



Murphy's Lore

BY SAM MURPHY

IF SHOES CAN DO THE WORK, WHERE'S THE HONEST EFFORT?



I am tempted to turn up at my next race wearing a pair of mini pogo sticks, in which I will bounce my way to the finish line. If anyone hints that I might be at an unfair advantage, I'll look down to see if they happen to have a pair of Nike Vaporflys on their feet.

Athletes wearing shoes from the Vaporfly range took 31 out of 36 top-three spots in major marathons last year, according to BBC Sport. Since Vaporflys hit the market in 2016, the five fastest marathons of all time have been run in them. That includes Eliud Kipchoge, who broke the two-hour marathon in October last year (wearing a new version of the shoe, the AlphaFly) and, on the same weekend, Brigid Kosgei, who took Paula Radcliffe's long-standing world record while wearing the commercially available Next% model.

This saddens me. Why are so many common or garden runners willing to fork out hundreds of pounds for a piece of tech that will make them run faster? I get the appeal of tech designed to help you improve by providing feedback that can enable you to tweak your training, such as smart watches. But just 'wear this and get quicker?' After three decades of running, I want to know that any upturn in my performance is a result of my own efforts, not down to what I've put on my feet. Take my 5K PB, 20:04. With the oft-quoted four per cent improvement resulting from wearing Vaporflys, I could expect to run 48 seconds faster, breaking the 20-minute barrier with ease. But it wouldn't feel like an honest run.

If you are the proud owner of a pair of these chunky-soled monstrosities, I'm sure you won't agree with me. Let's not fall out about it. I concede that it's a complex issue and one I'm arguing about more from my heart than my head.

Innovations geared towards helping athletes perform better are nothing new. Whether it's a training technique, such as fasted running; a racing strategy, such as drafting; a nutritional aid (energy gels, beetroot juice, caffeine shots, to name a few); or an anti-gravity treadmill that lets you run with less – or zero – impact on your joints, there are any number of ways to raise your game legitimately.

WHAT SAM...

Introduced...

The clubhouse whiteboard, on which we write details of the morning's or evening's session, along with why we're doing what we're doing. When it comes to the punchier Rye Runners offerings, we might have to start locking the doors to prevent a mutiny!

Learned...

Where my Knot of Henry is. You have one, too. It's a tendinous junction in the midfoot – a bottleneck, if you will. And having it 'unravelling' hurts like hell.

Tried...

A sweet potato energy gel. Well, sort of. A blend of sweet potato, tahini and quinoa in a resealable pouch (longhaul endurance.com). Quite nice – and great to have a savoury alternative to sugary gels.

The Vaporflys have taken us into new territory. According to the research, Nike's four per cent improvement claim stands up. It relates specifically to a boost in running economy – the amount of oxygen required to run at a given pace – of two to six per cent.

In my view, running shoes that cram compressed foam and a curved carbon fibre plate into a 40mm-high midsole to improve energy efficiency are the equivalent of the drag-resistant full-body swimsuit created by Speedo in 2008, which resulted in over 200 world records being set before it was banned by swimming's governing body. They are, in essence, a piece of equipment that yields an instant and significant effect on performance.

Exercise physiologist Ross Tucker agrees. In a blog (sportsscienetists.com), he writes that the Vaporflys have 'disrupted the meaning of running. You may as well accept that the medals in Tokyo are going to be determined more by shoes than by physiology.'

'We don't know exactly how the carbon-fibre plate and midsole foam within the Vaporfly achieves these performance gains,' says Nicola Blower, a podiatrist specialising in musculoskeletal podiatry. 'But we know stiff, curved soles improve forward motion (by reducing the foot's natural side-to-side motion, which is there to account for terrain changes and to absorb shock) and we can assume that the foam gives back what is lost in limiting some of the foot's natural spring,' says Blower. 'The overall effect will be that the foot no longer works naturally.'

While Blower stresses that this is not necessarily either a 'good' or 'bad' thing (she notes the Vaporfly would likely be a disadvantage on uneven ground, with frequent changes of direction), to me it feels like a betrayal of our feet and our bodies. And who knows what the long-term effects of wearing them will be? That, at least, is something I won't have to worry about.

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