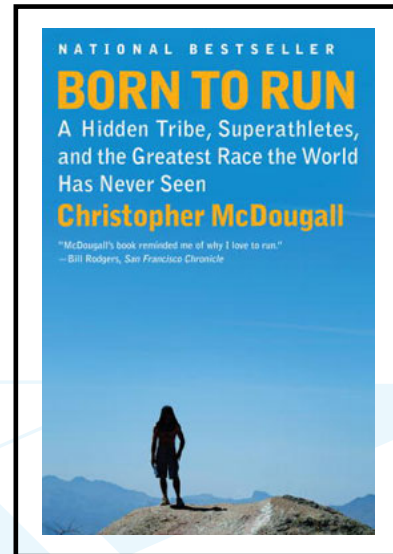


My Love/Hate Relationship With Barefoot Running

As a co-inventor of a foot and ankle strengthening device, the AFX - Ankle Foot maXimizer, I was thrilled when barefoot running finally started to become more mainstream and the debate on barefoot vs. shod heated-up.

I was excited not just from a business perspective, but because I believed that a spotlight would finally shine on the incredible biomechanical potential of the foot and ankle, and that feet would begin to be fully appreciated in all facets of activity. With over 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments, feet and ankles can be a tremendous source of strength, stability, balance, agility, and power.

In addition, my hope was not only that the importance of foot and ankle strength for performance would be appreciated, but also that increasing strength and mobility would finally begin to play a much more significant role – its’ rightful role - in the prevention and rehabilitation of common and often debilitating injuries like plantar fasciitis, shin splints, ankle sprains, Achilles issues, and the like.



Yes my friends, the barefoot debate was going to be the thin edge of the wedge. With the mountain of orthotics, braces, and athletic tape pushed to the side for the moment, foot and ankle strength would be cast into the limelight as practitioners, researchers and the health media would begin uncovering the tremendous potential that, up until now, has been under-appreciated or completely ignored.



That brings me to why I hate barefoot running:

Okay, now ‘hate’ is a very strong word, so lets just say I find it *extremely discouraging* that the barefoot running debate is primarily focused on whether shoes are good or bad, and if runners should be rear-foot or mid-foot striking.

Don’t get me wrong, those are very important considerations; however, there is virtually no acknowledgement, discussion,

or debate on the fact that most runners, whether barefoot or shod, have incredibly weak feet and ankles. That’s right, runners have *weak* feet and ankles, and I don’t care if they are wearing conventional shoes, minimalist shoes, or tip-toeing down the *Champs-Élysées* with nothing between them and the asphalt but calluses and a piece of gum they picked-up a mile back.

You ask any runner to do a straight ankle plantarflexion movement (pushing the foot downwards) and they are strong. They should be! Going out for a nice 6 mile run is roughly 10,000 repetitions of that exact movement.



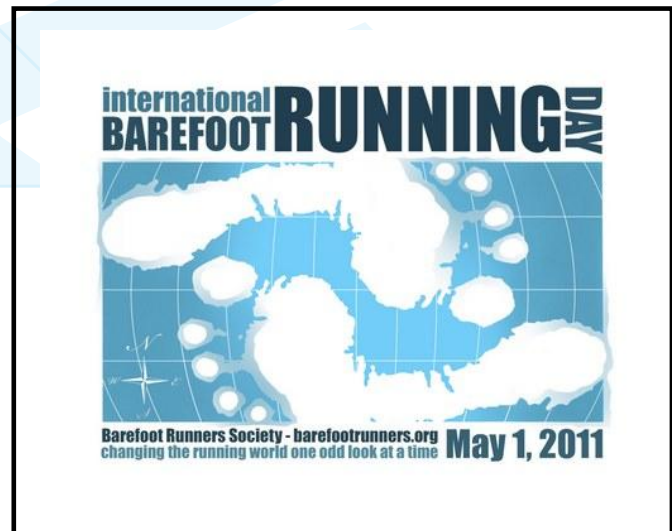
But then ask them to curl their toes and arch their foot while doing that same motion against resistance, and most get a look of surprise on their face when they realize just how weak their feet are. In fact, many actually cramp-up before they can complete *one* rep. Same goes for any lateral (side-to-side) movement; and forget about dorsi-flexion (toes towards the shin) – that just makes them cramp-up again.

How do I know this? Well in addition to the academic research, I have personally done hundreds upon hundreds of demos of the AFX at marathons and other sporting events. I've had AFX on everyone including 5K walkers, Kenyan marathoners (yes, *Kenyans*), barefooted uber-jocks, and Olympians. Without exception, I have seen that look of surprise on everyone's face.

What this proves to me is that most runners are disproportionately over-trained to move in one way: forwards on a solid, relatively flat surface. And when it comes to every other direction that the foot and ankle are built to accommodate, they are weak; and those muscle imbalances can put them at a much higher risk of injury.

Now some barefooters reading this will say that this is not the case with them. That, by going barefoot, they have strengthened the muscles of the feet and are more stable through the ankles. Thinking about it logically, that is likely true. But unless they have also been doing lateral movements and running backwards in the sand, they might not be *as* weak, but they are still weak.

Barefoot running on a flat surface does not address the muscle imbalances. Think of your foot and ankle like you would your core. If you wanted a strong core, would you only do crunches? No, of course not, because crunches only strengthen you in one dimension, when there is 360° of movement that needs to be accommodated.



So, why are your feet and ankles any different? A 25-mile a week runner will do the foot equivalent of ~40,000 'crunches', with no other movement to strengthen the foot and ankle in the other dimensions. Does that make sense? Is that healthy?

There is one final little bit of information that I haven't yet shared from my experiences in having runners try AFX. During or after the demo, almost every runner confesses that 'I have really weak

ankles', or 'my shins are really weak' or some other such thing. They *know* that they have significant foot and ankle weaknesses. Professionals in the world of running *know* that their athletes / patients have significant foot and ankle weaknesses. So what are we doing about it besides shrugging and accepting it as a reality of life?

Obviously, now would be the perfect time to plug our product and say how using AFX will solve all of these issues, so everyone should buy one. Well, if everyone did use an AFX, they'd definitely see a big difference in their strength & mobility. However, just as the key to a strong core is a variety of activity and strength-building movements, the same applies to your feet and ankles. So runners need to also incorporate barefoot training in their workouts. Some lateral lunges, pylon work in sand and a few kettlebell dips can really help. Or how about some yoga? Strengthen the feet, work on that core, and improve flexibility!

The barefoot debate has brought to the fore the realization that most people have weak feet and ankles, and for that I love it. But there is a tremendous opportunity for the practitioners, coaches, researchers and the media to educate the public on strengthening the entire foot and ankle complex, and not just doing 'crunches'. Let's not waste this opportunity.

~Matt Ferguson

Matt Ferguson is a co-founder, President & CEO of Progressive Health Innovations Inc., the maker of AFX - Ankle Foot maXimizer.