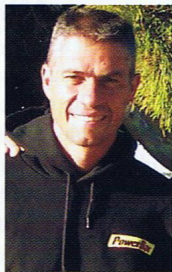


## News on Shoes You Can Use

By Dave McGovern



A few years back I wrote a shoe-making manual for incoming designers at a major footwear company based in the Northeast. (I can't divulge the name of the company, but for a hint, scrambled the letters "Beer Ok".)

I spent a lot of time interviewing biomechanics and shoe designers and found they were very frustrated with the process of designing shoes for walkers. They would invariably come up with great designs that would thrill any seasoned racewalker: lightweight, flexible shoes with low heels that would be great for racewalk or marathon-walk training or racing. But the marketing people would take one look at the new designs and say "We can't sell these! Walkers think they need stiff, heavy, klunky shoes—preferably something in white leather..."

But why? Because we've been brainwashed by running store employees who've shod lots and lots of joggers but not so many racewalkers. Fitness walkers and racewalkers are not slow runners. Fitness walking, racewalking and running are all biomechanically different activities. For one thing, runners hit the ground with approximately 3-4 times their body mass since they leap off the ground then slam back to earth with every step; walkers and racewalkers land with only 1 ¼ to 1 ½ times their body masses since they keep one foot on the ground at all times.

The way a walker or racewalkers's foot impacts the ground is also different from the way a runner's foot hits. Runners tend to land near the balls of the feet or perhaps flat-footed, while walkers and racewalkers land on the heel. This can be a problem, especially for racewalkers, if the shoe has a hard plastic heel counter. The heel counter adds support, but if the walker lands on the heel with a straightened leg (rather than a runner's pronounced bent knee) the back of the ankle and Achilles tendon slams into the back of the shoe. If the back of the shoe is not well-padded, the heel counter can dig into the Achilles causing bruising or even bleeding.

Now back to the shoe store... It can be a pretty intimidating place. There are so many shoes on the walls for so many different activ-

ities and types of feet. It wasn't always that way. There used to be pretty much one shoe choice for running, walking, skipping, jumping, tiddly-winking, etc.: Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars. They weren't flashy, but they were cheap and they could handle anything a 12-year-old kid could throw at them. Times have changed. Today there's a mind-numbing variety of shoes for every possible activity. But why? Do walkers, for example, need different shoes for strolling vs. racewalking vs. hiking? Does it really matter? Well, in a word, yes. All walkers were not created equal. Just as Cinderella's slipper fit only her foot, your shoes may "fit" only one fitness activity. Different ways of walking require different shoe designs and materials. The lightness and flexibility of a racewalking shoe would spell disaster on a tough hike over rough terrain.

Here's a rundown—er, walk-down—of the things you should look for in your shoes:

### Casual walking

For casual fitness walking, anything goes ... almost. Fitness walkers—as opposed to racewalkers—who aren't planning to cover more than three to five miles at a time are safe using anything from lightweight running shoes to cross-trainers to real racewalking shoes.

Since walkers impact the ground with so much less force than runners, they don't need excessive cushioning. In fact, too much fluff in the heel can lead to shin pain and other problems. A good rule of big toe (as opposed to thumb) is that any comfortable running, walking or racewalking shoe that doesn't give you blisters is probably okay for casual walking.

### Racewalking

An increasingly popular fitness and competitive activity, racewalking is more than just fast walking. Olympic-style racewalking uses a lot more muscles and relies on the feet much more than fitness walking does.

Consequently, the right shoes are critical. Racewalking shoes need to be very flexible to allow the feet to "roll" from heel to toe, and they should have a very low heel to reduce leverage that can cause the feet to slap the ground after heel contact. "Real" racewalking shoes or running racing "flats" or "trainer-racers" are your best bets.

### Marathon walking

Walking marathons—or even three-day ultra-marathons—is another form of athletic

challenge that is growing in popularity. How you walk one of these events will dictate what you should wear.

Most marathon walkers use everyday fitness walking technique, so walking shoes or lightweight running shoes are appropriate. But a number of marathons (Los Angeles, Honolulu, Portland and Mardi Gras, to name a few) include competitive racewalking categories. If you plan on racewalking a marathon, you'll need a good racewalking shoe, or a stable runners' racing flat as described above.

Picking the right kind of shoe is important, but the fit of the shoe is the most critical factor when you're on your feet for many hours. Shoes that are too tight (or too loose) can cause painful blisters or black toenails.

### Hiking

Hiking shoes and boots are all about disaster avoidance. (Step on an algae-covered rock in a fast-running mountain stream and you'll know exactly what I'm talking about!) For most hikes, anything with a treaded, high-grip outsole will do. I often wear a pair of athletic sandals for easy hikes, but for more rugged terrain, you'll want to invest in something more substantial to prevent ankle sprains. A high-cut hiking boot is a must when hiking on rocky trails.

So, there you have it. Maybe you could do anything in your Chuck T's as a 50-pound bundle of energy, but nowadays, unless you want to contribute to your podiatrist's new Mercedes, get the right shoe for the job. Fitness walking shoes and hiking boots are available in most athletic shoe stores, but racing flats and racewalking shoes can be more difficult to find. Web retailers such as Eastbay ([www.eastbay.com](http://www.eastbay.com)) and Road Runner Sports ([www.roadrunnersports.com](http://www.roadrunnersports.com)) are good places to find suitable shoes if you can't find a good running specialty store locally.

For a list of reviews of great shoes for racewalking and marathon walking go to the Shoe Review section of Dave's web site at: [http://members.aol.com/\\_ht\\_a/rayzwocker/worldclass/shurevuw.htm](http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/rayzwocker/worldclass/shurevuw.htm). ♦

**Dave McGovern** has competed internationally as a member of the United States National Racewalk Team on six World Cup Teams and six Pan Am Cup teams and has coached both elite and novice walkers to excel in competitions near and far.