

Chapter 37: The Poop on Shoes

During the Q & A section of my clinics, someone will invariably ask, "What about shoes?" To which I'll respond, "I highly recommend them." For some reason they'll always want me to elaborate, so here are some things to remember when looking for something to keep the glass and nails from cutting up your feet when you walk:

- 1. Walking shoes** are the worst possible things to wear for racewalking. By "Walking Shoes" I mean the big, stiff ugly ol' white leather "Nursing Shoes" the pimply faced kid in the mall will try to sell you when you tell him you're a racewalker. These things will cripple you if you try to racewalk in them. If you want to spend \$69.99 or more for black toenails, blood blisters and shin splints, go ahead, but don't say I didn't warn you. A racewalking shoe should have:
- 2. Flexibility**, both in the forefoot and medially. Frank Alongi used to say that you should be able to fold up a walking shoe and put it in your pocket like a wallet. Your shoe must be flexible enough to allow your feet to "roll" from heel to toe when you racewalk. If your shoe is too stiff to flex a bit from the middle of the shoe to the toe and a bit from side to side, you're going to be a very "stumpy" racewalker. And you'll probably end up with shin splints from your feet slapping down on the ground 200 times per minute instead of gracefully rolling along as they will in a more flexible pair of shoes.
- 3. A low heel.** One of the many paradoxes of racewalking: The more cushioning you have in a shoe, the harder you'll hit the ground when you walk. Huh? It's like this: The foot acts like a lever, with the ankle as the fulcrum. The bigger the heel on the shoe, the more force you will have acting on this lever, forcing your foot to flatten out upon heel-strike. With a low heel your

feet will roll very easily along the ground; with a “fat” heel your feet will hit the ground like a couple of sledgehammers.

4. A wide toe box. Make sure there’s plenty of “wiggle room” for your feet to spread out. Cramped toes will become black and blistered toes.

5. Racewalking shoes, or running “racing flats” are the answer. If buying running shoes, look for something designed for racing 5kms to marathons, instead of sprint or cross-country flats, which may offer insufficient support. The shoes should be light-weight (6 1/2 to 9 ounces), low-profile and flexible, with a breathable upper.

6. Where? 90% of “Athletic Shoes” are bought by kids trying to look cool, so the vast majority of big-chain shoe stores don’t sell anything for people who’ll actually use them for athletic pursuits. Which is why racewalking shoes and running flats are so hard to find in the local shoe store. You’ll probably have to resort to mail-order. Two of the best companies are Hoys, and Eastbay, both of which have web sites accessible under the “products” section of my web site (Appendix I). Or, if you’re lucky enough to have a specialty running store in your area, have the manager special-order a pair of racing flats for you. That way you’ll be sure to get the right shoe and the right fit.

7. Buy ‘em big. If in doubt, buy shoes 1/2 size large rather than too small. Since you land on your heel, then roll forward when racewalking, your heel always stays pressed up against the back of the shoe—your foot won’t slip as much as a runner’s will, so you can get away with a shoe that’s a bit large.

8. Goo ‘em. The problem with racing flats is that the outsole usually wears out very quickly. But if your shoe

is an “air” or “gel” model the midsole should stay firm through the next ice age. A tube of Shoe Goo, or glue from a hot glue gun will keep the outsole in shape for hundreds of miles. If you really like the shoes, you may even consider having them professionally re-soled (about \$30).