

# Go the distance



PHOTO PROVIDED BY METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Many experts believe running shoe-buying is getting simpler — no computer algorithm is needed. You'll probably fare best by trusting your sense of feel.

## Try on several pairs when researching the best running shoe

By AMBY BURFOOT >> *The Washington Post*

**C**hoosing the right running shoe has never been easy. There are so many shoe companies and so many models, each touting various high-tech features. How is a buyer supposed to make the smartest choice? Now is the season to figure it out.

With cross-country in full swing and the year's most popular marathons and half-marathons just weeks away, lots of runners are looking for new footwear. Fortunately — almost amazingly — many experts believe shoe-buying is getting simpler. You don't need a computer algorithm. You'll probably fare best by trusting your sense of feel.

A few years ago, "minimalist shoes," designed to mimic barefoot running, were all the rage. The theory might have been good, but the results weren't. "To borrow from Winston Churchill, never has so much damage been done to so many by such little shoes," Washington podiatrist Stephen Pribut says. In particular, many runners suffered forefoot pains and sometimes stress fractures because of the lack of cushioning. Others complained of calf strains and Achilles tendinitis.

A backlash followed quick-

ly, but so did a new approach among shoe companies. Although they brought back thick cushioning, they also abandoned bulky devices intended to increase motion control.

Of course, super-cushioning, like lack of cushioning, can't eliminate all running injuries. So, neither a maximalist nor minimalist design is the key to finding a good running shoe.

Nor, it turns out, is the shape of your foot, despite the fact that consumers have been advised for decades to buy shoes based on the height of their arches. This is determined, not so scientifically, by the "wet test," which involves stepping into a pan of water and then onto a sheet of paper to create a footprint. If you have flat feet, your feet are assumed to "overpronate," or roll inward, and you're supposed to buy rigid shoes. If you have high arches, you're supposed to buy a shoe

with extra cushioning and support.

But when Marine Corps medical staff conducted a randomized, controlled trial of this method, they concluded that using the wet test to select running shoes "had little influence on injuries."

Around the same time, biomechanics specialists also changed their assessment of pronation, previously blamed for many injuries. In his book "Biomechanics of Sport Shoes," veteran Canadian biomechanics researcher Benno Nigg explains that pronation is an entirely normal phenomenon. In fact, it's the way humans are designed to walk and run. Excessive, harmful overpronation is rare, Nigg says. A 2014 study in the British Journal of Sports Medicine confirmed his position by following 927 novice runners for a year and finding that the pronators had, if anything, fewer injuries than non-pronators.

"The foot is going to move the way it prefers to move, regardless of the shoe," says Clearwater, Florida, running podiatrist Brian Fullem, author of "The Runner's Guide to Healthy Feet and Ankles."

This means runners who are used to buying shoes based on the height of their arches or the advice of salesmen who have watched them run across the store to gauge their pronation tendency need a new strategy.

That new strategy? Try on lots of shoes, including brands and models you might not have considered in the past. Nigg proposes that the best running shoes are the ones that feel best when you lace them up and give them a spin. "Comfort is hard to quantify," he acknowledges in his book, "but everyone knows it when they feel it. And comfort is associated with performance, injuries, muscle activity and other biomechanical, physiological and/or psychological factors."