

A VERY PEDESTRIAN SUBJECT – RACE WALK NOTES – Dec 2012 George White

IF THE SHOE FITS!

If you are serious about race walking then you should spend time considering what shoes to wear. I am a firm believer in different shoes for racing and training. Generally you will cover more kilometres in training than in races so a hard wearing shoe is a good consideration. I tend to get somewhere between 800 and 1000kms from a training shoe. These shoes are a running shoe with reasonable support. However for racing I like to wear racing flats or the new trend of minimalist shoe. These are much lighter and feel so much more responsive for racing. However they do not wear as well – often lasting 400kms or less.

Don't worry about all the hype that you need good support in a shoe, as race walking is far kinder to feet and legs than running, so a very light shoe should not cause any problems. Racing shoes are built with a relatively low heel which assists a fast, efficient race walking technique. Training (normal running) shoes generally possess higher, more shock-absorbing heels necessary because of the stress caused by running. These shoes result in more compression and expansion in the heel which uses energy.

WHEN TO BUY NEW SHOES

Shoes are the most expensive part of our sport but don't skimp or injuries could follow. You need new shoes when wear on the shoes tells you, or they just no longer feel as though they give you the support you need.

Shoes will wear differently for each walker. Regularly inspect your shoes for wear, paying particular attention to the bottom of the shoe near the heel, and the front where you roll off the toes. While obvious wear may exist – it is often the midsole that could be a problem as this tends to collapse. Check the shoes from behind. If the midsole of the shoe is compressed (visible creases) or leaning too much to one side it is time for them to go.

Don't try to save money by home-repairing shoes. Sole rebuilding products only fix the visibly worn section of a shoe, often leaving invisible damage inside.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A SHOE

Shoes should feel great as soon as you put them on – you don't turn an uncomfortable shoe into a comfortable one by wearing it. Therefore even if it has rave reviews and claims to be the best thing since sliced bread – avoid it unless it feels good on you. Try them on a treadmill in the shop if you can. Having said a shoe should feel comfortable as soon as you put it on – do "break them in" before wearing them in an important race.

Ideally, walkers training consistently should alternate between two pairs of the same or different model shoes; this protects the feet and helps to prevent blisters, as each shoe will wear differently. Also, with two pairs, you can usually avoid training in wet shoes and it gives time for the midsoles to recover.

If you find a particular shoe that you like, buying the 2 pairs can certainly be an advantage but don't be tempted to buy multiple pairs because they do have a shelf life with midsoles in particular eventually breaking down.

Heel Counter

Most shoes provide some form of stabilizing heel counter. This prevents excessive motion when the heel strikes the ground. Race walkers need a little more motion control than runners; so test for heel stability by squeezing the sides of the heel together; the heel should not collapse. Be sure that the heel counter is well cut out at the top or an inflamed Achilles tendon could result.

Sole

Make sure the sole bends at the ball of the foot – not under the arch as this could cause hamstring problems.

Toe-Box

In walking the foot needs plenty of space to spread out, so make sure you have plenty of room in the toe-box and allow for the feet swelling during the day and in a race. Your toes should be about a thumb's thickness from the end of the shoe.

Shoe Last

When a walker's foot strikes the ground, it normally lands on the outer corner of the heel and then rolls towards the big toe. If you tend to over pronation (rolling inwards) you should go for a straight-lasted shoe, whereas if you supinate (rolling outwards) a curve lasted shoe is best. If you pronate normally, then select a semi-curved last.

WHERE TO BUY SHOES

You should begin at a specialty sports store, perhaps even taking your old shoes in to discuss how they have worn. While often the more expensive shoes will perform or protect better, this is not always the case and sometimes the advantage is marginal. Choose a shoe that suits you, not by price or fashion. If you want to save money then after finding the right shoe (and size) at a store, going online can often save a great deal. This is especially the case with discontinued models which can be purchased at a significant saving. The major shoe companies continually update their shoes, relying on fashion conscious athletes to buy them. However technology doesn't change that fast and the previous models are almost always just as good.