

The Foot in the Shoe

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The journey of a thousand leagues begins from beneath your feet.

Lao-Tzu

Our feet are the only part of our anatomy that touches the ground to transmit all the force that we spend so much time developing in the rest of our body. Think about that - the only part of our anatomy to touch the ground when we run or jump - and we spend no time developing strength, mobility and proprioception in the feet.

That's one of the reasons I've become known as "that barefoot training guy." And, our athletes get tremendous results and fewer injuries.

Before the barefoot controversy begins, no one except sadists advocate running barefoot on littered city streets, jagged mountains or gravel. The barefoot controversy centers on running barefoot, not on training barefoot; there is a substantial difference. Barefoot training is about exercising a part of the body that takes a lot of the punishment and gets little attention.

Simply put, barefoot training is essential. Almost 33% of all joints in our body are in our feet. Feet are your base of support, the foundation of movement. If the feet lack strength, mobility, and proprioception and we have strengthened the rest of the body so that the force that will be put into the ground through those feet is increased- we're asking for trouble.

When you don't have foot proprioception and you run and cut, your body can't protect and tighten down correctly - you're going to get injured. Now, add taped ankles and tightly laced shoes on an athlete who has been training a lot and doesn't know how to slow down - and we increase the possibility of injury and decrease the possibility of athletic performance.

Our athletes tend to think that if they buy the right shoe, they don't need to do anything else for their feet. Actually they tend to think that feet are just something that get shoved in a shoe. Shoes need to be looked at the way we look at other protective gear - shoulder pads for example. We traditionally bench press as preparation for competition, but we don't wear shoulder pads while doing it. That's because we're building the musculature that will go under those pads. With the feet we should be building the feet that will go into the shoe just as we build the shoulders that go under the shoulder pads.

How do we do that? Many lower body strength training exercises can be performed barefoot. In most climates, athletes can perform their entire warm ups barefoot; we've done that from Arizona State to Rutgers in New Jersey. Form running and sprint running can be barefoot - that's what we're designed for. But when was the last time anybody did that? Strengthening your foot is an essential part of strengthening the entire lower limb. The architecture of the hand and the foot are almost identical. So what would happen if you had incredibly weak hands? If you have incredibly weak hands then you can't pick anything up and if you can't pick anything up then the arm can't get strong - if the arm isn't strong then you're more susceptible to injury. The same principle applies to the foot.

I've heard a lot of objections to barefoot training, some of them out of long-ingrained habit, some of them legitimate concerns. I've heard that you can't have athletes in the gym area without their shoes on or they'll cut their toes off - the athletes in our gym don't; I haven't had one toeless NFL Combine athlete. Another objection has been that there could be glass, there could be holes on a field - it's not safe. If you can't control that area then keep shoes on, but before you do, think about ways you could control it. Facility personnel do their jobs well. If you explain the reasons for working barefoot and ask for their

help in seeing that the field is safe, you'll probably get it. We've found that college teams and pro teams can do initial field work barefoot without problems. If you can't use a field, don't substitute your indoor basketball court – that surface is too hard. But, a matted surface is an alternative. Ultimately the best surface is an artificial turf field. That is where we train our teams; artificial turf fields are where we've trained over 150 NFL athletes barefoot. If you have the luxury of a turf field that you know is free of debris – all warm ups should take place barefooted.

A lot of in practice running should take place bare footed to strengthen the feet. And add foot mobility exercises - for example, take a tennis ball and roll their feet over it to keep the foot mobile. To begin specific foot work, stand with one foot in front of the other, aligning the heel of the leading foot with the toes of the back foot. Lift the front foot so only the heel remains on the ground, holding for a count of 5 and then gradually lowering the front portion of the foot. After repetitions, switch and work on the other foot. To strengthen the foot and improve balance, drop a sock on the floor, grip it with the toes and lift the sock; hold for ten second and then release the sock. This exercise should also be done with pencils; pick up the pencil, hold it and then drop. For static toe flexion, place the feet flat on the floor, spread the toes as far as possible and then bring them back together.

You need that mobility and stability in the foot. As soon as mobility and stability in the feet deteriorate, the ankle, knee and hip positions and impact change and athletes are more prone to injuries. Athletes work hard to strengthen their muscles; it is only common sense that you need to strengthen the muscles that are the base of support.

It's not only the shoe on the foot - It's the foot in the shoe...

Martin Rooney is an internationally recognized athletic performance specialist, author and speaker who works with training organizations, major universities and professional teams around the globe. Martin has trained athletes from the NFL, UFC, MLB, NBA, WNBA, Olympians, Olympic coaches and Military Elite Units. He has developed one of the nation's leading NFL Combine training programs that has produced 21 official 4.3 second 40's; 130 of his athletes have been drafted to the NFL. As the creator of the Training for Warriors system and COO of the Parisi Speed School's 65 international franchises, his training programs have impacted over 300,000 athletes worldwide.