

New Product – Nike “FREE” Running Shoe - Cost \$170

The competitive edge was delighted to have the pleasure of attending the media launch of the new Nike “Free” shoe in Melbourne on Thursday the 24th February 2005. The launch included talks from Tobie Hatfield (Senior Engineer of Advanced Products at Nike’s Innovation Kitchen, Eugene, Oregon, USA), John Blievernicht (President of the Institute for Sports, Health and Fitness, Arizona, USA) and a feedback session with Steve Moneghetti and Nic Bideau.



In developing the Nike Free shoe, designers from Nike questioned several of the top coaches in the United States to find some of the secrets of their success. A common finding was the use of barefoot running to strengthen the muscles of the feet and ankle leading to a reduced prevalence of injuries. Other advantages from running barefoot include increased proprioception (body awareness) and an increased range of movement in the ankle and foot. The reduced number of injuries resulted in more training and consequently better performances.

However, there are some obvious risks associated with running without shoes including stepping on tree roots, stepping on glass, stubbing toe, etc. Further to this it is often difficult to find suitable surfaces to train barefoot.

Thus it was felt that if a shoe could be developed that simulated barefoot running, it might indirectly improve performance. That is, the shoe itself will not necessarily improve your performance, but its use may lead to an improved performance, similar to including a core stability program in your training regime.

The concept of benefiting from barefoot running is not new, with Adidas developing the “Feet you Wear” concept several years ago. However, to adequately simulate barefoot running it required a radical change to the conventional running shoe and it appears that Adidas were not willing to go to the extreme required. There is no denying that Nike has gone to the extreme that is required.



The Nike FREE is now the most tested product developed in the 30 years at Nike and Nike are making a very special effort to ensure that staff selling the FREE understand that concept behind the shoe and its designed use. The words “progressive adaptation” were frequently mentioned at the launch and it was clear the Nike FREE was NOT designed as a universal training shoe, it was designed as a training aid.

So what is the shoe like?

It is one of the most comfortable shoes you will ever put on your feet. The upper is made from a material which appears to be more appropriate in surfing booties. But put your foot inside and it fits like a glove. They look great and will no doubt be mistaken as a fashion accessory. At 230g and 200g for the men's and women's models respectively, they are lighter than most racing flats. Another large positive for the Nike FREE is the male and female models were developed separately to cater for identified gender differences.

There were some significant modifications made to the last of the Nike FREE to make it more representative of the human foot (why this had not been done years ago, I did not quite understand?). The newer shape allows for an improved fit, reducing movement of the foot within the shoe. This reduced movement allowed the designers



to remove the heel counter and replace it with the 'dynamic heel pocket', which provides a more natural motion of the foot. Further the FREE has a reduced heel to forefoot height differential (the difference in the height at the top of the midsole in the heel of the shoe compared to at the forefoot) of 8mm in males and 12mm in females, again providing an environment closer to barefoot running.

The midsole is made of "Phylite" (40% rubber and 60% EVA) and you feel like you are walking on marshmallows. Did I mention that the shoes are comfortable! The large sipes (deep cuts along the bottom of the shoe) provide channels, both longitudinal and horizontal, which allow the shoes to flex in virtually every direction. The outsole is basically non-existent, except for a five small portions of rubber at the rear of the foot. Does the outsole look like it would wear away in one month? Most definitely! However, several athletes including Steve Moneghetti and Scott Nicholas (2.18 marathoner from the US, now living in Australia) vouched for the durability. In fact, Scott has a pair that he had run 1200km in (more than the Competitive Edge ever gets out of any heavy weight trainers). They had very minimal wear on the outsole, the upper was still in perfect condition and he promised the midsole felt as soft and responsive as his brand new pair.

Different Models

Although the idea of the FREE was to simulate barefoot running, it was thought that initially a shoe that was half way between normal training shoes and barefoot would be a good starting point. The first model released is termed the "5.0", given that on a scale of 0 – 10 (10 representing a normal trainer, 0 representing barefoot), the shoe would fall right in the middle. However it does come with two removable innersoles. The thinnest of these innersoles reduce the shoe to a 4.5 on the scale. There are plans to launch a FREE 4.0 shoe in the next 12 months.

Does It All Make Sense?

Does it all make sense that these soft, flexible shoes could last so long and be good for people? Well it is definitely in the realms of possibility. Considering pressures studies (conducted at the Nike Sport Research Lab and an independent lab in Germany) indicated a greater dispersion of pressure across a larger area of the foot it is possible that wear would be reduced as it is spread across a larger range of the outsole rather than the typical pattern in normal training shoes (ie. outside of the heel and inside of the toe).

Also if you consider that when a person lands on the outside of a normal training shoe, it generates a large moment of force which can potentially cause over pronation, it is possible that the very flexible nature of the free, may actually reduce some gait problems.

If used correctly, the shoe would increase intrinsic foot strength and a runner's ability to control the motion of their foot without the need for a rigid, supportive shoe. It seems that Asics have also recently discovered this and the new Kayano is not as stable as previous models. The stability of running shoes seems to have reached a peak about 12 months ago and now is heading back in the other direction. As long as an individual's feet are strong enough to handle the reduced control and stability in the shoe, this should be a good thing.

What does the Competitive Edge think of these shoes?

The Competitive Edge was initially skeptical of the shoe, but the concept is solid and the product appears to be very well designed and produced. This type of product always has the potential to backfire in the face of the producer if the product is misused and it will be interesting to see if Nike are able to pull it off successfully.

The Competitive Edge feels Nike are now in a great position to lead the market into this new realm. It is our opinion that in five years time, every other shoe company will also have a barefoot simulation model and that it will be just another part of the range similar to stability shoes, light weight trainers and racing flats. If you get a pair and use them correctly, we think you will definitely find that it was money well spent.

We would like to stress to all readers who are thinking of purchasing the Nike FREE, these shoes are NOT to be initially worn as a normal running shoe. They should be worn in very slowly. Beginning with just walking and then some light running. More information including some training programs are online (www.nike.com/nikefree).

There are now several runners completing all of their training in these shoes without problems, however they have built up to this over a period of six months to a year. We must re-iterate that these shoes were NOT designed to replace all other shoes, they were designed as a training aid.