Clockwise from main pic: Tan Wah Sing has competed barefoot in 29 marathons; the hardened feet of a barefoot runner; minimalist footwear like the Vibram Five Fingers supposedly strengthens runners’ feet; marathoner James Wong on the Kiara forest trail.

Stories by
LEONG SIOK HUI

ouzical stares, incredulous looks or even sneers — Tan Wah Sing has seen them all. The inquisitive would ask, “Does it hurt?” The sceptics would say, “What’s he trying to prove?”

The 53-year-old engineer has been happily running barefoot for the past decade. He has completed 29 marathons and runs about 50 races a year — not bad for a recreational runner.

Chuck those trainers
Since 2009, the running industry has been abuzz with the barefoot running debate, thanks to the bestselling book, Born to Run by Christopher McDougall. After suffering chronic foot pain and being told by doctors to give up running, McDougall set out to learn the secrets of the Tarahumara, an indigenous group living in the deep canyons of Mexico.

The Tarahumaras are known for their epic 100-mile (161km) runs shod only in thin-rubber strips.

McDougall’s conclusion is that modern-day running shoes — with cushioning, motion-control and orthotics — have done nothing to prevent injuries. Today, the former US war correspondent runs ultra-marathons barefoot, minus the pain.

But barefoot running isn’t a newfangled movement. For eons, humans have been running barefoot or with basic sandals for protection. Modern running shoes only came into the picture in the 1970s. Barefoot idols, Olympians Abebe Bikila from Ethiopia and Zola Budd-Pieterse from South Africa blazed to the finishing lines sans shoes in the 1960s and 1980s.

Thirteen years ago, American barefoot advocate Ken Bob Saxton, a.k.a. Barefoot Ken Bob, set up his popular Running Barefoot website [runningbarefoot.org] and a forum in 2001 to discuss and promote the movement. To date, he has almost 2,000 members who are strictly barefoot runners.

Box to running shoes, studies say
In recent years, scientific studies have revealed that running shoes aren’t living up to their multi-million dollar marketing hype. For all their high-tech features, modern running shoes may not actually help runners improve a runner’s performance or prevent injuries, according to a research published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine by Dr Craig Richards of Australia’s University of Newcastle (2009).

Also, the injury rate was twice as high in the group of runners using expensive running shoes, in a University of Bern, Switzerland study of 5,000 participants of a 16km run.

Aye to barefoot
So why go barefoot?
“Barefoot running strengthens your feet muscles and forefoot balance,” says Austrian Dr Karl-Heinz Kristen, one of the foremost experts in orthopaedic sports medicine.

Dr Kristen first delved into barefoot running research when he analysed the gait of children in 1988.

“People who grew up close to nature and who are able to walk and run barefoot, their soles adapt naturally to wear and tear, with time,” adds the foot and ankle surgeon in an e-mail interview.

Your feet are thick with sensory nerves, even more than your hands.

Learning to listen to our feet means when we get more “ouch” than “ail”, we know when to stop and try to fix what’s wrong.

Studies dating back to as early as 1905 say that barefoot running on natural ground is best for the development of healthy feet, Kristen adds.

The latest study that’s getting injured more often.

The spunky ‘soles’
Tan and others like him are also sold on barefoot running because of their personal experiences.

“I was running half marathons in shoes but always ended up with black toe nails that needed extrac-
tion. That meant longer recovery before I could race again," says the amiable Tan who’s based in Kuantan, Pahang. Despite trying out all sorts of brands, he couldn’t find shoes that fit comfortably. Then he spotted people walking barefoot on Kuantan’s Bukit Pelindung and thought, “Hey, why not go barefoot?”

Tan started with a 5km walk up and down the hill once a week. He gradually increased the frequency of his walks, followed by a slow jog uphill after a couple of months. “Initially, I suffered from blisters and calf muscle pains,” admits Tan. Sharp pebbles also pierced his soft soles. “It took me a few months to ‘season’ my soles. I found that I started landing on my forefoot, instead of heels, running with smaller strides and at a more rapid cadence.”

When Tan heel-strikes, he loses energy faster. It took him about nine months before he did the full transition to barefoot in a half marathon (21km) and two years before he ran his first marathon barefoot. “Barefoot running increases my endurance and I don’t have to carry running shoes anywhere,” he chuckles.

He trains on asphalt and runs an average of 8km daily. The zealous runner frequently takes part in races in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand. Tired of suffering yet another ankle sprain or foot injury, Su Mei Toh of Petaling Jaya thought there had to be a better way to run injury-free. “I was spending more time recovering from injuries than I was running,” says Toh, who ditched her shoes in 2007. She stumbled on Barefoot Ken Bob’s and Ted MacDonald’s (a. k. a. Barefoot Ted; www.barefooted.com) websites. (Barefoot Ted is one of the characters featured in McDougall’s book.) “Both sites were inspirational and educational,” says the 37-year-old biologist. Like Tan, Toh had also tried several brands of running shoes. “Those shoes (with cushioning and support) were making my feet, joints and muscles weak instead,” says Toh, who has raced in 10km, 15km and 21km runs. Fruitful ride

Her early barefoot experience was at a local football, sweat and pain. “A mere 200m to 300m round the block would result in blisters, which would then bleed the next time I went out barefoot again because I didn’t have the patience to wait till they healed up,” says the gungho lady. It took her a few months to get comfortable running barefoot. “I had faith that my mind and body would eventually adapt. After all, we evolved as runners without shoes.”

The resourceful Toh fashioned herself a pair of Huaraches, simple homemade sandals with a strip of rubber sole and some leather string to hold it on. She used the Huaraches for protection when she ran on unfamiliar terrain (she started trail running a few years ago). Less than a year into her barefoot transition, Toh ran a 10km race with no blisters, aches, black toe nails or fatigued legs. “I had expected to be injury-free, but I had not anticipated the sheer joy of running,” says Toh, who also swims, cycles and hikes regularly. “It’s also about being aware of your mind and body — being consciously relaxed and properly aligned. I see barefoot running as a lifelong learning!”

Despite the wide media coverage, barefoot running is slowly gaining a following, but in Malaysia, barefoot runners are a mere handful, Tan says. He occasionally gets people walking up to him wanting to know more about it. “If you want to give it a try, be careful and take the time to strengthen your weak muscles. There’s no magic wand. It’s purely conditioning,” says Tan who has been enjoying injury-free running for the past 10 years. “It may work for one person but not another.” As McDougall sums up in his website: “Ultimately, the debate isn’t about Bare Soles vs. Shoes. It’s about learning how to run gently. Master that, and you can wear — or not wear — anything you please.”
The experts explain

Before we ditch the shoes and hit the road, experts warn that most arguments promoting barefoot running tend to generalise too much.

Kuala Lumpur-based podiatrist, Dr Mark Reyneker of South Africa, grew up watching South African-born barefoot runner Zola Budd-Pieterson on TV. (In an interview with The New York Times in 2008, Budd-Pieterson said she always wore shoes to train and race on the roads. She went barefoot only when she ran track and cross-country.)

“Barefoot running has always been recognised as a technique used to strengthen the foot and is used by many elite athletes as part of their training process,” explains Dr Reyneker who has 10 years of experience and sub-specialises in biomechanics.

“I don’t have issues with going barefoot. The point is not to generalise.”

For instance, when someone says she’s flat-footed and feels good after running barefoot, there may be several factors to it, Dr Reyneker explains.

“She may have chosen the wrong shoes so when she goes barefoot, her foot muscles respond well and she’s pain-free.

“Feet vary from person to person depending on the shape, size, region you come from, where you live and your overall body shape. Treatment is never the same for each person,” says Dr Reyneker, who has taken part in races. Another popular argument for barefoot running is that it teaches us to listen to our feet for pain, discomfort, problems, etc.

Subang Jaya-based sports medicine specialist, Dr William Chan says pain doesn’t necessarily equal to injury.

“Pain from running, especially long distances, can be delayed muscles soreness which usually settles itself after a week,” says Dr Chan, also a marathoner.

“Running injuries don’t depend on whether one wears shoes or not. Your running distance, frequency, running surface, technique, foot type, being overweight and poor feet and legs can contribute to injury or pain.”

Barefoot woes

Dr Chan has treated barefoot runners suffering from injuries during marathons and walkathons.

“Their pain is caused by blisters, hard corns or calluses. Or they suffer from fat pad contusion (bruised heel), Achilles tendinitis and plantar fasciitis,” says Dr Chan. “But it’s hard to say if these injuries are caused directly by barefoot running or overuse, or both.”

The doctor has no problem using normal running shoes with good cushioning but he suffered heel pain during one marathon when he experimented with light racing shoes that had minimal cushioning.

Kuala Lumpur-based foot and ankle specialist Dr Low Tze Chong says the injuries he’s seen amongst barefoot runners have more to do with getting poky by sharp objects.

“I had a patient who liked to walk barefoot but had a parasite infestation in her foot as a result of stepping on her dog poo. Interestingly, I’ve yet to see a patient who has sprained his or her ankle while running barefoot.”

Dr Low agrees that going barefoot gives us a better sense of the contact the foot is making to the ground.

“Most people will adapt their style of running based on the stresses to their feet,” says Dr Low. “It’s a bit like dancing. There are those who pick up the steps quickly and there are also those who may need some coaching. But running barefoot doesn’t automatically correct wrong techniques for everyone.”

“And for those who have abnormalities such as a bunion or nerve disorder, footwear is an absolute must!”

Cut shoes some slack

So can we live without shoes? Most likely not.

Austrian Dr Karl-Heinz Kristen has been researching barefoot running for 12 years. The orthopaedic sports medicine specialist cum outdoor buff runs regularly — about three times a week for up to 15km each run — to boost his endurance.

“I train barefoot whenever there’s an occasion but the weather in invented purely for protection,” says Dr Reyneker.

But in their frenzy to market “new” creations every season, shoe companies constantly slap on high-tech features to “improve” on their products.

“They go overboard with thick cushioning or aggressive pump in the heel,” says Dr Reyneker. “Hence, the more we have this protective stuff around our feet, we’re suffering or weakening our feet.”

Experts agree your feet spend too much time coddled in modern shoes. They advise: walk or run barefoot sometimes on safe, secure surfaces or around the house.

Dr Reyneker who has also been researching barefoot running in Malaysia, says shoe brands have also failed to educate the public on choosing the right shoes, Dr Reyneker adds.

Five tips to buying your right footgear

1. Next week, look out for our story on minimising footwear — the “transitional shoes” to running barefoot.

— B.PKG.HIJM/2010/12/1

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GOING BAREFOOT

Common foot injuries

The experts explain

Clockwise from far left: Podiatrist Dr Mark Reyneker; Dr Karl-Heinz Kristen; Dr William Chan.

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