

## Q&A John Woodward

Runner and coach John Woodward shunned shoes long before barefoot became a running trend. The 67-year old has been holding his Natural Running courses in the Lake District for the past 25 years.

### What made you first take off your shoes?

There was a hippie dimension to it. In the 1970's I did a few barefoot summers of love! More seriously, I studied human movement at Nottingham University and then got interested in the Alexander Technique. The more I worked with the Body Sense, the more I felt I wanted to explore natural movement. I have rarely worn shoes since.

### Have you always run?

Always. Way back in the 1960s and 70s people would stop cars and asked me if I was alright or if I wanted a lift. I have never been that interested in racing. It is more about exploring and challenging myself. For my 65th birthday I ran 80 miles barefoot in 24 hours. For my 60th it was 60 barefoot miles over Lake District Fells in a day. *Barefoot?* Yes of course! Most runners in my locality grind out their miles on local roads. It leaves the wilderness of the Duddon Estuary to my barefeet. It really is the centre of the barefoot running universe!

### What motivates you to run and do you run every day?

I love it. It is the most important motivation. The great Kenyan Kip Keino thinks so too. He says that the most important element in your running is that you love it! Over what has become a fairly long running lifetime, I've seen running become a Big Bucks Industry. It is easy to lose the love of it. However when you are *in your element* it is obvious that maintaining focus and concentration is quite effortless. I do have the occasional 'Running Blues' day. I never push it. "*If you don't love don't do it*" - is my motto!

### Were you pleased when barefoot running hit the mainstream?

It is a blessing and a curse. Great news that the word is out that shoes may cause restrictions and adaptations. After 25 years in my Laboratory of One, some of my hunches are now being tested by the rigours of science. It's not just me saying that a mid-foot/forefoot strike *feels* lighter, now strain gauge/ force plate analysis confirms this. It's great when the subjective and objective come together like this. It forms a really solid base to build on.

### But what are the downsides?

People are misguided if they think that barefoot running is just a matter of just doing it. Really you have to earn the right to go minimalist or barefoot. On my courses we systematically peel back the layer upon layer of compensation. Basically we have bought and paid for a shod modified gait. My job? To provide a sense of the price that we've paid.

We should be wary of '**Nothing Buttery thinking**'! Only the recent barefoot running advocates claim that it is *nothing but* a matter of kicking off your shoes. That's also why I strenuously resisted the Barefoot John label. It is far better that science sorts out what is sound and what is cultish. Really it is not about being barefoot at all but about how to engage the whole foot.

### **Don't shoes represent progress?**

No. They represent protection. In our evolution, survival meant being continuously alert and connected to our surroundings. In only an eye blink of evolutionary time things have shifted from connection to protection. In modern times what underpins our clever shoe technology is the sense that our surroundings have become a hostile threat: broken glass, drug addicts needles, the hard pavements. The prevailing mindset of protection undermines the natural self-reliance of the human foot. As I say, it's important to know the price of what it is we have bought and paid for!

### **What do you think is to be gained by going barefoot?**

There is such a profound disconnection between brain and body. Consider a familiar enough scenario: an individual with £1000 of sports gear in his kit bag is driving around the gym car park looking for a space closer to the entrance so that he can go in and run on the treadmill that he is paying £350 gym membership a month to run on. We become driven in all kinds of strange ways! It is that drivenness that creates an amazing amount of "noise" in the brain. It makes it difficult to tune into the signals from the body and to the feedback that you get from your feet - that's one key connection! When it comes to the neuro-muscular relationship, I think it's important to focus on the connection between mind and body. It pays to be smart before you try to get strong. There is such great good news from recent neuro-science. Plasticity is such a big thing now in neuroscience. We may have drifted far away from the natural state but that doesn't mean to say that things can't change. Learning a whole new way into running might be daunting, but honestly that's where the fun begins.

### **What would you say to runners who were firmly rooted in traditional running shoes?**

Be interested and attentive to your living foot and the way that it works inside its protective shoe. Certainly incorporating some barefoot training is beneficial. It is uncontentious that enhances proprioception. It's sensible to begin on that side of things *before* you start to try to build endurance and strength. If you fail to get this focus correct, a proportion of your hard won efforts will always go towards compensation and adaptation.

### **How do people react to you living barefoot?**

It can be quite extreme. You sometimes get a 'you should be ashamed of yourself' type of reaction. I went to Paris recently and they wouldn't let me get on a boat (on the Seine) barefoot. And at the V&A museum, they asked me to put shoes on for 'health and safety' reasons. It's only when you step out of a tradition that you realise the extent and force of its influence.

**We have to ask... what's the worst thing you've ever stepped on?**

People are always concerned about that – as if the world is full of rusty nails and syringes. I think the worst thing was a dog turd when I was running a course in Hackney. That drug-dealer's dog must have been the size of a donkey!