot."

Roeber will go to the store barefoot "unless the shoe police say something to me."

The reason running barefoot helps the proper technique is because it promotes the ball-heel foot strike. When a person runs barefoot, if he or she doesn't run with the proper technique, it will hurt.

"If you clomp along like you would with shoes, it's high impact that way," Roeber said.

Roeber explains that when running barefoot, the steps are more similar to what a person would take cross-country skiing. He picks his feet up off the ground, but keeps the steps low to the ground in a more gliding fashion.

According to Roeber, his knee problems are gone and injuries aren't a major problem anymore. Roeber said the new injury risk of running barefoot -- stepping on something like glass -- really isn't the problem most people think.

"You get pretty good eye-foot coordination; you don't step on it," Roeber said. "The little bit (of glass) that you do step on usually doesn't hurt you anyway. You watch out for the big stuff. I've run thousands of miles since I've been doin' this, and I really haven't had any de-habilitating injuries that have kept me from running, that's for sure."

Running in marathons is nothing new for Roeber. He has completed 25 marathons, 18 wearing shoes.

His first try at completing a marathon barefoot came last year in the Boston Marathon. Roeber started the race barefoot, but had a pair of sandals tied around his back just in case.

Roeber faced the toughest weather conditions of his barefoot running career in Boston. It was a warm day, and the pavement was extremely hot from the sun since the marathon starts in the heat of the day.

A tail wind was another factor he faced in Boston. For runners, having the wind at your back isn't beneficial because you don't get a breeze in your face. With no cooling breeze, it's even tougher to keep from overheating.

Roeber used the sandals for about five miles, which meant that he ran 21 of the miles barefoot. His goal this year is to finish without any aids. Saturday's half-marathon was a preparation run for the Boston Marathon on April 18.

"There's no doubt in my mind that I'm gonna do the whole thing barefoot this year," Roeber said.

The barefoot runner has logged more than 700 miles this year alone and says that the weather isn't as much of a factor as many would believe. Roeber runs in the snow, but doesn't recommend running barefoot in snow deeper than the ankles.

He doesn't like running in wet conditions, but said, "It's not like I'm getting my shoes wet."

His fastest time barefoot is 3:54, but wants to get down to the 3:30 mark. For Roeber, the challenge of running without shoes is what he likes.

"Most anybody can run with shoes, but I think it takes a little extra technique to run barefoot," Roeber said.

"Thirty-six thousand people completed the (New York City) marathon, so it can't be that difficult. I'm just trying to add new challenges to my repertoire."

While adding this new challenge, Roeber has received some mixed reactions from other runners in the marathons.

"Incredulous looks a lot of times like, 'What in the heck

are you doin?' " Roeber said.

While running barefoot in a marathon doesn't appeal to most, Roeber explains that running barefoot can help his 'shod' friends. Roeber explains that the foot has muscles in it, and running with shoes on doesn't help to strengthen those muscles.

Roeber recommends running barefoot on a soft, grassy surface to strengthen the muscles in the feet, which he said should help improve time when wearing shoes.

Switching to barefoot running hasn't helped his performance times in marathons. According to his Web site (barefootrunner.org), while wearing shoes, he ran a time of 3:15:59 in the Quad Cities Marathon in 2001. That is a time he hasn't come close to equaling since shedding the shoes.

"I think performance-wise I'm not necessarily any faster than when I ran with shoes, but I tell you what, my knees sure feel a lot better," Roeber said. "For me it's almost like a primordial type genetic feeling of accomplishment. It's kinda like returning to maybe my primitive roots or something."

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