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7 Things You Need to Know When Choosing Cross Country Running Shoes

A successful season starts with the right shoes.

BY JONATHAN BEVERLY AUG 9, 2018



As cross-country season begins, it's time for a fresh pair of running shoes. But we know it can be easy to get overwhelmed by the selection—and the price tags—at the local running store. Before you start shopping, here are seven tips you should know to help you choose the shoes that will sweeten the miles this fall.

1. Go light.

Many running shoes on the market today are designed with older, heavier people in mind, so the shoes have a lot of cushioning and support. Extra material between you and the ground makes it more difficult for the shoe to flex and for you to feel the ground underfoot and can alter your stride. You (or your kid) are still light and athletic, so you don't need that level of support.

Steve Magness, a coach for runners from high school athletes to elites, says that young cross-country athletes can run in a lightweight trainer with less cushioning without much risk of injury, and learning to run in such shoes will set them up for running better throughout life.

2. Ask an expert.

Ideally, get an expert to help you choose a pair that fits your size, stride, and training. Greg Weich, who has over 20 years of experience coaching in Colorado high schools and working at specialty running stores, says he won't make general shoe recommendations for young athletes. He urges parents and athletes to go to a reputable specialty store, where a knowledgeable fitter will help them make good choices on footwear.

The specialist should ask you about your injury history, how much running you've been doing, what your training program is like, and your past experience with certain products and brands. The fitter might watch you run and do simple exercises like a squat, so he or she can analyze your gait.

3. Ignore looks; go by feel.

We get it—you want to look cool (who doesn't?). It's easy to convince yourself that a popular or attractive shoe—or even the one your best friend wears—is good for you, even if it fits poorly or causes pain. If you're thinking, "I'll break them in," or you think they feel good when you slip them on while sitting down, reconsider.

Comfort is important, but you have to assess how comfortable they are when running—not just at step-in. So get up and take them for a run down the street or on a treadmill in the store. Get going at a decent speed. Don't settle for "OK"—try on several pairs and find which feels best.

4. Leave some room.

You need more room in a running shoe than a street shoe because your feet swell while running. Make sure there's space between your toes and the end of the shoe—at least a thumb-width. Check that the shoe isn't too narrow, either. You want room to spread at the ball of the foot. When in doubt, go up a half size so they'll still fit at the end of the season—you're still growing, and you'll be bummed if your favorite shoes no longer fit mid-season.

5. Ask for a discount.

Local stores will often give 10 to 15 percent off a pair of shoes if you tell the clerk that you're running for an area high school. Another wallet-saving move is to buy last year's model. Running shoes do change over the years, but if a closeout model fits, and you like it, you aren't losing out on anything. (And you'll make mom and dad really happy.)

6. Be smart about spikes.

When you're first starting your running career, it's fine to run races in the same pair of shoes you train in during the first year or two. As you get older and more competitive, you might change into spikes for cross-country races. While not everyone needs competition shoes, these spikes are lighter than training shoes and provide a tighter fit and more traction, especially on muddy, grassy courses.

Spikes do, however, put more strain on your feet, Achilles tendons, and calves. They also aren't ideal for courses that cross over pavement and some meets may not allow them so be sure to be clear on the rules before you buy. Racing in a lightweight training shoe is safer until you've developed strength in your feet and lower legs over several years of running. No need to rush into spikes right away.

7. Don't expect a miracle.

Perhaps the most important thing we've learned about shoes in the past decade is that they aren't as important as we once thought when it comes to injury. Injuries come from weaknesses in the body and poor training, and no shoe can correct or prevent that.

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