

Natural Evolution

By Cregg Weinmann

The interest in running form and minimalist running shoes has generated significant attention in the running community in recent years. One response has been a specialization in the brands most involved in this synergy of form and function. A group of 15 stores in 10 states, as well as one location in British Columbia, have taken this approach. Their collective purpose has been summarized by co-founder and executive director, Mark Cucuzzella, M.D. and owner of the store Two Rivers Treads:

“We have a common philosophy about how the foot should function in running and walking and how to best fit a customer to a shoe. We know from the literature that the conventional way of fitting a shoe to a static foot type is



Mark Cucuzzella is spearheading the group's collective purpose when it comes to proper footwear fitting.

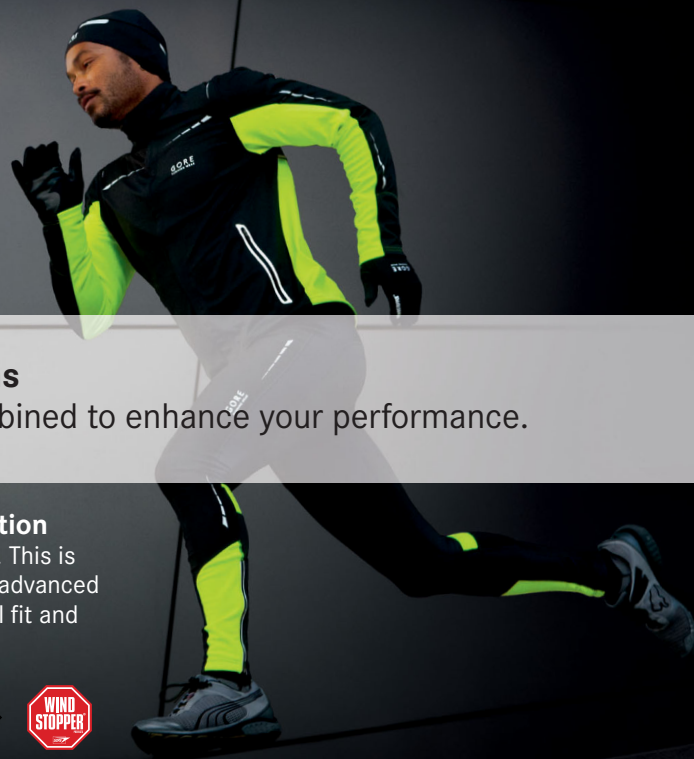
Rewriting the rules on how to fit and sell running shoes.

not evidence-based and may increase injury rates. Even without the literature we know that the foot in running is a spring and if braced the movement is inhibited. The process of how we fit shoes and place feet on elevated supported platforms and the potential perils are well described in the new book by Dr. Peter Larson and Bill Katovsky Tread Lightly.”

David Jonson of NEWSole Running adds: “The stores are all independent of each other but we share the same philosophy regarding the natural running movement. We exchange stock when and if needed and we encourage each other and share ideas.”

The educational effort is spearheaded by the group's website as well as print materials that come from a wide variety of academic contributors, including many peer reviewed articles and references to the growing body of

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research being produced in this area.

“The Natural Running Center website is an educational portal and resource for consumers and stores, to encourage the development of better running form

and the selection of footwear to allow pain free and efficient running,” says Bill Katovsky Co-Founder and website editor.

Katovsky, Cucuzzella, and Nick Pang, co-founder and web and shoe editor, are

responsible for vetting the contributors, collecting new material, producing the e-newsletter, and updating the website for the members, as well as visitors seeking advice and pertinent information. ■

The stories behind the launch of the stores.

How did the stores come into being?

Mark Cucuzzella Two Rivers Treads Shepherdstown, WV

“As a family doctor and community health advocate the goal is sustainable health, not running. So the focus behind our original store was for it to be a place where all could learn better walking and running mechanics and get in functional footwear to complement this. After 10 years of teaching, researching and practicing natural running, it was clear to me that we needed to get folks out of heels and teach them better movement patterns in addition to getting folks out the door. Too many runners get injured and it does not need to be this way. I also wanted to support retailers

who have this belief but may not have the medical/science background to stand behind when challenged. We have 15 stores now who are partnered in The Natural Running Center (naturalrunningcenter.com), our joint education portal.”

David Jonson, NEWSole Running, McDonough, GA

“I wanted to have a traditional specialty running store but we were getting push-back from the major shoe companies because of another store in the area. My focus was going to be on Natural Running because of my personal success with VFF, so not getting the major brands didn’t faze me at all. Then I discovered a whole new world with Inov-8, ALTRA, Merrell, Newton and Vivobarefoot and I’ve never looked back.”

Sandra M. Elliott, CEO, MS, PT, M.Ed., Major (Retired, US Army), Georgia Game Changers Running Co., Richmond Hill, GA

“Our store came into being because of my desire as a physical therapist to make a difference in our community. I am retired from the U.S. Army, but when I left in 2006 I was having to complete the Army 2.5 mile walk test, due to a previous back surgery and could not even attempt to run without numbness and pain. A patient of mine was a Vibram FiveFingers fan and could not wait to finish his rehab so he could be cleared to return to running. He succeeded in convincing me to try them. I did and found I could run without pain. I ended up running for more than 25 minutes the first day in the shoes.

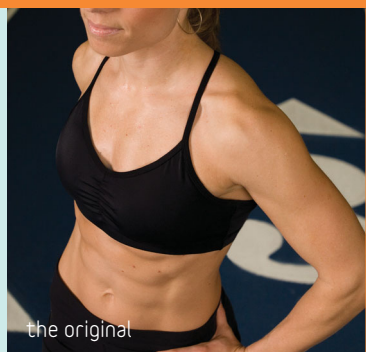
Of course, the next day, the calf soreness set in, but was recoverable. This began my journey to researching the shoes, the running form and how to transition correctly. I discovered over the past 18 months, that there was a lot of knowledge and a lot of research beginning to emerge about ‘natural running form.’ Once I discovered Dr. Mark Cucuzzella, I found his name recurring in almost everything about natural running to include his work with the Air Force. I began to test some of the knowledge on my patients who were interested. I conducted a survey about the usage of minimalist running shoes at Fort Stewart and saw there was a trend towards using the shoes, and questions about how to do it safely. I saw some positive results from helping soldiers

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to transition their running form, and I thought that this could be a way I could use my knowledge as a PT and provide a needed service — offering the shoes needed to help others transition. I wrote my first article for the Fort Stewart paper – ‘Form vs. Footwear’ – to raise the question about how each are intricately intertwined in helping others to ‘run naturally.’ I became a Newton Natural Running Coach by taking a course, and a test. The idea for the store grew into a dream and in July of this year we opened Georgia Game Changers Running Company. I tell people when they come into the store that this is a ‘Natural Running Store’ and that as a PT I am all about helping others discover

the joy of ‘running naturally.’ I hold weekly, soon to be two sessions per week, Natural Running Clinics, to help people understand how running form and the footwear are inter-related. I let people know that we have shoes that are not their ‘traditional’ running shoes; but that the differences may both amaze and surprise them. It has truly been a blessing to see that others are ‘embracing the change’ as we establish our brand... More people than most realize are ready to ‘embrace the change.’”

**Kyle Roberts, C. Ped.,
Revolution Natural Running
& Walking Center,
Wauwatosa, WI**
“I started learning about the

benefits of these lighter, flatter, thinner shoes in 2010. Part of it was prompted by reading “Born to Run.” The term ‘minimalist shoes’ was starting to get on my radar screen and I found myself Googling these things nightly. That’s when I heard about Dr. Mark Cucuzzella and Two Rivers Treads. I decided I needed to open a minimalist running shoe store in Milwaukee. I’m a Certified Pedorthist, which is a foot care professional who helps people with foot and lower extremity injuries. I decided to open Revolution Natural Running when I realized that I wanted my patients to build their foot muscles by wearing shoes that promote natural human movement.”

What makes the stores different from typical run stores?

Cucuzzella:
“Our stores are no different than other community running and walking centers in their primary mission. We just take a different approach to fitting and running form education. I have always loved and supported small community running stores. My friends in Charlottesville, Mark and Cynthia Lorenzoni of Ragged Mountain Running Shop, are the model of a family giving back to their community. We started hosting community

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running events here (www.freedomsrun.org) and they got too large to manage from a Blackberry so we needed a central HQ, thus a store was born. All of our stores are passionate about helping their community and put massive hours into the effort.”

Jonson:

“Education. We have a story to tell and it begins with educating a group of people who may or may not be interested in listening. But at some point, when things hurt, don’t work or if they are just looking for a change, we have a story to tell. I personally don’t sell a pair of shoes without showing them how to best run in them. I also offer free introductory running clinics twice/week to assist in that responsibility. It has paid huge dividends. We are becoming known as the place to come for running knowledge because it works.”

Roberts:

“We do not offer cushioned, arch-supportive type footwear, because that type of footwear puts the foot in an

environment where the body moves in a different manner than it does when the foot can feel the ground. I was involved in a medical study where we observed how every runner landed in a marathon. What we saw was astounding — over 93 percent of the runners landed with a heel strike, and only approximately seven percent landed on the midfoot or forefoot. The study (Daoud, 2012) showed that heel strikers sustain nearly twice as many injuries as mid or forefoot strikers. We don’t think it’s okay to heel strike when running. But most runners wear thick, cushioned arch-supportive shoes, and most of them tend to heel strike, so they might be subjecting themselves to twice the risk of injury than a mid or forefoot striker does. We spend a lot of time teaching people to get off their heels when they run. And we emphasize the importance of building the feet by wearing thin, flexible shoes, and by going barefoot as much as possible. What most typical running shoe stores don’t realize is that thick, cushioned arch-

supportive shoes hurt many more runners every year than minimalist shoes do. We have, in our store, many scientific studies that we use as free handouts that customers can take home and read. I’ve never seen that in a traditional running shoe store.”

How is it going and what are plans for the future?

Cucuzzella:

“For our store, Two Rivers Treads, we are a town of 3000 so you can imagine the challenges from the economic side. Visitors who run here find it almost comical that the majority of runners on the roads and trails are in minimal and flat shoes. We need to increase our growth to the wider region and nationally with our online store. We are finding that customers who understand the foot and posture want to get in a flat shoe all day.

On the Natural Running Center side we have a goal of increasing our partner stores and improving the shared education materials.”

Jonson:

“We continue to push forward and make education our focus. We are using other peripheral lines (compression, nutrition, and therapy) to continue to educate our community and to assist them in running efficiently and injury-free.”

Roberts:

“It is going very well. We are a new store in a city with plenty of options for runners. We are more medically based and we are more science based. Our growth will come as runners’ awareness of the benefits of minimalist footwear and efficient natural form running grows. We are moving people out of the thick, orthopedic boots known as stability running shoes. When someone takes that off their foot and puts on a thin, lightweight minimal shoe they can feel the difference. When they learn to run more efficiently, by landing on the ball of the foot they like how it feels. Once they go to a minimalist shoe, they never go back.” ■

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