

The book that inspired a craze

Born To Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, And The Greatest Race The World Has Never Seen (to give it its full title) was written by Men's Health's Christopher McDougall and published in 2009. It details the story of how McDougall tracked down the Tarahumara and Caballo Blanco in the Copper Canyons of Mexico, and how he corrected long-term running problems by copying their running style. The book culminates in an unofficial race between the Tarahumara and a number of Western ultra-runners.



► Making the transition

Russell Holman of Fit 4 Personal Training (www.fit4personaltraining.com) says: 'When converting to a minimalist shoe, it is important to introduce strengthening exercises into your routine. Exercises should start at a level where you are focusing on control, not just of your foot and ankle, but of the entire kinetic chain.' His suggested exercises include:

- **Split squat:** Place a Swiss ball between your back and the wall and lower yourself on one leg in a forward lunge. Then push back up through your feet to the starting position.
- **Skater jumps:** Start from the skater position above, jump over a stick and switch legs before landing. Repeat.
- **Stick placers:** Stand on one foot holding a stick or broom handle horizontally above your head. Bend down and reach the stick to the outside of your standing foot, a bit like rowing. Return to the starting position.
- **Skater squats:** Stand on one foot in a running pose. Lower yourself into a squat, making sure you maintain the alignment of hip, knee and ankle. Push back to the



Time to think on your feet

Barefoot running: As the craze gains momentum, **JAMES ELLIS** examines the pros and cons of this form of exercise

'Run like you're on clouds and don't want to fall through,' says Caballo Blanco (real name Micah True) as I pound on a treadmill. 'Lean slightly forward and let gravity pull you forward. Take smaller steps and land on your forefeet rather than hitting with your heels. It's like how you'd run as a kid.'

When Blanco speaks, runners listen. He is the hero of best-selling running book Born To Run by Christopher McDougall, who eschewed Western values and headed into Mexico's Copper Canyon to learn the secrets of the little-known Tarahumara tribe – the most gifted natural runners in the world. Whenever they've come across traditionally trained athletes, they've beaten or matched the best every time. Even stranger, the members of this elusive tribe train on a diet fuelled by *tesguino*, a corn-based beer, and run in ceremonial costume with nothing but sandals on their feet. Their exploits are one of the reasons for the current trend for barefoot and minimal running.

Traditionally, runners were told to take long strides, impacting on their heels as they landed, turning their feet through the curve of mid-foot to forefoot. Minimal runners tend to take shorter strides, land on their mid or forefoot and claim that running with little between them and the ground improves their 'feel' for the terrain.

To a point, science backs them up. Running slams six to eight times your weight through your body with each stride – for an 80kg runner, that's around 500kg per step – so it makes sense to use a quick turnover of strides and land on the fleshiest part of the foot.

Running coach Nick Anderson (www.runningwithus.com) is a fan of the forefoot strike and minimal running. As Blanco (pictured right) gives me advice at my 'introduction to minimalism' session, Anderson cocks his head towards the treadmill. 'Key in training is to listen to your body,' he says. 'Listen now, you can hardly hear your feet touching the treadmill, whereas before you were making quite a noise.'

The minimal craze has inspired shoe manufacturers to produce footwear a million miles from the structured,

supportive trainers many of us wear. Check out someone with Vibram Five Fingers on their feet and you can bet they'll have a dog-eared copy of Born To Run somewhere. Shoe specialist Saucony has gone further by introducing a range of shoes from a structured shoe to a minimal one, allowing those wishing to make the change the chance to step down gradually.

'We produce different shoes with different degrees of minimalism,' says Spencer White, of Saucony's Human Performance and Innovation Lab. 'The key difference in any minimal shoe is in the amount of "drop" between the heel and the forefoot. On a traditional shoe it's 12-14mm, whereas minimal shoes have 4mm or less.'

However, although runners could make the step down to minimalism by wearing each shoe until they wear out and then buying the next 'level' down, White says this should be done with some caution.

Massage therapist and fitness trainer Lillian Lartey (www.healthdestination.co.uk) is less convinced by the clamour for forefoot striking and minimal running. She says: 'When you forefoot strike, pressure goes through the front of the calf muscle and into your shin bone. If your calf muscles are weak, it will increase the chance of getting minor fractures.'

For those wishing to make a switch to minimalism, she suggests a programme with lots of cross-training and strength work such as lunges and calf raises.

White admits the running community remains divided over the best way to run. 'There are elite athletes who forefoot strike and others who are heel strikers,' he says. 'What they have in common is that their centre of mass moves quickly over their foot and their leg shank is nearly vertical when it hits the ground. Effectively, impact is minimal as they move very quickly and that reduces the load on their legs.'

'The unanswered question is whether there is an optimum natural stride. Until we know, people who want to make the move to minimalism should definitely do so gradually.'

James Ellis's blog is at 1095miles.com



On their toes: Tarahumara runners run in nothing but sandals. Picture: Alamy

► Watch your waistline this Halloween

Most people blame the festive period for their weight gain. However, Halloween, with its abundance of sugary treats, could actually be the start of our overindulgence. Sam Feltham, owner of Smash The Fat Bootcamp in London, advocates heading off holiday weight gain right before it even starts.

'Most people put the emphasis on Christmas for those extra inches but Halloween is the time when most people start buying and eating sweets and treats,' he says. 'The overindulgence of sweets during Halloween often leads to poor food choices following the holiday. Sweets are still lingering around the house and bad eating behaviour can develop into a habit. People then just put off losing weight until their New Year's resolution. However,

it needn't be a time of expanding waistlines. To get yourself back on track after Halloween, start the next day with some physical activity and a healthy breakfast. This often motivates you for the rest of the day, which carries on each day thereafter.'



Feltham also suggests not stockpiling sweets for the winter and incorporating healthier snacks such as dried fruit and nuts rather than just chocolates. He also says it's a good idea to donate any leftover treats so you're not tempted a few days later.

Did you know?

Walking sideways burns 78 per cent more calories than walking straight forward. 'With lateral motion, your body is dealing with balance and coordination as well as using a slightly

different muscle group to the one when you walk normally, thus burning extra calories,' says Neil Johnson, senior personal trainer at The Chelsea Club (www.thechelseaclub.com).

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