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Footwear makers focus on educating people about 'barefoot' basics

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With barefoot running and training gaining traction, more and more shoemakers are launching bare-bones shoes with a scarcity of materials separating the foot from the ground.

[\(Click here to see SNEWS TV episode, "TNT with Therese -- This week, barefoot shoe trends."\)](#)

While all of these shoes aim to approximate the feel of running and walking sans footwear, they're not all built the same: Based on varied philosophies and designs, you find support, structure and cushioning from slipper-like and up. Footwear manufacturers told SNEWS in the coming months they will provide retailers and their consumers with educational materials so everybody can better understand the variety of products hitting the market, as well as the basic principles of becoming accustomed to using and training in bare-bones shoes.

"Education is critical," said Craig Throne, vice president of global marketing for Wolverine World Wide, the parent company of Merrell, which introduced its Barefoot collection at this year's Outdoor Retailer Summer Market trade show. "People need to understand what the barefoot movement is all about."

Educating people is also the focus for New Balance, which introduced its new Minimus collection of barefoot-inspired shoes at Summer Market. "We understand there is a risk in transitioning into this type of shoe too quickly, and using it with bad form," said Katherine Petrecca, strategic business unit manager for New Balance. She said the company would devote marketing resources to producing training and instructional materials rather than sink money into traditional advertising and promotions. "There's really an appetite for education for the retailers and consumers."

The many types of 'barefoot' shoes

A main challenge facing manufacturers is that they must help retailers and consumers sort out the many different types of "barefoot" shoes hitting the market. Some are referred to as "barefoot" or "barefoot-inspired," while others have been dubbed "minimalist" or "natural footwear."

All of these shoes are constructed with few materials surrounding the foot for a more barefoot feel, but they do this to varying degrees. [Click here to see a SNEWS Morning Report](#) from Aug. 4, 2010, during the Outdoor Retailer show, and here for a [post-ORSM report](#) on Aug. 13 on footwear.

SNEWS has found the terms "barefoot" and "barefoot-inspired" are often used for the most stripped-down shoes, such as Merrell's Barefoot collection (www.merrell.com), the New Balance Minimus shoes (www.newbalance.com), Terra Plana's Vivobarefoot collection (www.terraplana.com) and Kigo's Curv shoe (www.kigofootwear.com, [photo-right](#)).



These shoes generally allow feet to move freely, have a neutral platform, with little to no change in height from the forefoot to heel, and encourage a midfoot strike. "Also, the forefoot is more generous to allow the foot to splay. Assuming a midfoot strike, the forefoot absorbs more impact and needs to expand," said Petrecca of New Balance.

The shoes mentioned above also have little to no midsole, support or cushioning, so the foot not only moves naturally but also feels subtleties of the walking or running surface.

"Barefoot should be defined as any product where you can feel the ground through your feet," said Galahad Clark, owner of Terra Plana. "If you walk over gravel, you should be able to feel the stones, and there shouldn't be any extra cushioning, and no pitch from heel to front."

Petrecca and other manufacturers also said that barefoot or barefoot-inspired shoes also have a low "stack height," meaning that the entire foot rests close to the ground.

The barefoot running trend has also led to the introduction of shoes often referred to as "minimalist." These extremely lightweight shoes (typically trail runners) surround the foot with fewer materials than a traditional running shoe, but still provide some cushioning and support.



An example is Golite Footwear's Tara Lite trail runner ([photo-left](#)), a 10.7-ounce shoe constructed with the company's Bare Tech platform. This shoe has a neutral last and no heel lift to achieve a more barefoot feel, but it also includes a midsole and support structures for the foot, as well as a cushioning sole with its Soft Against the Ground lugs.



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Another new product, the New Balance 101 trail running shoe (photo - right), could also fall into the minimalist category. "It has really traditional midsole geometries and delivers a similar feel under foot as a traditional shoe," said Petrecca. "On the shelf you wouldn't think it was anything other than a neutral trainer, but when you pick it up it's significantly lighter."



Another offering in this arena is the Vasque Transister with the company's FootSyncl Fit System.

In addition to the terms "minimalist" and "barefoot-inspired," the phrase "natural footwear" is also emerging

as way to describe shoes that approximate going barefoot.



"I think there is a wide spectrum of footwear, beyond just 'barefoot' and 'minimalist' that will ultimately reside under the category of natural footwear," said Georgia Shaw, marketing manager for Vibram, whose FiveFingers shoes (photo - left) have really fueled the barefoot running trend. She told SNEWS that shoes falling into the natural footwear category, "include but are not limited to: upper construction that does not constrict the toes, a low, neutral platform, and a thin, flexible sole."

Education is Job 1

This footwear lingo is completely new to most retailers and consumers,

and shop employees told SNEWS that most of their customers aren't even familiar with the basics of the barefoot running philosophy.

Jim Thumm, assistant manager of Erehwon Mountain Outfitter in Bannockburn, Ill., told SNEWS that even the experienced runners who buy Vibram FiveFingers at the store are not very knowledgeable about barefoot running.

"They have a small inkling," said Thumm. "Maybe they run with someone who wears them, and they say, 'Those look cool. I'd like to try them.'"

Other shop sales staff and owners have told SNEWS that at least half or more of the sales of "barefoot" shoes are not for running, but for generally walking around, lounging poolside or at a river, gym training, or just plain for looking cool. Several have told SNEWS that if someone says they want to run in them, they are quick to lecture them about the need to start slowly.

Fortunately, Thumm and all those other retail salespeople will soon benefit from a bevy of new learning tools supplied by manufacturers.

"In the coming months, you will see an increase in running education in print, on the web and at the store level," said Vibram's Shaw. And Clark of Terra Plana said that his company would offer consumers an instructional pamphlet, as well as a DVD, that teaches techniques for barefoot running, with all its shoes. At the OR show, it had running coach Lee Saxby working with buyers and media individually to teach them some basics.

Merrell is also focused on increasing knowledge and awareness among retailers and consumers. Throne of Wolverine World Wide said Merrell is developing an instruction pamphlet that retailers can give to customers when they buy shoes in the Merrell Barefoot collection. Product hangtags and shoes boxes will also include tips on how to use the shoes properly. "We're also creating training videos to share with store staff members," he said.

Petrecca said that New Balance would use the retail training company 3point5 (www.3point5.com) to educate store staff on its products, barefoot principles and the Good Form Running system (www.goodformrunning.com), which teaches people how to run faster, easier and avoid injuries. "We'll train all of our reps in Good Form Running and provide consumers information through the New Balance website," said Petrecca. "We're also looking at providing information to consumers when they purchase Minimus shoes -- either a CD or access to a password-protected website."

She added that New Balance is proceeding much more cautiously than normal with this product introduction (in fact, its collection at the show was only being unveiled in private sessions in a back room, so the company could hand-select its retailers), because consumers risk being injured by using barefoot-inspired shoes incorrectly.

"Right now, we are selling through specialty dealers only, and won't be selling through our traditional online channels or catalogs," she said. "Where we sell on our own site, we can provide educational material at the point-of-sale."

She pointed out that these types of shoes should be treated like other highly technical products in a store, adding, "You have to look at them like equipment."

And, like with anything new or technical, understanding how to use best use it comes first.

—Marcus Woolf

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