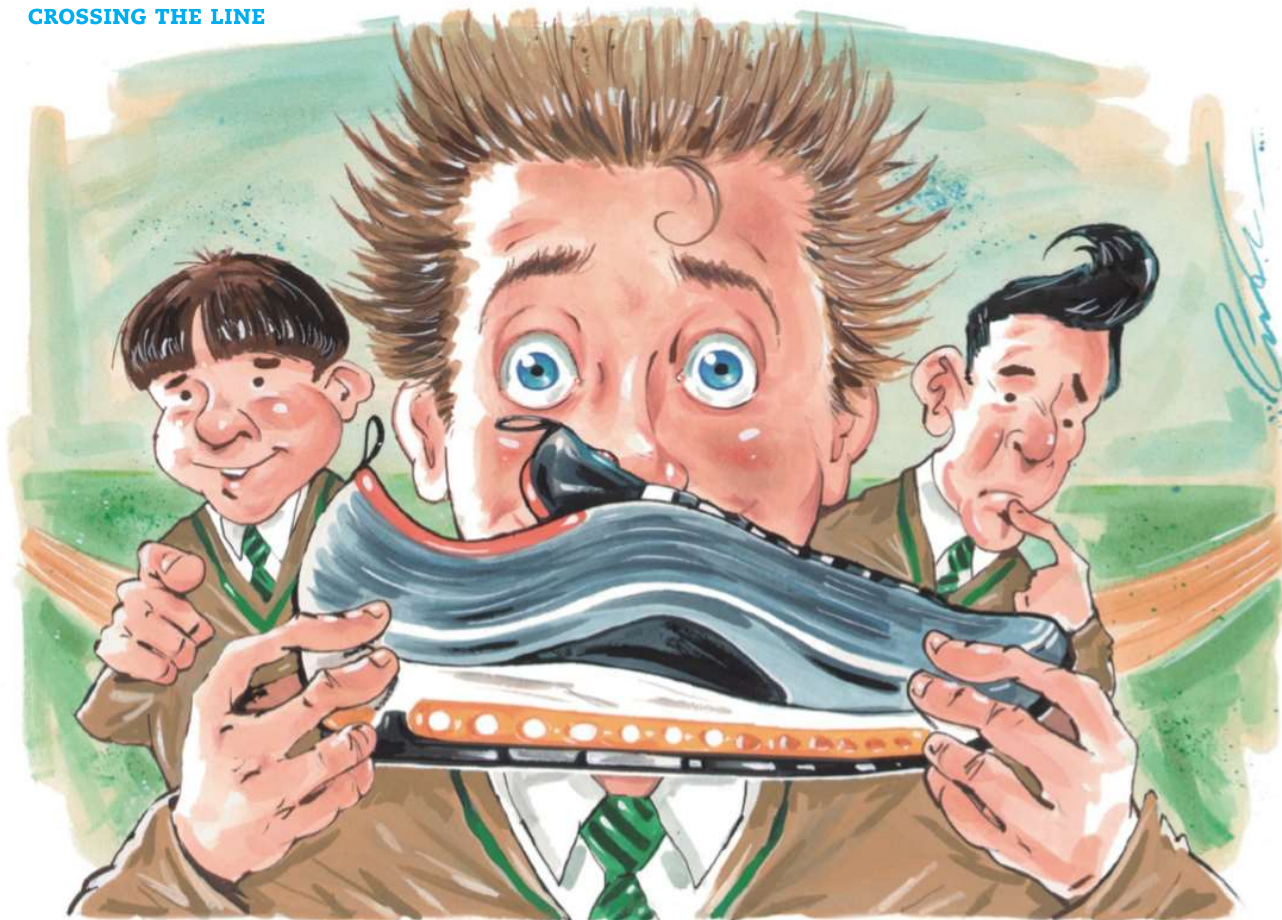


## CROSSING THE LINE



## Running Shoes

Three Decades of Love, Loss, and Love Again

By Kelly Bouchard

**M**y love for running shoes began in the mid-'90s. It was the early days of the Internet, and shoe companies like Nike and Reebok were capitalizing on technological optimism. Ads cast running shoes as futuristic marvels equipped with pumps, proprietary air and even lights that were guaranteed to make you faster than the Flash. If you happened to be in elementary school, as I was, you couldn't help but be seduced. I truly believed shoes could make you unbeatable, independent of your athletic ability, until one recess I convinced the fastest kid in my grade to take a fork to the clear plastic air pockets in the heels of his Nike Air Max's, and he still beat me in a two lap race around the school field.

From then on, I developed a different approach to running that gradually drew me toward brands with more serious images. Asics and Saucony were in the running for my affections until my cross-country coach clinched my loyalty to New Balance. During my grade-eight season, he gave us a stunningly articulate speech on how New Balance's North American manufactured, never-celebrity-endorsed shoes epitomized the blue-collar ethics on which our northern town was built. That speech, which really should be part of New Balance's ad campaigns, simultaneously awakened me to an entire ethos and kept me in New Balance right through my senior year.

But, in university, a friend in my freshman dormitory succeeded

in winning my fickle heart for the emerging barefoot running school. Graceful and gazelle-like in her Vibram Five Fingers, she warned against imprisoning my feet in blocks of foam, waxed poetic about forefoot striking and gave me a science article titled "The Evolution of Marathon Running" that said my barefooted ancestors had used their unique running abilities to outcompete other predators for prey. Filled with Neanderthal pieties, I tippy-toed off to buy ultra-modern Five Fingers and Nike Frees to help facilitate my rediscovery of humanity's ancient past.

Of course, it didn't occur to me that paleolithic humans likely didn't encounter much cement on the African savannah, until I graduated and started incurring knee injuries on training runs as a wildfire fighter in B.C. A crewmember turned me on to maximalist shoes like the Adidas Supernova Glide, but no amount of cushioning could stop the pain. In 2015, I finally went to a physiotherapist who put me on a treadmill, pronounced me a chronic over-strider and told me, in the weary tone of someone tired of saying the same thing, that *how* I ran made a lot more difference than *what* I ran in.

Since then, I've really, truly tried to take his advice to heart. Now, when I look back over 30 years of love and heartache, I can see how little running has changed while shoes have come and gone. The lactic burn, the synaptic singing of endorphins and the peripheral blur of road or trailside are all the same, as are the facts that no shoes have been conclusively shown to reduce injuries, and that the most important variables in any race remain the runners themselves. But I still find myself lingering over ads in magazines and constantly drifting in and out of shoe stores. And sometimes, when I'm lacing up a new pair, I still choose to forget everything I've learned, and wonder earnestly if *these* will be the shoes that finally make me faster than the Flash. **R**

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Russ Tudor