

"The Poop on Shoes"

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Fig. 1: Kids, don't try this at home...

During the Q & A section of my clinics, someone will invariably ask, "What about shoes?" To which I'll have to respond, "I highly recommend them." (See Fig. 1). 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 walking. By "Walking Shoes" I mean the big, stiff ugly ol' white leather "Nursing Shoes" the pimply-faced kid in the mall is going to 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 you 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 you'll 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 5 k-marathons, instead of sprint or cross-country flats which offer too little support. The shoes should be light-weight (6 1/2 - 9 ozs.), 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 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.

7. Buy 'Em Big. If in doubt, buy shoes 1/2 size large. 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, but a shoe that's too small will give you blisters and black toenails.

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