



After “Changing the Running World One Odd Look at a Time,” The Barefoot Runners Society Is Set to Cross the Finish Line

By Norma Coto

In 2007, a group of runners decided to form a running group. They were from all parts of the country, all running at different abilities, both men and women. They met online when Mark Remy of *Runner's World* created a separate forum for them, a forum for runners within a forum. They were runners on the fringe of the running craze, a counterculture of sorts, and they were met with equal parts fascination and ridicule. What did they do that was so radical they needed a separate forum free from trolls?

They took off their cushioned running shoes.

In a world where running meant buying expensive shoes, barefoot and minimalist shoe runners were as odd as ten healthy toes after a marathon. Therefore, Tamara Gerken (TJ) reached out to Remy and asked if *Runner's World* could create an online forum dedicated solely [no pun intended] to barefoot and minimalist runners where they could meet and perhaps feel less like an anomaly.

After forming friendships and building enthusiasm, six members of the forum decided a website with vetted members would be a safer place to meet and share their love of running barefoot, and a few months later, the Barefoot Runners Society™ was born.

The six founders—TJ, Jason Robillard, Victor Palma, Preston Curtis, Cameron Guthrie, and Haley DiCicco—agreed the site would be free of ads, run by volunteers, and sustained by donations. To clarify, at no time in its entire existence, did any member profit financially from working the BRS site. It was a running site 100% driven by the love of running.



Figure 1: Barefoot runners at Stone Mountain, GA, International Barefoot Running Day

More importantly, the site would be a rich hub for resources. From the start in 2009, the Barefoot Runners Society [BRS] was inclusive and welcomed barefoot and minimalist runners from all over the world, inherently encouraging runners to educate runners. At a time when no information—or worse, misinformation—about barefoot and minimalist running swirled the internet, BRS stood out as a beacon of truth and reason. The site reminded runners of the importance of patience and of transitioning “back” to natural running slowly. Runners were encouraged to re-learn how to run by taking off their shoes first and beginning over deliberately.

Barefoot runners understood that, unless they were at the beach, their running practice likely would instigate a reaction—a blaring car horn, being stopped and questioned, or a few head turns and odd looks. Founding member, Jason Robillard, often quipped that BRS was “changing the running world one odd look at a time.” For many new barefoot runners, getting over the funny looks was harder than learning how to run barefoot. They quickly realized that their unique practice was physically possible, but culturally impossible. As a result, BRS worked to normalize barefoot and minimalist running. They promoted news, events, clinics, and races featuring barefoot runners around the world.



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Figure 2: Barefoot runners in France, one of the most active BRS chapters, International Barefoot Running Day

Despite the curiosity their practice triggered, barefoot runners believed that dealing with tension around their practice was worth it. They were getting all the benefits of mainstream running with added sensory benefits, the most important of which was mitigating common running injuries initiated by running shoes.

It wasn't long before the Barefoot Runners Society site began to grow. In fact, it grew to over 10,000 members. Eventually, the site was getting approximately 1 million visits per month and 30 million hits.

The busiest years came after the 2009 publication of *Born to Run* by Christopher McDougall. *Born to Run* is a nonfiction narrative tracing McDougall's determination to run an ultramarathon. He suffers injury after injury, and in his quest to run far and free of pain, he ends up meeting various doctors, coaches, ultramarathoners, barefoot runners, and the Tarahumara people of Mexico, considered the greatest long-distance runners ever.

McDougall's story is not unlike the many members of BRS. Most came to barefoot running because of injuries related to running shod. Consequently, a BRS site priority was answering medical questions for members, and fortunately, barefoot running-friendly doctors stepped up to the call. Doctors, such as Drs. Mark Cucuzzella, MD; James Stoxen, Andrew T. Klein, DC, DACNB, FACFN; Emily Splichal, DPM, MS, CES; and William Charschan, DCCCSP, took time out from their regular practices to advise frustrated barefoot runners who could not find support from their local doctors. As barefoot or minimalist runners themselves, these doctors provided science-backed answers to members healing or transitioning to barefoot running.

Furthermore, BRS provided a map of barefoot running-friendly specialists across the country, so members could locate a doctor near them. Surprisingly (or not surprisingly, if you're an avid barefoot runner) the Ask the Docs forum was *not* inundated with questions. Barefoot and minimalist runners tend to suffer less injuries when they transition carefully.

In 2010, Ken Bob Saxton joined BRS. Affectionately called the Godfather of Barefoot Running, Saxton had already been writing and teaching barefoot running on his own website since 1997. Many barefoot runners learned or improved their running technique from Saxton's book, *Barefoot Running Step by Step*. Furthermore, his nationwide clinics were instrumental in getting the word out about barefoot running and helping runners understand the benefits of taking their shoes off. With his presence, advice, and support, BRS continued to grow and flourish. A Calendar of Events and a Map of Barefoot Running Instructors kept members informed not only of Saxton's clinics, but also of races, events, and meet-ups held by runners and other instructors worldwide.



Figure 3: Barefoot runners in India, International Barefoot Running Day

Barefoot runners discovered early on that funny looks diminished as numbers grew. Running with a group of barefoot runners made everything normal, almost acceptable. Cue the BRS chapters and member maps. With over ninety chapters on the site, barefoot runners found other like-minded enthusiasts near them or talked about the joys and concerns of running in their specific locations. The member maps visually captured the expansive reach of BRS while also allowing members to find each other. Furthermore, the chapters and member maps represented the global appeal of barefoot and minimalist running. From Australia, to Taiwan, to the United Kingdom, to Canada, to France, and beyond, the Barefoot Runners Society brought the world together under one “weird” health habit.

Expectedly, it wasn't long until one of the founders, Victor Palma, launched International Barefoot Running Day [IBRD] on May 1, 2011. Barefoot runners from all over the world

flooded the site with photos, routes, and lots of healthy, muddy toes. Running events and clinics were held worldwide. Robillard's wit-- "changing the running world one odd look at a time"-- was coming to fruition, and his words graced the inaugural banners and t-shirts of IBRD. Every May, International Barefoot Running Day continued to celebrate the freedom, health, joy, and childlike fun that comes from running without shoes.



Figure 4: Barefoot runners in Hong Kong, International Barefoot Running Day

There's a not-so-secret joke that no one likes to talk about shoes as much as a barefoot runner. After *Born to Run*, minimalist shoe companies enjoyed record sales. Companies, such as Xero Shoes, Luna Sandals, Vibram, Vivobarefoot, and FullSoul Running Pads, led the way creating shoes and sandals that appealed to barefoot runners. And while talking about minimalist shoes was a hot topic on the BRS site, there was a clear rule that when niggles started for a runner, the first piece of advice was always *take off the shoes!* In short, a respect for what the human body is capable of always undergirded conversations on the site while still respecting the need for footwear by some runners. Accordingly, the BRS site often provided product reviews of barefoot-friendly footwear and gear.

The impact of the Barefoot Runners Society website extended beyond running. Besides freeing runners of nagging injuries, besides bringing runners together from all corners of the world, and besides providing a site of camaraderie and support, BRS also can take credit for matchmaking. More than one couple met, married, and gave new meaning to "making my toes curl" through chapter meet ups.

The love extended to organizations as well. Most recently, BRS supported and promoted the Barefoot Autism Challenge led by BRS member Tyler Leech. Seven years strong, the Barefoot Autism Challenge brings awareness to Autism and allows participants to advocate for someone they love with Autism. The challenge has led to a deeper understanding of what it means to

communicate through our senses, specifically through our feet—a valuable channel that cushioned shoes block.

Besides the forums, the doctors, the products, the chapters, and International Barefoot Running Day, the Barefoot Runners Society also featured a library of resources for members looking for books about barefoot running. Some of which were written by BRS members. Bloggers writing about their barefoot journeys found a home at BRS, adding to the many varied adventures. Mileage Clubs, Mileage Reporting, and Winter Challenges doled out a healthy and fun competitive spirit as well as provided some added motivation. Lastly, if a member needed a new route, then the Course Reviews was a necessary first stop on the site.

Despite all the good that has come from the Barefoot Runners Society website, problems have led to its closing. Just a few short years into the launching of the site, five of the six members moved on to different projects, to new locations, or just moved on to new lives. In the end, TJ was left as the only original founding member, and maintaining the site alone has been a labor of love, as she still was not earning a dime.

TJ's over fourteen-years-long devotion to BRS was driven by her own story. Out for a run one day, she felt a sharp, shooting pain in the ball of her foot. While she *did* notice that the pain vanished when she walked barefoot, she suppressed this obvious message from her body. She was diagnosed with Morton's Neuroma, probably a result of constricting running shoes. Like most of us, she had been programmed to believe that running meant always running in shoes. After many failed treatments and surgeries, she finally took matters into her own hands; she took off her shoes and kept them off. She became a barefoot runner. Her disastrous experience with running shoes and narrow-minded doctors impassioned her to maintain the website in hopes of safeguarding others from a similar ordeal.

It wasn't long into managing the site single-handedly that TJ realized there was room for improvement, and in 2023, BRS went through a long overdue migration to a new platform. Unfortunately, visits to the site had plummeted during the pandemic. TJ hoped a new site might help revive enthusiasm. However, the new site did not prove any better to manage, nor did the visitors return. The pendulum over the shoe industry has decidedly swung to maximalism, with heavily cushioned shoes, such as HOKAs, enjoying success. The barefoot running phenomenon impacted the running world for a few years, but the fervor has died out. As a result, the Barefoot Runners Society will close on June 7th.

As every runner knows—whether shod, barefoot, or minimalist—the only bad run is the one that doesn't happen. Because of the work done by BRS, thousands of runners have learned to run for the first time, returned to running after an injury, or discovered a new way to run that turns the volume up on all the joys that mainstream running extols. Lest you wonder if barefoot and minimalist running was a fad, know that today thousands worldwide will smile as they run off, toes out, onto trails, beaches, urban sidewalks, tracks, and roads.

Thank you, Barefoot Runners Society, for the resources, support, camaraderie, and pure, pure joy you've brought to running. As you cross the finish line on June 7th, may you bask in the runner's high earned only after a great run.