

By Michael Jenkins

To run or not to run- that is the question.

Sneakers, trainers, 'gutties', runners, running shoes, 'go fasters' are all frequent references to the good old running shoe. Whatever name you give them is not overly important but how you choose your running shoe can be the difference between the sheer joy of running in comfort and pain free or picking up niggles and injuries.

The running shoe market is split between the sports fashion stores and the more specialist running market stores. Sports stores tend to focus on the fashion brands which look good though often do not stand up well when used as a pure running shoe. This is because proper running brands from USA such as Brooks, Saucony and New Balance and Japanese brands such as Mizuno and Asics spend vast amounts of money on research and development on cushioning, comfort, fit and durability of their running shoes. For other brands, the look of the shoe is key selling feature- and these shoes should be avoided at all costs!

Why is this research and development so important with these brands? As Ruth Gorman alluded to in her Belfast Telegraph Runher 5k Training diary, when we run, at least three times our body weight 'hits' the ground with every foot-strike. Good cushioning is crucial for protecting the feet, ankles, knees, legs and back. As one of the leading running specialists in the British Isles, we, at Up and Running in Belfast have found, that very often people coming to us with sore knees, legs or backs are a direct result of a poor choice of running shoe brand. Fix the shoe, fix the problem. Many people look to strap their knees or other part of the leg up thinking that they are "falling apart". Not so! They are in good health; it's just that they are possibly running in that dreaded fashion trainer.

Old running shoes should also be avoided at all costs. Any running website or magazine 'worth its salt' will highlight that once you have ran around 400-450 miles, the shoes will have lost around 30% of their cushioning or shock absorbency. Running on in old shoes means saving money (on the price of a new pair) but the 'price to pay for this' could be that you start to put your lower body under unnecessary strain with less cushioning from a worn out pair of shoes.

The 'fit' of the running shoe is also important. For the girls running the big event on 29th June who have never been properly fitted, it is worth knowing that your running shoe and high heel shoe size tend to be completely different. Over the years in 'Up and Running', we would find new customers would have been wearing a size too small in their running shoe. It is crucial to have roughly the width of one thumb in front of your big toe or second toe. If you don't want red raw toes and black toe- nails, follow the 'rule of thumb'. It should also be noted that a technical running sock will not only keep the feet fresh but help with finding a good fit with your running shoe.

The final key aspect to consider when you choose your running shoe after brand and fit is 'Gait Analysis'. As the first business to offer this in Ireland- North or South- in a retail

environment, we are very proud of the fact that we use the technology along with our running experience to help people choose the correct shoes. In watching people run on a treadmill, we look to see which way the foot strikes the ground. We have found that around 70% of our customers would have some level of over-pronation. This means that there is an inward roll of the foot/ankle. With over three times your body weight coming down on this 'bend in the foot', it can lead to all sorts of problems- often pain in the outside of either knee, ankle pain and lower back pain to name a few. This can happen on both feet or with one only. Other people have, what we call a 'neutral gait' where their feet strike the ground in a straight direction. There are various levels of this over-pronation and the key is to assess how much one over-pronates and offer the person a shoe that compensates for this. We also see a minority of runners with an outward roll which is referred to as under-pronation.

Gait Analysis takes all the guesswork out of choosing your correct shoe. Running specialists will also use their running knowledge to help match the correct shoe to your running gait. It would be fair to say that beginners, without getting their gait analysed, would have a 25 per cent chance of picking the correct shoes in a sports fashion store. Running specialist stores also offer customers the opportunity to 'try before you buy'. Whether you jump outside the store or use the treadmill, we actively encourage all customers to test the shoes for themselves – BEFORE you pay.

As you read this, you may be saying that this is all very technical and a lot of information to take in. After all, all you want to do is to get outside and run. And, you may also be saying the line we hear every day in our store : "Sure, I am not a runner" which translated means getting properly fitted and tested is for 'proper runners' only. Running specialist stores welcome customers of all abilities. Infact, we would get the most satisfaction out of helping beginners and those injured. While we would strongly recommend local physios and podiatrists for professional help and advice, we often find our running knowledge, gait analysis technology and passion for running goes a long way in helping people run in comfort.

Whether you are after gutties, go-fasters, sneakers, runners or running shoes in advance of the Belfast Telegraph Runher 5k, be sure to consider the 1,2,3 of Brand, Fit and Gait before you opt for some new shoes. You won't regret it.