

FLYING COLORS
Danny Abshire, at his
Boulder headquarters, with
an array of Newton models.



THE

SHOE

BELIEVER

Long before the barefoot-running craze, **DANNY ABSHIRE** was promoting a better way to run—and building a better shoe to run in. Now his revolutionary Newton shoes have the attention of runners, and the competition

BY MICHAEL BEHAR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREGG SEGAL



THE GOSPEL OF DANNY
On Saturdays in Boulder, runners gather to hear Abshire preach about natural running and its tenets.



“OKAY, GANG, FOLLOW ME!”

And with that simple command, Danny Abshire—all five feet, six inches of running-shoe showmanship—takes off through the streets of Boulder, Colorado, with 40 or so runners of all sizes and shapes and PRs following behind. Most of them don't know each other, or the man they're trying to keep up with. The only thing they have in common is the shoes on their feet, and for that they can thank this fast-moving salesman.

At first glance, the shoes look like any ordinary trainers, except for the flashy neon color schemes. But those attending this Saturday-morning running clinic soon realize that the Newton—as the shoe is called, and which Abshire first started developing 20 years ago—is nothing like what they've previously worn. It weighs about a third less than a conventional running shoe but

is not—as Abshire likes to point out—a so-called “minimal” shoe, the kind with the barely there sole. While Newton's heel-to-toe pitch is more level than that of most name-brand models, what makes this shoe so unorthodox is the plump and springy cushioning in the forefoot. The odd design promotes something Abshire calls “natural running,” which the inventor is about to demonstrate with all the avuncular charm of a young Mel Brooks, the comic he vaguely resembles.

After jogging three blocks to a leafy park, Abshire stops, launches a metronome app on his iPhone, and holds it in the air. The tinny speakers drum a rhythm—*tat-tat-tat-tat-tat*.

“That's 180 beats per minute,” he tells the assembled runners. “This should be your cadence.”

He pauses. He bounces in place. “Never slower!” he commands. “A quick cadence will land you underneath your mass and onto your forefoot”—to Abshire, that's the promised land—“instead of on your heels”—to Abshire, Hades. He'll tell the runners, and anyone else who'll listen, that landing on the heel is a heinous



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misdeed that puts undue stress on ankles, knees, hips, and back. Heel-striking, Abshire warns, is inefficient, and potentially dangerous. And runners heel-strike, he says, only because traditional shoes have an unnecessarily high heel-to-toe drop.

Abshire trots in place to the beat. Soon we're all doing it, like a choreographed dance team. Amused bystanders stop to watch.

"Now," Abshire suddenly chimes in, as he begins to dash down a gravel path, "watch my feet. They're parallel to the ground!" He's shouting over his shoulder. "My heels never touch first." He circles back. "That's natural running!" Abshire says. "It's that simple!" And then he keeps on running.

RUNNING HAS ALWAYS been thought of as just that. Simple. All you needed were a pair of sneakers and some open space and you're off. But for Abshire, a one-time 3:12 marathoner who's completed one of the toughest ultras in the country, the Leadville Trail 100, the sport became overcomplicated—and dangerous—as shoes got more and more built up. As he told me a few days after the clinic, which Abshire leads every weekend trying to convert runners to natural running (and hopefully Newtons), "I don't blame other brands for what they did. They were just trying to protect us from concrete and asphalt. But they didn't realize the physiology and how it would change the way humans ran."

Abshire's technique—integrating a forefoot strike with rapid cadence—is rooted in the biomechanics of barefoot running. He says that unshod runners will instinctively or "naturally" protect their heels by shifting the impact to their forefoot, "just like cavemen did in prehistoric times." This is a healthier way to run, he claims, because our forefoot more readily absorbs and dissi-

pates impact, while heel-striking pummels knees and hips. "Natural running is how our bodies were designed to move."

His theories sound a lot like those espoused in the 2009 best-selling book *Born to Run*, by Christopher McDougall, which chronicled the running lives of the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, known to run hundreds of miles in thin-soled sandals. The book, which at points castigates the big running-shoe makers for building up their treads, helped fuel the ongoing barefoot/minimalist craze. But where many minimal shoes are designed to simply protect feet from the pings and pangs of the roads and trails, Abshire's Newton—with its pronounced and ample cushioning in the forefoot—has a specific job: put the bounce be-

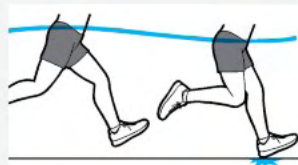
"Watch my feet. They're parallel to the ground!" Abshire shouts. "My heels never touch the ground. That's natural running! It's that simple!"

neath the forefoot rather than the heel. "Cavemen were smart enough to build a moccasin—a protective coating for the foot. But they also lived in a natural environment. It wasn't concrete and asphalt. This is where people get mixed up. Our shoes promote natural running in an unnatural world."

The Newton purports to accomplish this in two ways. For starters, a typical running shoe props the heel about 12 millimeters above the ball of the foot. Among Newton's 10 models, heel-to-toe drops range from virtually flat to just six millimeters. According to Abshire, if you reduce the height of the heel, it's

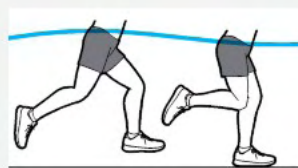
IT'S ONLY NATURAL

RESEARCH SHOWS that most runners land on their heels first (right, top). But as a proponent of "natural running," Danny Abshire contends that landing on the forefoot (right, bottom) mimics how our forebearers learned to run—and reduces the risk of injury in the process.



HEEL-STRIKE

The red patches to the right illustrate the peak pressure areas of a heel-striker. To protect such a runner, substantial cushioning is recommended in the heel.



FOREFOOT-STRIKE

Unlike heel-striking, forefoot-striking leads to more pressure areas in the forefoot (red, right). Added cushioning in these places will provide protection.

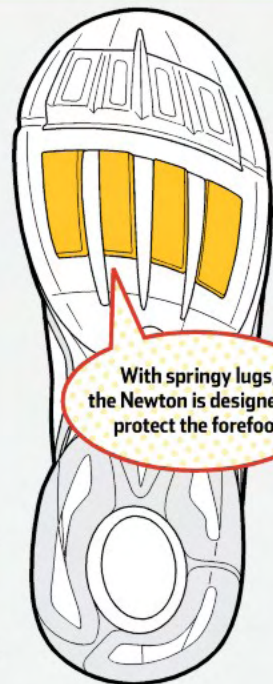


Newton's lower heel-to-toe drop promotes a forefoot strike.



NEWTON'S SOUL

Newton's hallmark features: (1) a heel-to-toe drop (red line, left) averaging 3 mm, less than the drop in most shoes (blue line); (2) cushioning strips protruding from the shoe's forefoot (right).



With springy lugs, the Newton is designed to protect the forefoot.

Illustrations by CHRIS PHILPOT



NEW



SMART MONEY
 Boulder real-estate developer Jerry Lee invested in Newton when Abshire, his tenant, was cash-strapped.

much easier for runners to land on their forefoot. Assuming they do, Newton's flagship innovation kicks in. Beneath the forefoot, embedded in the shoe's outsole, are rubber "actuator lugs" cradled in hollow, elastic membranes. Abshire says, "[The lugs] work like a trampoline, like a shock absorber under the ball of the foot that also returns energy to the runner." (The shoe got its name from the theories of Sir Isaac Newton, who came up with the concept that for every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction.)

A handful of studies—the most noteworthy conducted by Daniel Lieberman, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard University, and published in *Nature* in 2010—have shown that runners shod in traditional shoes do, in fact, hit the ground harder than unshod, and often do so heel-first; and that higher-heeled soles torque the knees; and that midfoot- and forefoot-strikers inflict less trauma on certain joints. But researchers who study biomechanics and kinesiology have not (yet) been able to prove a direct cause-and-effect link between footwear and injuries. This hasn't deterred Abshire from spreading his gospel and spawning a proselytizing flock that includes triathletes, marathoners, blue-moon joggers, and even an Olympian famously known for her feet.

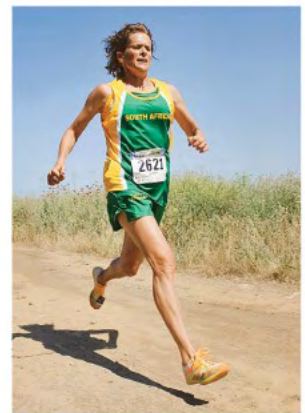
In the 1980s, South African Zola Budd broke the women's 5000-meter record, twice, and won back-to-back gold medals at the World Cross-Country Championships—running barefoot. But in 2009 she tried on her first Newtons. She now runs regularly in her fluorescent-orange-and-yellow trainers. "I tried them out of curiosity," she tells me. "After my first run, I was hooked. I [had done] the bulk of my training on the road. I never ran barefoot on the road, but always felt sluggish in my training shoes. When I ran in Newtons, I was on my midfoot immediately, and there was little or no change in my style from running barefoot."

Budd has company. In 2007, Newton's first year on the market, Abshire sold 30,000 pairs, even though the shoe was only available through the start-up's Web site. Today, Newtons are at 280 retailers in 36 countries, selling for between \$125 and \$175. For 2011, sales exceeded 120,000 pairs. That total pales when compared to sales of some of the older, more established running-shoe giants—Brooks, for instance, sold more than 375,000 pairs of its Adrenaline GTS shoe last year. Still, Newton's growth caught the attention of Paul Fireman, the former CEO of shoe maker Reebok. Last June he invested a reported \$20 million in Abshire's company, which employs all of 50 people.

Mark Cucuzzella, M.D., has seen Newton's allure up close. A physician who owns Two Rivers Treads, a running store in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, he's sold more than 2,000 pairs of Newtons since June 2010. Cucuzzella, who helps lead group runs with Abshire when he is in Boulder, says, "Danny is out every Saturday, 52 weeks a year, rain or shine. If it's snowing, he holds classes in a parking garage." Cucuzzella's certain that



MOLDING A RUNNING LIFE
 Abshire with his wife, Jennifer, and son Cody at their Active Imprints store in 1993 (far left); making a footbed (left) in 1991; running the Buena Vista 50-miler in 1994 (below); Olympian Zola Budd (right), a Newton disciple.



Courtesy Danny Abshire (With Jennifer & Cody, Active Imprints & Buena Vista); Paul Kitagaki Jr./ZUMA Press/Corbis (Budd)



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Newton would not exist without Abshire's evangelical devotion. "You don't just wake up and start a shoe company," he says. "There are massive players with massive marketing budgets that can make shoes a lot cheaper. You have to believe in your message."

In the often rough-and-tumble world of the \$2.3 billion running-shoe industry, where a small player has to knock heads with behemoths like Nike and Asics and Adidas, you better have faith—and be a good salesman.

Fortunately for Abshire, he comes by both naturally.



WHILE GROWING UP, Danny Abshire—who was born in 1957 in Cleveland, Tennessee, in the Appalachian hill country, where about one-fifth of residents fall below the poverty line—lived in a trailer park for some time. His parents divorced when he was still an infant, leaving his mother to care for him and his older brother. (Abshire has never met his father face-to-face, though he did get in touch by telephone, decades later. "I ended up chatting with him and being at peace with that.") His grandfather played the paternal role. "He was a fire-and-brimstone Baptist minister," Abshire tells me. "You know, that kind where you would go to hell if you didn't get it together. I sat in church every Wednesday and Sunday. He molded me in high moral values, and that if you believed in something enough, then you really lived it and strived to make it better. I looked up to him."

When Abshire was 8 years old, his mother remarried. His stepfather, a former Army Ranger, was a salesman who got the young boy interested in sports. "I did little league football when I was 10 years old, playing wide receiver and running back, and returning punts during kickoffs. I was the special team's fast guy." To train for speed, Abshire joined the track team. "I also used to run through the forest and dodge trees for practice."

The sport, though, that ultimately caught his attention was downhill skiing, even though he had never seen snow in his life. "I remember watching Jean-Claude Killy on a black-and-white TV tearing it up in the 1968 Olympics. I thought, *Dude, I love skiing.*" In 1977, two years after graduating high school, he sold his Austin-Healey Sprite, the everyman's sports car du jour, and spent the cash on a one-way plane ticket to Aspen, Colorado. "I never went back to school." Instead, Abshire took a menagerie of jobs—a housekeeper at a condo complex, a B&B manager, a hotel breakfast cook. He also got a gig doing equipment rentals at a local ski shop. Fitting ski boots for Aspen's finicky and demanding clientele wasn't

easy. But Abshire had a knack, and his boss soon promoted him to full-time boot-fitter on the sales side.

Off-the-shelf ski boots are notoriously painful to wear. They're stamped from plastic forms into generic shapes and sizes. It's the fitter's job to make the boot comfy. Fitters might make dozens of tweaks—shaving, grinding, or melting the plastic shells, repositioning metal buckles, injecting heat-activated foam into the fabric liners. It's a skill that requires patience, creativity, and a knowledge of podiatric peculiarities. In a ski community like Boulder, the leading boot-fitters are mini-celebrities.

Abshire had no formal training as a fitter. "I learned about the parts of the foot from a bone-anatomy calendar hanging in the shop," he admits. But he had a gift and soon became Aspen's boot guru. He fit boots for professional racers, including several members of the U.S. and Canadian ski teams. "The ski thing," says Abshire, "got me into the foot thing." And as it turned out, the foot thing got him back into running.

In 1978, Abshire's ski-shop boss invited him to train for a five-mile footrace. Abshire hadn't done any serious running since high school. He finished the race in the top 10, "and that



FEET FIRST

A gecko's foot and tire treads, among other items, inspire Newton designer Dean Bacalzo.



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got me hooked.” More races followed. Eventually, he would compete in ultramarathons. His first, in 1990, was a 35-miler in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. He later finished Leadville—the preeminent high-altitude ultramarathon—twice.

Along the way, Abshire met Jennifer Newman when he was back in Tennessee visiting. They eventually married, and in 1988 relocated to Boulder to open a 600-square-foot shop called Active Imprints. The store sold lightweight, custom footbeds compatible with a variety of sport shoes. Molded to create a mirror image of your feet, custom footbeds provide more support and stability than stock insoles (orthotics differ in that they are shaped by a clinician to correct for an injury or anatomical abnormality). Abshire, the consummate pitchman, met with the head of the athletic department at the University of Colorado, based in Boulder, and won contracts to make footbeds for several of its athletic teams. “I was also going to health clubs and talking to podiatrists, telling them about our product. We were there only a couple months and all these elite athletes had heard about us.” Paula Newby-Fraser, the eight-time Ironman champion, sought out Abshire when she was recovering from bone-spur surgery. “Somebody told me about this guy, so I went to see him,” says Newby-Fraser. “And he grabs my foot and starts moving my big toe around and goes, ‘Oh, yeah, I see the problem—

EVOLUTIONARY STEPS

Through all its iterations, from a 1998 hand-built prototype (below, bottom) to today’s MV2 model (top), the Newton has featured added cushioning in the forefoot. The company currently offers 10 models.



you have this hypermobile first metatarsal. Yeah, yeah.’ And that was it. He’s like this little savant elf that can just see things you would never see. My career was saved by him.”

Other athletes followed, including Lorraine Moller, a bronze medalist in the 1992 Olympic Marathon. It was Moller, in turn, who, in 1992, introduced Abshire to Brian Russell, a recreational runner and garage inventor who had been working on a radical new running shoe. Abshire says, “Lorraine wanted us to meet because she’d seen Brian’s idea and she knew I had connections with the major brands.” Russell had been tinkering with several designs. On some, he had removed the heel entirely. On others, he’d fashioned the heel with a set of six compressible lugs. The

“Danny’s like this little savant elf who sees things you would never see,” says Paula Newby-Fraser. “My career was saved by him.”

goal was the same: to build a low-profile shoe with a bouncy forefoot that paid homage to unshod form but retained ample impact protection. “When Brian showed me the shoe,” says Abshire, “it made sense.”

Initially, the project progressed incrementally. “While Brian worked on variations, I was busy with my young kids,” says Abshire. Eventually, in 1996, Abshire paid for their first patent. Cost: \$30,000. “I wanted to make the shoe happen,” he says. The following year, Abshire and Russell decided to ramp things up with a fresh batch of prototypes. With Russell’s designs “we knew we had a better way to absorb shock and lose less energy,” Abshire says. What they didn’t have was a lot of money.

For funding, they went to Newby-Fraser, who gave them \$100,000 and became their first investor. But the Abshire/Russell team continued to burn through cash. Jerry Lee, a real-estate developer in Boulder, owned the shopping center where Abshire leased retail space for Active Imprints. They knew Lee was a runner because he’d stopped in several times to chat. And as their landlord, they figured he must be loaded. “They didn’t have a business plan,” remembers Lee. “But the idea really resonated. Brian was the mad scientist. Danny was the guy who made sense of the technology.” In 1998, Lee wrote them a check for \$100,000.

The slog was only getting started. “We had to get our friends to invest money through every stage,” says Jennifer. “The whole family grew up with this. Our two sons, when they were little, they’d hammer our prototypes on the table to see how bouncy they were in the heel. It became the ‘shoe project.’ Customers came in the store and asked, ‘How’s the shoe project going?’”

“Not so good,” invariably was the answer. There were always money woes and dalliances with shoe makers (such as Nike and Adidas) that didn’t advance much past a few meetings. As well, Abshire and Russell began to disagree on the shoe’s direction. Russell envisioned a shoe that incorporated both the forefoot actuator-lug technology and his spring-loaded heel. Russell told me that adding the extra jolt in the heel “would give runners



MOVING PRODUCT
Abshire sold 120,00 shoes last year, a 300-percent increase since the Newton debuted in 2007.



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seven to 10 percent more efficiency." Abshire says that this design would have been impossible to sell because the springy heel protruded precariously from the sole, making the shoe appear unstable. "At the time," he recalls, "people wore big oversupportive shoes, so no one was going to buy a shoe that looked like if you hit it on the heel, you would break your ankle." They also disagreed about weight. "[Russell's] shoe was 16 ounces and no performance runner was going to run in that." Abshire felt it had to be bantamweight—eight ounces or less.

Ultimately, in 2005, Abshire and Lee bought Russell's eight patents. They gave him a multiyear working agreement and made him Newton's director of R&D. "We told Brian to bring

any kind of development to us and we'd consider it," says Abshire. But at the end of last year, when his contract expired, Russell left the company.

Russell says Newton didn't consider any of his work during that period. In addition, he claims his original design "was abandoned because they said it was impossible to make." Still, the inventor, who continues to design shoes while refining his latest invention—an airless bicycle wheel that he claims has better efficiency than a conventional pneumatic tire—says, "I wish Newton well in spite of [our] often difficult relationship."

When I convey Russell's gripes to Abshire, he says that the differences boil down to "a marketing decision. If we had put

A SHOE THING

Like Danny Abshire, these runners saw the need for revolutionary treads



Doctor's Orders

AFTER 20 YEARS of doing laboratory gait studies, **CASEY KERRIGAN, M.D.**, was frustrated that she still could not recommend shoes that would relieve her patients' aches. So Kerrigan, who practiced physical medicine and rehabilitation, took matters into her own hands. She designed **OESH** (shoe inverted and spelled from inside out), a shoe with carbon-fiber cantilevers in the midsole that, according to its Web site, compress and release "in perfect physiologic tune with how the body works."

Dr. Kerrigan gave up her practice last year to manufacture the Oesh near her Virginia home. "I don't miss what I was doing," she says. "In fact, when customers come in and try on a pair of shoes at the factory, it's just like seeing patients."

Better Late Than Never

IN 2002, **DAVID SYPNIEWSKI**, then 24, had an IT-band injury he couldn't kick. After months of trying traditional remedies, he started searching online forums to see what else he could do. Barefoot running popped up. It was his first introduction to minimalist philosophies. He grabbed a pair of aqua socks and went to a park in Calgary, where he lived at the time. For the first time in 18 months, he ran 25 minutes pain-free.

"I knew this was going to be the future," Sypniewski says of the current minimalist trend. "I sat on it for years." Finally, in 2010, after "enough dreaming," he took ankle cotton socks and covered their bottoms with latex rubber. The makeshift models lasted for just 15 miles, but they helped to inspire the **SKORA**, which will be in stores this spring. "Runners deserve a better option," Sypniewski says.



The Golden Touch

A SELF-PROCLAIMED shoe nerd, **GOLDEN HARPER**, 29, grew up around running treads. His parents own a running store in Orem, Utah, where Harper hosts running clinics. By 2008, he had concluded that the typical running shoe's big, clunky heels caused more harm than good. He set out to make a shoe that would diminish injuries.

"My dad used to put shoes in a toaster oven until the glue loosened, then he'd add a new sole," says Harper, who ran a 2:45 marathon at age 12. "So I started doing it, too." His experiments led to the **ALTRA ZERO DROP**, which debuted in 2010 and

has no drop from the heel to the forefoot. "[Designing] is what I was built to do. It's not about money; it's about passion and helping runners."—NICOLE FALCONE



something out that was too heavy or looked unsafe, we wouldn't be where we are today."

Through 2006, Abshire and Lee refined the concept, and by year's end they placed their first order with a manufacturer in China. Abshire, his eyes wide, says, "We never thought about what would happen if nobody bought them. We were going to sell them. We were going to make it happen."



O N WEEKENDS, the Abshire family piled into a campervan and headed to the next triathlon or marathon expo to hawk their wares. "We were like a traveling circus," says Jennifer. They used a warehouse Lee owned and friends helped fill orders. It so happened UPS was located across the street. "The drivers would just back up their truck to the loading dock," says Abshire. In less than a year, their initial stock was sold out.

Abshire and his crew can provide reams of anecdotal evidence that their shoes are sea-changing, much of it through tales from customers whose crippling injuries suddenly vanish after they begin training in Newtons. Last fall I attended a symposium at Newton's Boulder headquarters where I met a couple training for the New York City Marathon. The wife gushed that her husband had been plagued with injuries until "Newtons saved him." I also heard speakers, mostly professional athletes, make bold claims about Newtons while the audience—numbering about 40 people, virtually all wearing Newtons—nodded in agreement like they were at a church revival. One speaker, Ironman World Champion Craig Alexander, confessed that he dumped his shoe sponsor after a single, 20-minute run in Newtons.

But for all the Newton converts, there are skeptics, too, like Darwin Fogt, a physical therapist in Los Angeles. "I can recall within the last six months three patients who have had lower-chain injuries—hip, knee, calf, ankle, foot—and they've been wearing Newtons," Fogt says. "And these are people who weren't injured before." But Fogt doesn't necessarily blame the shoes. "It's largely the fault of the runner doing too much too fast," he says.

Then there's Simon Bartold, a clinical podiatrist and fellow at Australia's University of Melbourne and the Staffordshire University in the U.K., who points out, "There is no study anywhere in the scientific literature, in a peer-reviewed journal, that says athletic footwear causes injury. There is also no study anywhere in the scientific literature that says footwear doesn't cause injury. We have no direct cause-and-effect link."

Even so, Bartold, who is a national research consultant for Asics, commends Newton's technology. "I've never bagged the Newton on the fact that it doesn't work," he says. "If you are a runner who has been a forefoot-striker and has an efficient gait, this type of shoe would work very well. But you cannot impose one rule on all people. There is enormous variability in human-kind biomechanics." Bartold also praises Newton's chutzpah as



SOLE MATES

"The whole family grew up with [the Newton]," says Jennifer, who married Danny in 1988.

an overdue rally cry. "A real positive thing they've done is compel the big companies to get off their bums a bit, get out of their comfort zone, and think about what might be relevant going forward. I reckon shoes have become way too complicated with too much stuff in them that we don't need and should take out."

Where trouble can arise with the Newton—or any running shoe, for that matter—is "if you do a forefoot strike," says Reed Ferber, Ph.D., a professor of kinesiology who directs the Running Injury Clinic at the University of Calgary, "because it is going to stretch your plantar fascia and Achilles tendon." This is problematic if you're a lifelong heel-striker, a gait that doesn't put as much stress on your Achilles or calves. "[The Newton] requires more elastic recoil from your Achilles," he says. "If you do a forefoot, it generates 58 percent of the force required to rupture your Achilles—that's 42 percent more than what's normally created."

Like the other researchers, Ferber is not damning the Newton. "I took up running in a pair of Vibram FiveFingers. My left knee is usually grumpy, and it has been great. And I feel more up-right." He thinks Newtons could yield a (continued on page 119)



MARKETPLACE

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Continued from page 85

similar result. "A certain percentage of the population—probably 20 percent—is going to do well in a Newton. But pay attention to your body. If you put it on, and it feels okay, then that's a good sign. But you should dramatically decrease mileage in order to get your body accommodated to the shoe."

To be fair, Newton retailers are supposed to tell buyers not to do more than a mile their first time out. "Stop, walk, and stretch if your calf or Achilles tightens up," Abshire says. Calf soreness is the most common complaint for runners new to Newtons.

IN *NATURAL RUNNING*, a book on the topic that Abshire had published in 2010, he recounts a story about a friend teaching him a proper skiing stance by trying to knock him to the ground, a lesson that he would later apply to running. "Because of my centered, balanced, athletic position, I was able to react...offsetting his attempts to topple me," he writes. When Newton detractors rush Abshire, he employs the same tactic, dodging like a featherweight boxer trying to evade an out-sized opponent in the ring. But he doesn't shy away from a fight.

Later, when I relay concerns from researchers, he fires back an e-mail: "I do not think serious runners are interested in short-term prospective lab studies. The fact is humans land on different parts of the feet depending on their speed. We heel-strike when we walk; we land way up on our forefoot and toes when we sprint. When striking the heel first, you literally put on the brakes and stop your forward progress. This creates a slower cadence and higher vertical bounce—a very inefficient running style! The goal for the lifelong sustainable runner is efficiency, and the most efficient runner wins the marathon and has fewer injuries!"

These days, Newton is not alone in developing shoes for runners with new expectations. In October, Brooks launched its Pure-Project line. Like the Newton, the shoes have a lower-than-average heel-to-toe drop. Then there's Asics's "Propulsion Trusstic Plate" system, which is included in most of the shoe maker's models. According to Brice Newton, who manages Asics's performance-running products, the system "provides spring-loaded responsiveness at toe-off by mimicking the connective tissues in the foot. This is similar to what Newton touts in their lug-membrane...but ours does so at a fraction of the weight."

Rivals don't seem to bother Abshire, at least outwardly. He maintains that he simply wants others to enjoy running as deeply and personally as he does. He has hopes of expanding the number of Newton retailers who can re-educate runners and cultivate a brand-driven lifestyle. "There's just something about running that sets you free and takes you away from your worries," he tells me. "When I was doing more ultrarunning, people always asked me what I was running away from. It was the demons of never meeting my dad. That was a travesty, especially when I was having my own children. But he couldn't have been that bad of a guy, because I turned out pretty good."

Before wrapping up the Saturday clinic, Abshire asks each of us to jog a few paces down an adjacent gravel path so he can evaluate our progress. He watches from behind and calls out suggestions. "Up the cadence a bit," he shouts to a 30-ish woman visiting from Chicago. To a sprightly kid who runs track for the University of Colorado, Abshire barks gently, "Lean forward. Weight more centered." I take my turn. Abshire tells me to stand more upright and to try and temper my arm swing. Then, as I run toward him, he asks, "When did you injure your left shoulder?" Abshire's sixth sense about form is his trademark. He can observe a runner only briefly and immediately identify their weaknesses. For me, it took him 10 seconds to spot a three-year-old rotator-cuff tear—long healed but still somehow affecting my gait.

An hour or so into our clinic the temperature hits 90 degrees, a scorcher for Boulder. But nobody wants to quit. There are many questions: How can you avoid slamming your heels on the declines? "Lean back and quicken your cadence," answers Abshire. Are Newtons safe for pronators? "A little pronation is normal, nothing to worry about," he advises. "Just stay balanced, centered, and relaxed."

Then, for a brief moment, all is quiet, except for the sound of footfalls in the Boulder morning. **RW**

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