

Shoes and Foot Care

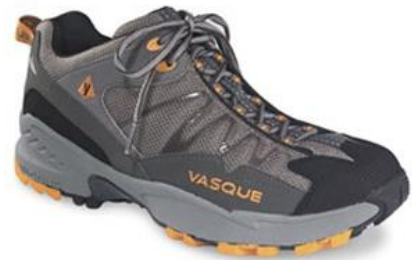


When I started to run, I had no understanding about shoes or foot care. Somehow I had a strange belief that expensive running shoes was a scam and it really didn't matter what you ran in as long as they fit well. I would just go to a big box store and choose a pair of cheap shoes off the shelf that seemed to fit well. My struggles were many, as I tried to go longer distances. My feet would get very sore and blisters were frequent. I became very discouraged.

Once I discovered the existence of ultrarunning in 2004, I subscribed to an email listserv named, ultralist (still in existence in 2016). This was the primary gathering place back then on the Internet for ultrarunning discussions. After my first year of ultrarunning, in 2005 I posted a long summary of my running activities and one veteran posted in reply: "After reading your race reports about your first ultra year, I'm amazed that you survived. It seems that you made many poor decisions during the year but still managed to grow and achieve success. You seem to be very determined and quite persistent, but be careful out there. Learning from your mistakes will help you eliminate a lot of the unnecessary pain you've been experiencing." His comments were very true. I was gaining a lot of good experience through failures. I did read carefully the ultralist and learned a ton of knowledge from the experienced runners who shared their experiences and race report.

Note: *I will mention some products. I have never been sponsored by any of these products. I don't want to be sponsored and feel obligated to stick with a product. I use products that work. Once they stop working, I move on. You won't ever see me hash-tagging products on posts as many do. I would rather just run than try to get free products. Generally I'm not into gear.*

I finally concluded that I needed better shoes. Trail shoes at that time were still a pretty new idea. There were mostly lightweight boots or road running shoes. Vasque came out with a trail shoe, "Velocity" that seemed to be the most popular shoe on the ultralist. While traveling to run my first 50-miler at White River 50, I stopped off at a sports store in Boise and bought a pair of Velocitys. When I put them on, I was amazed! It felt like I had pillows on my feet. I didn't know comfort like this was possible in shoes.



My running enjoyment took a turn for the better as the foot pain and blisters greatly diminished. I ran in Vasque Velocitys for several years, going through many, many pair. They would last for about 400 miles until the uppers would develop holes in the crease locations. As I would retire my shoes, my boys would claim their favorites to use.



Now with decent shoes to run in, I later turned my attention to foot care. I learned from the ultralist that you could prevent blisters by taping potential hot spots ahead of time. The tape of choice seemed to be Elastikon, a cloth tape that stretches and holds to the skin very well. The runners on the list recommended also applying tincture of benzoin, a bonding fluid. It makes the tape adhere much longer. This was a great find. The Elastikon worked great, but the tincture of benzoin would make a nasty mess at times and tough to clean off the skin after a race. Eventually after a year or so, I stopped using the tincture of benzoin and learned that if I just stretched the

My Path to Ultrarunning – Davy Crockett

Elastikon a little while putting it on, it would bond much better and usually stay on for an entire 100-mile race.

Early on, I would usually just tape the back of my heels to eliminate rubbing blisters. But eventually I started taping other locations too. To this day (2016) I still use Elastikon for any run longer than about 25 miles.

I became familiar with black toenails, but it took me awhile to figure out that they can nearly be avoided by more room in the toe box, a thus better fitting shoes. That lesson took years to arrive. My family would make fun of my gross looking toe nails, but it didn't bother me.



My main foot problem was sesamoiditis. In the foot beneath the big toe in the forefoot are little sesamoid bones that can become painfully inflamed. Eventually I made my first visit to a podiatrist in 2005. I learned about foot pronation, and by looking at the wear of my shoes, I discovered my right foot in particular over-pronated pretty badly. The podiatrist made me hard custom heel orthotics to control my pronation. They were very hard to get used to. I wore them during my first 100-mile finish and by 80 miles my feet were so sore that I had to walk the rest of the way in. I would try putting them under my insoles but even that didn't work well. I think it took me a year to wise up and ditch them altogether.

The real cause of my sesamoiditis was shoes that were too narrow. It literally took me years to figure that out. My feet are just a bit too wide to fit into most standard shoes. Once I figured that out and was more careful about the shoes I ran in, the sesamoiditis went away.

My pronation issue remained. Instead of using orthotics, I learned how to tape the sole of my shoe, building it up under the insole, to better force my foot to quit tilting inward so much. Too much buildup would cause blisters, so I learned how to apply just the right amount. I still use this method today (2016) for all my running shoes and will never use orthotics anymore.



My next foot ailment with increased miles was a painful Morton's Neuroma. A neuroma is a thickening of nerve tissue. Mine was between the third and fourth toes in the ball of the foot. Compression would occur causing terrible pain to shoot into the toes. This pain would be felt especially on a sustained uphill such as the early miles of Bighorn 100. Eventually it would just get so bad that the toes would numb and then I could bare it. My solution was to use a thinner insole. It really all came down to getting more room in my toe box but I still didn't realize that at the time. For a couple years I would always replace my insoles with thin insoles that I would buy at the store. (Later when max cushioned shoes came

out, this problem totally went away).

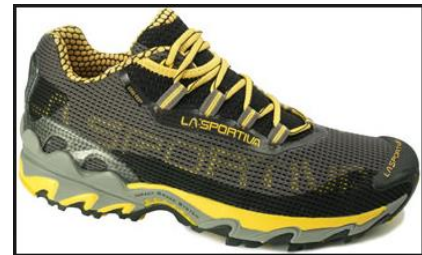
Crushed toes was a particularly nasty issue, especially the small toe. I would resort to using toe cushions, a nice item to put on a toe to protect it. I still use those now and then for a particular toe. But again, the real problem was narrow shoes and a small toe box. I remember at The Bear 100, that my toes became terribly crushed and that with ten miles to go I was literally in tears from the pain. It wasn't until the next week that I discovered my shoes had two insoles in them, giving my feet no room in the shoe. During the night I had asked my crew to change out my insoles, but I wasn't clear. They thought I wanted to add my insoles to another pair of shoes. Ouch!

My Path to Ultrarunning – Davy Crockett

It wasn't until the 2009 Bighorn 100 that I finally figured out that most of my foot ailments were running in shoes too small. It took me twenty-four 100-mile finishes to teach me that lesson. For the 2009 Bighorn 100, I started running in a new model of the Vasque Velocity, getting my usual size 9.5. They seemed a bit tight, but I ran in them anyway. Within 15 miles I was really suffering. Late into the night I nearly DNFed because of the terrible foot pain. At an aid station with my drop bag, I decided to change into an older pair of shoes and was surprised that the pain mostly went away and I was able to finish the race slowly.

After the race, I was very discouraged about my shoes. They seemed to work so well in the past, but now no longer did. I soon figured out that with all the running that I had been doing for the past five years that my feet had groan nearly a full size. I ditched using the Vasques because I didn't like their new model, and I was in search of a new running shoe. (Today I always run in size 10.5 and sometimes even 11).

I followed the lead of Karl Meltzer at that time and started running in La Sportivas. That somewhat worked for a year or so, but the problem with the shoes was that they were too narrow and the rock plate was bad, causing sore feet bottoms. They also wore out quickly, in just about 250 miles. I couldn't afford buying expensive shoes that often. I also eventually badly aggravated a tendon that wraps around the ankle and connects to the bottom of the foot. These shoes just were not protecting my feet enough.



So, I was again trying to find the ideal shoe for me. I ran in some Montrail for a while that helped, but they were pretty heavy and slow shoes. They did let my ankle heal.



Finally the shoe I was really waiting for arrived. Hoka One-One Mafate. I started to run in them during 2010 and was amazed to discover that I could run 100 miles without sore feet afterwards. My finish times improved and I started setting personal record times at nearly all distances while running in these shoes. They made a huge difference and I was delighted. Many runners away from Utah scoffed at the funny looking “clown shoes” that many of us were wearing and thought we would surely twist our ankles in them. But I learned how to run in them well and never twisted an ankle. The barefoot craze was going on and this was in the opposite direction, max cushioning. No, I couldn't feel every rock on the trail and my feet thanked me for that.

But nothing is perfect when it comes to shoes. The major issue I had with Hokas, all models, is that they still were too narrow for me. They caused nasty blisters on the sides of the big toes or side of the foot because of shoe defect, a seam inside. All manner of taping didn't cause those to go away. Also the foam cushion used by those early Hokas would break down pretty fast. With my pronation issues, the foam would eventually collapse and the shoes became slanted. New models of Hokas wouldn't improve things much and the Stinson model proved to be very, very unstable for my pronation issues. In 2012, while wearing unstable and worn-out Hokas, the pressure caused on the inside of my leg developed a massive stress fracture that sidelined me for six months. All because of imperfect shoes.

My Path to Ultrarunning – Davy Crockett

In 2013, I kissed Hoka's good-bye and started using the New Balance Leadvilles. These shoes were stable enough for me and didn't cause the nasty Hoka blisters. But they didn't provide enough of the max cushioning I wished for. In 2014, I went to Altra Olympus. These shoes delighted me at first. The zero drop never was an issue for me. But as the summer went on, I discovered that their traction was very, very poor. I was slipping and falling on just about every steep trail in the Wasatch Mountains. My forearms and elbows had terrible scrapes and cuts all summer. The Altra toe boxes are nice and wide, but their funny foot shape doesn't work for those of us with long second toes. I had to wear size elevens, but even that wasn't enough to give room for that toe. I finally had to say good-bye to Altras and went back to Hoka's. Once I switched, all the slipping and falling stopped.



In 2015-16 I ran in the perfect shoe for me. The Hoka Rapa Nui II. These shoes had the stability I needed and didn't have a seam inside that caused the nasty Hoka blisters. They still were a bit narrow, but fit pretty well. Proper taping provided the protection I needed. Unfortunately Hoka discontinued my ideal shoe. These shoes would not break down fast and I could easily put 600 miles on a pair. I quickly bought enough half-price pairs to last me through much of 2016. Their replacement model (Speedgoat) is too narrow and likely won't work for me. For 2017, I will again be looking for that perfect shoe.

What about zero drop? Similar to the barefoot running craze, I think it is a passing fad, but an ingenious marketing idea. A little heel lift works best for me. Don't worry so much about millimeters of drop. Instead concentrate on good running form. Runners need to develop good technique and form before anything like a couple millimeters of drop can make any difference. Foot-strike and shoe-drop are secondary to proper pronation and activating the major running muscles correctly.

In summary, these are the factors for me in selecting shoes. 1 – Fit. Toe box room and width. 2 – Stability. I must pronate correctly. 3 – Foot protection. Max cushioning and toe protection. 4 – Grip – Good lugs and aggressive tread patterns for steep slopes. 5 – Uppers. Must drain water fast, keep out most of the dust, and not have seams to cause blisters. 6 – Weight – Shoes that are as light as possible with the required features.

My foot care involves prevention. In my early ultra years I would typically finish a 100-miler with some nasty blisters, but with better fitting shoes, tougher feet, and better prevention I started to finish without any blisters.

Before every 100-miler, I would take about 30 minutes to carefully tape my feet. The taping depended on the shoes and potential hot spots. I used Elastikon two-inch tape, and applied to: the backs of my heels, the bottom of my right heel (pronation slippage), the sides of the big toes, and the entire forefoot. With Kenesio tape (one inch), I would wrap any toes that tended to rub against each other. Currently in 2016 for some reason these are the first three toes of my right foot. I use Kenesio tape because it is smoother than Elastikon when rubbed against another toe. Finally, I would apply Butt Paste on any toes that aren't taped.

My Path to Ultrarunning – Davy Crockett

Early in my ultrarunning career I started to run in toe socks. They seemed to make sense and helped me avoid toe blisters. But the socks wore out so very fast, always getting a hole at the tip of my longer second toe. Worst of all, I eventually figured out that they spread out the toes and used up way too much room in the toe box causing lots of problems. Once I finally ditched them, my foot problems decreased quite a bit.



My socks of choice in 2015-16 were ASICS Quick Lyte Cushion Quarter Socks. For me, light socks that fit well work wonders. Cushioned, thick socks take up too much room in the shoe. If I need cushion, that should be in the shoe or the insole, not the sock.

What about wet feet? There are certain 100-milers where my feet have been wet nearly the entire time. My experience has been that wet feet, while uncomfortable and heavy, lubricate well. I would usually have to remove some of the tape on my feet as it got soggy and lost its adhesive. But I rarely came away with blisters in races with wet feet. So I wouldn't stress out about running with wet feet. They usually would just dry out fast or stay wet and work fine.

Dust in the shoes and socks can be nasty. If they stay in the shoes too long, blisters can start forming. It is worth the investment of time to quickly clean the feet, change the socks and move on. Whenever I run on trails, I run with gaiters - Dirty Girl Gaiters. I wonder why all trail runners don't use them. They save me so much time, keeping the dirt and tiny stones out of my shoes.



What about switching shoes during a race? If the shoes are working well, I leave good enough alone. For most of my races I finish in the same shoes I started with. At times, one shoe might be causing some problems and I might switch out the problem shoe. I don't feel embarrassed running in two different colored shoes.

One of the most important things to do to avoid blisters, is to stay properly hydrated. If I'm badly dehydrated, I'm at a higher risk of developing blisters. If I'm retaining fluids badly, blisters can also develop. Stay properly hydrated.

What happens when I get a blister? If it is toward the end of a race, I just grin and bear it. Otherwise, I'll stop and treat it. I'll pop them with a safety pin from my bib or with a cactus needle in the desert. Yes I know some say don't drain them. I always do, feel better quickly, and it has never resulted in infection. After draining, if I have tape, I will tape over the spot after cleaning well and run on. I've never used moleskin, the tape works better.

Keeping the feet happy is one of the most important thing to pay attention to. What are my feet like after nearly 40,000 miles of running? They are soft but tough. My big toes always have some numbness on the tips of them, but I'm used to that now and it doesn't worry me. I get calluses, but usually carefully remove them periodically. My toe nails are always rather ugly looking because they come and go. Toe nails are overrated. Thus far I've avoided any stress fractures in my feet. I think I have good feet and I try to treat them well.