



## Wiggling their toes at the shoe giants

Some runners are convinced that they are better off with shoes that are little more than thin gloves for the feet — or with no shoes at all

BY AMY CORTESE  
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**T**odd Byers was among more than 20,000 people running the San Francisco Marathon last month. Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, he might have blended in with the other runners, except for one glaring difference: He was barefoot.

Even in anything-goes San Francisco, his lack of footwear prompted curious stares. His photo was snapped, and he heard one runner grumble, "I just don't want the guy without shoes to beat me."

Byers, 46, a running coach and event manager from Long Beach, California, who clocked in at 4 hours 48 minutes, has run 75 marathons since 2004 in bare feet. "People are kind of weird about it," he shrugs.

Maybe they shouldn't be. Recent research suggests that for all their high-tech features, modern running shoes may not actually do much to improve a runner's performance or prevent injuries. Some runners are convinced that they are better off with shoes that are little more than thin gloves for the feet — or with no shoes at all.

Plenty of medical experts disagree with this notion. The result has been a raging debate in running circles, pitting a quirky band of barefoot runners and researchers against the running-shoe and sports-medicine establishments.

It has also inspired some innovative footwear. Upstart companies like Vibram, Feelmax and Terra Plana are challenging the running-shoe status quo with thin-sole designs meant to combine the benefits of going barefoot with a layer of protection. This move towards minimalism could have a significant impact on not only running shoes but also on the broader US\$17 billion sports shoe market.

### BIG BUSINESS

The shoe industry giants defend their products, saying they help athletes perform better and protect feet from stress and strain — not to mention the modern world's concrete and broken glass.

But for all the technological advances promoted by the industry — the roll bars, the computer chips and the memory foam — experts say the injury rate among runners is virtually unchanged since the 1970s, when the modern running shoe was introduced. Some ailments, like those involving the knee and Achilles' tendon, have increased.

"There's not a lot of evidence that running shoes have made people better off," said Daniel E. Lieberman, a professor of human evolutionary biology at Harvard, who has researched the role of running in human evolution.

Makers of athletic shoes have grown and prospered by selling a steady stream of new and improved models designed to cushion, coddle and correct the feet.

In October, for example, the Japanese athletic-shoe maker Asics will introduce the latest version of its Gel-Kinsei, a US\$180 marvel of engineering that boasts its "Impact Guidance System" and a heel unit with multiple shock absorbers. Already offered by Adidas is the Porsche Design Sport Bounce:S running shoe, with metallic springs inspired by a car's suspension system. It costs as much as US\$500.

Some question the benefit of all that technology. Craig Richards, a researcher at the School of Medicine and Public Health at the University of Newcastle in Australia — and, it should be noted, a designer of minimalist shoes



Tony Post, chief of Vibram USA, in the company's thin rubber running shoes. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

— surveyed the published literature and could not find a single clinical study showing that cushioned or corrective running shoes prevented injury or improved performance. His findings were published last year in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

Other experts say that there is little research showing that the minimalist approach is any better, and some say it can be flat-out dangerous.

"In 95 percent of the population or higher, running barefoot will land you in my office," said Lewis G. Maharam, medical director for the New York Road Runners, the group that organizes the New York City Marathon. "A very small number of people are biomechanically perfect," he said, so most need some sort of supportive or corrective footwear.

Nevertheless, a growing number of people now believe in running as nature intended — and if not barefoot, then as close to it as possible.

Spend some time in Concord, Massachusetts, and you might catch a glimpse of a fit 51-year-old man in a pair of funny-looking socks running down the bucolic streets.

That would be Tony Post, the president and CEO of Vibram USA, on a lunchtime run. And those socks? They're actually thin rubber "shoes" with individual toe pockets. Called Vibram FiveFingers, they've been selling briskly to runners and athletes looking to strengthen their feet and sharpen their game.

When Vibram, an Italian company known for its rugged rubber soles, designed the FiveFingers a few years ago,



Top: Vibram USA, with its FiveFingers line, is challenging the traditional idea of a running shoe. Above: Terra Plana's walking shoes. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

company officials figured that they would appeal to boaters, kayakers and yogis. Instead, the shoes, which sell for US\$75 to US\$85, caught on with runners, fitness buffs and even professional athletes: David Diehl, the New York Giants tackle, trains in them.

Post, a shoe industry veteran, said he believed that the business was poised for a shake-up. "It used to be all about adding more," he said. "Now, we're trying to strip a lot of that away."

### A SIMPLER TIME

Strange as they look, the FiveFingers shoes hearken back to a simpler time. Humans have long run barefoot or in flat soles. Lieberman's research suggests that two million years ago, our ancestors' ability to run long distances helped them outlast their prey, providing a steady diet of protein long before spears and arrows. More recently, at the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, Abebe Bikila, an Ethiopian runner, caused a stir when he ran the marathon barefoot and won.

Things changed in the early 1970s, when Bill Bowerman, a track coach turned entrepreneur, created a cushioned running shoe that allowed runners to take longer strides and land on their heels, rather than a more natural mid- or forefoot strike. Bowerman and his business partner, Phil Knight, marketed the new shoes under the Nike brand, and the rest is history.

At the same time, millions of Americans began taking up running as a pastime. These twin trends ushered in a golden age of biomechanics research. "There was a lot of concern about injuries because of the boom," said Trampas TenBroek, manager of sports research at New Balance. The logic, he said, was that "if you build a heel lift and make it thicker, you take stress off the Achilles' tendon."

Sales of minimalist shoes, while still tiny, are growing at a rapid clip. Clark figures that he will sell 70,000 pairs of minimalist shoes this year, double last year's volume. The shoes have sold mostly online and through 10 Terra Plana stores worldwide.

Vibram says sales of its FiveFingers have tripled every year since they were introduced in 2006, and Post said he expects revenue of US\$10 million this year in North America alone.

Many professionals agree that while barefoot running may have some benefits, those who are tempted to try running barefoot — or nearly so — should proceed slowly, as they should with any other significant change to their running habits. They also say that more research is needed.

[ SOCIETY ]

## Old city block finds new creative life

Formerly a bustling business center, the Po-Pi-Liao area in Wanhua has been transformed into an arts district

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
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After six years of restoration work, a dilapidated city block in Taipei's Wanhua District (萬華區) has returned to life as a new arts district that the Taipei City Government hopes will complement its efforts to reinvigorate traditional local culture in the area. The new arts district officially opened on Saturday in conjunction with the two-month long Popiarts Old Street Cultural Festival (剝皮寮藝廊通：古街文化節).

Kangding Road Lane 173 (康定路173巷) was left largely untouched by the massive developments that have been taking place in and around the now cleaned up and modernized Lungshan Temple (龍山寺). The hookers and purveyors of pirated porn and snake products have now been ushered off the main thoroughfare into less visible back alleys, replaced by the rather more convivial No. 12 City Park. This gradual process of modernization and restoration has now extended one block to the east.

The rectangular city block that lines this alley has had its old and more evocative name revived. Po-Pi-Liao (剝皮寮), literally translated as the "peeling workshop," was formerly the center of Taipei's lumber business.

Wang Wen-tu (王文達), borough warden for Fuying (福音里), where Po-Pi-Liao is located, said that this city block gained its name because it was where the bark of logs that had been towed from Fujian Province in China was stripped away and prepared to be made into construction materials. "During the Qing Dynasty, the river ran right up to this part of town," he said. "It is one of the oldest parts of Taipei, and its wealth was built on the sale of much-needed timber for construction." Although it later fell on hard times, Po-Pi-Liao was once one of the richest and busiest areas of Taipei.

Remnants of the block's golden days are evident in the elaborate architecture of many of the storefronts that make up Po-Pi-Liao. Much of this beauty, previously hidden by signs and the general disrepair of the buildings, has now re-emerged as the result of refurbishment efforts and the rejuvenation of Po-Pi-Liao's old town center. It has recently served as the setting of the new big-budget period drama *Mengjia* (艋舺), starring the likes of Ethan Ruan (阮經天) and Mark Chao (趙又廷). This exciting development might account for the movie town feel of the old street, which in fact has been divided into a number of exhibition spaces the Taipei City Government hopes will attract artists of all sorts, thereby enriching local culture and enhancing the area's tourist appeal.

The spaces, characterized by a combination of heavy wooden beams, brick and stone, are enormously attractive, as is the secluded garden area. However, their current status as venues for the Fusion Folks Contemporary Art Exhibition (混搭—當代藝術展), which is part of the festival, might be somewhat questionable. Featuring 24 young artists, seven invited from overseas, the exhibition seems to possess little connection to the space, and once again appears to expose the city government as a sucker for abstract and inaccessible art.

Fortunately, there is a great deal else going on beyond Fusion Folks, not least the opportunity for visitors to take in some of the old buildings, now stripped of tatty awnings and signs. The mixture of neo-baroque and Japanese colonial is a fascinating manifestation of the hurley burley of Taiwan's history.

Starting on Sept. 12, the new venue will serve as the center of the Bopi-Summer Feast (寮一夏), which will include music, theater performances and movies. Opening the festival will be Deserts Chang (張懸) and her new band Algae.

Festival and exhibition curator Sean Hu (胡朝聖) emphasized that in addition to all these events, Po-Pi-Liao will become a center for tourist exploration of the historic Wanhua District. A "fun tour map" has been published and provides a friendly, if not particularly informative or innovative, introduction to local points of interest. For those so inclined, the Po-Pi-Liao event is also connected to the ubiquitous Cow Parade, and visitors can search for the Night Market Cow, the Devotional Cow and other cow sculptures that are spread throughout the district.

Not everyone, however, was fully appreciative of the way the city government restored the space or the manner in which it has chosen to use it. "Well, they might have just torn it down," said one arts manager present at the opening ceremony. The creation of the Po-Pi-Liao Old Street, has, if nothing else, preserved something of old Taipei, and it will hopefully evolve throughout the course of the current Popiarts Festival to become a genuine part of the ongoing Wanhua community revival.

Detailed information about the festival can be found at [www.bopiarts.tw](http://www.bopiarts.tw). Po-Pi-Liao is located at the corner of Guangzhou Street (廣州街) and Kangding Road (康定路) and is open 10am to 5pm Sundays to Thursdays and until 7pm on Fridays and Saturdays. Closed on Mondays. Admission is free.

Below: A facade in the recently refurbished Po-Pi-Liao area. PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

Right: A scene from Po-Pi-Liao before renovations. PHOTO COURTESY OF TAIPEI CITY GOVERNMENT

