

Rich on Running: Harvard event shows bare facts about barefoot running

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Winter in New England may seem like an unconventional time to talk about barefoot running, but it was a hot topic at Harvard University a few weeks ago.

On Wednesday, Jan. 26 - yes, the day we got hit with one of our many snowstorms - I joined a crowd of Cantabrigians to hear a panel discussion about running at Sanders Theater. The elegant, cavernous theater dates back to the 19th century and can accommodate a crowd of 1,000 ... and while it certainly didn't feel like that much two weeks ago, plenty of people still came on a snowy night.

Two of the three panelists - Harvard biology professor Daniel Lieberman and bestselling author Christopher McDougall - discussed the phenomenon of barefoot running during the event. (The third panelist, Harvard Medical School psychiatry professor John Ratey, focused on the mental benefits that exercise can bring; Harvard president Drew Faust was the moderator.) After the discussion, I had a chance to step on a treadmill and practice running both heel-first, as I might do in running shoes, and toes-first, which I might do if running barefoot.

The past few weeks haven't been the friendliest to runners weather-wise, certainly not barefoot ones. Yet when I've gotten in some running lately, I have tried the toes-first approach -- albeit while wearing shoes - while remembering Lieberman's advice.

"(It's) sort of like this," he said in the question-and-answer period, getting up from his seat on stage and jogging. "Like when you're waiting to cross the street ... Lean forward, not from your hips, but with your ankles. You'll find also you're much less likely to fall over in weather like this. You're much more stable with little, shorter steps." For those interested in statistics, he said that many of the world's best runners aim for 180 steps a minute.

Why run barefoot at all? Lieberman cited the "importance of form," noting that "people sometimes get injured.

"For the last 50 million years, we ran barefoot," he said. "Barefoot, you can't just collide with the ground. You run lightly and gently."

However, he acknowledged, that morning, "I was wearing shoes, I can guarantee you."

Lieberman made sure to note that heel-first running could be perfectly fine ... as long as it was done in shoes.

"If you were to take your shoes off and run down Mass. Ave. (in Cambridge) tomorrow," he said, "and land on your heels, you'd probably feel a fair amount of pain after a quarter-mile, maybe. There's a big exchange of momentum with the ground that is quite painful. It's a shockwave ... That's why we wear shoes."

He added that people wearing shoes and using the heel-first approach "can run just fine and be uninjured."

This past Sunday in North Cambridge, I used the toes-first approach on a run of about 1-2 miles up the local bike path to a neighborhood restaurant to get lunch for myself, my girlfriend and our West Highland white terrier (full disclosure: it was a McDonald's). I tried to keep my strides short and my impact light. I switched to the heel-first approach on inclines, such as when the ground sloped downward en route to the Mickey D's.

Overall, the run felt refreshing and the toes-first approach kept me moving relatively smoothly along the bike path. Yet, as always, one must know one's limits of endurance. Namely, on the way back clutching a Coke and two bags of fast food, I walked all the way.

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