

Shoes

I knew the drill. Show up to the run with new running shoes; the shoes weren't surviving the distance clean. We never knew who it was amongst us that started the vile custom, though we always suspected it was the blonde. She was always up to something. For this Sunday morning long run, I'd broken into the running-shoe box for the morning's togs. I'd no other option, having torn the outside upper of my old and now replaced left shoe. Having purchased the new pair at a great discount some months ago, I'd forgotten their color.

White.

The new running shoes were white with white shoelaces, white midsole, and black outsole. Just as were the prior pair, they were comfy to the feel. My feet loved stepping into them, a collective joyous sigh from each foot following their settling into their new environs. Anticipating my morning long run, I could sense the joy of the run upcoming. We'd run as a pack for the first half of the forested run in the dry summer air before separating into a long line on the return.

White shoes. Oh, damn. The rain-starved dirt would change the color in just the first mile. Then I stopped worrying over that happening, realizing the new white shoes wouldn't make the first running step still clean. They'd all join in, like a posse capturing and hanging the outlaw. More accurately, they'd be a pack of vultures feeding the carcass of my white running shoes. And those shoes had to last me through the next 400 miles. At that time in my running life, that was two months, if that long. Heaving a long, hard sigh, grabbing my keys and running bag, I head on out to the meetup a few miles away.

I didn't help my cause when stepping out of my car, seeing the early-bird arrivals squawking to each other as we stragglers arrived, the bright morning sun directed a laser-like sunbeam onto my bright white running shoes. Piranha to a feed, they pounced. The fate of my clean bright white running shoes sealed; I stood silently while turns were taken in wiping outsoles from the others' disgusting running shoes on mine. As I recall, I'd done the same to each of their new running shoes.

I am not a sneakerhead. I don't purchase running shoes to collect the latest and greatest style, brand, model, color, or promised-land of shoe. I wear out my running shoes, rather than maintain them all in a hermetically-sealed room. I even recycle the running shoe box, the paper in which the shoes were wrapped, and the shoe stuffing. When I was single, I'd keep the shoes indoors, usually in an out-of-the-way place; the new shoes next to the older shoes that were stuffed with a drying cloth to reduce the odor or newspaper if I'd run in the rain. Now, I fight the never-ending battle to keep the shoes on the garage shoe rack set aside for the outdoor landscaping shoes.

I hear their quiet whimpers each night.

I don't collect shoes to match my outfits. Putting aside the conversation over appropriate shoes to go with business attire, when I put on casual slacks, jeans, shorts, swim trunks, or clean running shorts following a run, I put on retired running shoes. I don't worry about color. I simply want a comfortable shoe to wear with my casual lifestyle. Though there are runners . . . no matter the gender . . . who fuss and overthink the room in choosing the perfect shoe to wear for the current occasion. I'm just not wound that way.

When I first began distance running while matriculating through college, I could afford one pair of running shoes. That pair went out in the weather, on all surfaces, at all speeds. Track workouts, hilly courses, dirt trails, muddy trails, long runs, races, and casual outings. Those had to last an elapsed time from three to six months, depending on my financial situation. Being hired for my first employment after graduating, I took running shoes to the next level. I began alternating running shoes because I could afford to buy two pair.

I am not a running shoe hoarder. Keeping one older pair for those muddy runs that happen, in addition to the two pair that I alternate during my running week is sensible, and a healthy habit. Rotating running shoes reduces injury risk because I'm not using the same little, itty-bitty toe, foot, ankle, calf, thigh, hip muscles day after day after day from wearing the same running shoes each of those days. Avoiding an overuse injury, say, Achilles tendonitis, shin splints, and the like, is a no-brainer. Of course, there is a limit to all of that.

All that said, there is a deep hole runners fall into, just one deep hole over from the one dug by avid golfers. They buy yet another club to add to their already overstuffed bag because that club will drop their handicap from 40 to 39.5 over par. And what happens to the old club being replaced? It goes into the unused old golf club hall of fame, never to be tossed away, because “you never know” when the old club might be needed. Running shoes are to runners what clubs are to golfers.

That used-up pair of racing flats may have just one more race in them, if the right race for that purpose ever arises. And, that race doesn’t happen? Well, you just never know. Those crumbled up training flats could be useful someday when soft-track marathon comes up on the calendar. Oh wait, there is no such marathon on the calendar. Never mind, there will be a new calendar. And those old pair covered in dried mud and muck that were the long-run pair? Well, you just never know. Golfers and runners never met a new shiny object they couldn’t justify in the purchase. Reminds me of my dad in the height of his hi-fi collecting. (Look up record albums, turntables, amps, receivers, and speakers. Or, look up Stan Freeberg.)

Avid distance runners are hard pressed to avoid the lure of owning a new pair of running shoes. Advertisements are relentless in selling the sucker, er, runner, the latest, greatest, best-made pair of running shoes “designed with the runner in mind”. Yeah, like the running shoes companies specifically designed a shoe for a tallish runner with moderately narrow feet, with arches that don’t leave a print in wet sand, and whose heel has never been part of the foot strike. That doesn’t keep this particular runner from attempting to turn the running shoe not designed with him in mind. Not every shoe is into him. Soles for Souls, or the like, love runners like me.

And try as runners all might, find the running shoe perfect for them, and then stay with that model, despite the annual “mandatory” upgrades to that shoes. Go ahead, just try. “I thought you liked running in that shoe?” “I did, but then the shoe company changed the model.” “What did the company do?” “Turned the light, fast shoe into a clodhopper?” “That was less than ideal.”

This is the lament of the distance runner. Consistency is all they want in a shoe. They don’t need a new pair with a different set of specifications. They just need that shoe over and over, just as it was when they bought their first pair. Ain’t that hard.

I bought new running shoes this week. Two, actually. They replaced the worn out older pairs that have been deposited safely in the receptacle where they will be cleaned up and delivered to persons in need of shoes who wear roughly shoes in my size. Good.

One pair is for long runs. It has cushion in the midsole, endlessly compressing with each foot strike onto the ground. My prior pair of the same shoe model lasted the required 400 miles. The new model is built almost like the prior model, maybe a bit wider in the toe box, bit thinner in the heel cup. The color choices remain variations off of the pastel family, from light and bright to dark and bright. No white. I chose neon baby blue with long streaks of aqua. The outsole is dense and compact. Lots of good miles in that one await.

The other pair is designed to be fast pair, a carbon plate sitting above the new-generation midsole material, with barely a shoe upper to cover my feet. Electric black with a streak of deep purple camouflaged with a longer line of deep pink. No white. In this shoe, my running steps will barely touch the ground. That is the hope. Because my running is based more on hope than achievement, I'll go with light, quick turnover in these shoes.

I have yet another pair, but that pair is for racing. I've had the current racing shoes for over a year, with just under 100 miles put upon them from running any race distance beginning at 5km all the way to my last failed marathon. I finished that marathon only because it was 13.1 miles out and 13.1 miles back. Because I've reached the age where my speed pace is my 5k pace is my tempo pace is my 10km pace to my half-marathon pace, the racing shoes suit my current needs and ability.

Oh, and I use a different pair of running shoes for my use on my treadmill. Based upon past history, these shoes will last 750 miles before I feel any niggles in my feet or knees. Pounding on a treadmill belt doesn't wear down the outsole. As long as the midsole is both flexible and consistent, the treadmill will make no dent into the life of that pair.

I may be slowing, but I still have some good habits. I still have the beaten down pair for running on muddy, wet running days. Some things never change.