

Running Free

Here's a shoe with little cushioning. And it could make you run better



► Pradeep Paul

THOSE who make running shoes have always preached the mantra of protection. They say the shoes should provide cushioning to counter the jarring impact of running on hard surfaces.

They say the shoes should boast stability control to support the feet and ankles.

But Nike has done an about-turn. The American sportswear manufacturer has launched Nike Free — a shoe that offers minimal cushioning and virtually no stability control.

Adhering to the basic principle of running — human body propelling itself forward with its feet — it decided to

go back to basics: barefoot running.

The Africans do it all the time, and have won almost every middle- and long-distance race worth mentioning.

Nike also found that the track team at Stanford University, California, was doing some of its training barefoot on the golf course.

When asked about this, former Stanford track coach Vin Lanana said: "I can't prove this, but I believe that athletes who have been training barefoot run faster and have fewer injuries."

So Nike came up with a shoe that closely mimics the bare foot. It is very light, very flexible, has deep grooves on the sole which allow it to flex in most directions and involves your feet more in the run.

The logic: Making the feet work harder would make them stronger. And stronger feet should make you run faster and longer, and jump higher.

After trials in other parts of the world like the United States and Australia, the shoes came to Singapore in February. Since then, four national athletes have been invited to take them for a trial run.

U.K. Shyam, 27, who holds the national record of 10.37 seconds for the 100m dash, is among them.

The sprinter says the shoes fit like a glove: "When I'm running, I can feel the ground. The shoes help in clawing the track, which means I am in better

control when sprinting."

Triathlete Victoria Campbell, who has been doing longer distances in the shoes, agrees with Shyam's assessment.

The 22-year-old, whose mother is Singaporean and father English, adds that training in the shoes actually "awakens the other muscles that were never used before".

If all this has convinced you to chuck your running shoes and head for a Nike store, don't.

The company's product specialists — they're called the Ekin team, because they know the brand backwards — stress that the Free is not meant to replace running shoes. It is meant to be used as a supplement to your training.

In fact, every pair comes with a usage chart that lists the recommended activities on a fortnightly basis.

For instance, in the first fortnight, you are advised to wear them around the house or for short walks. Only in the second fortnight are you meant to start running in them, doing just short, low-intensity jogs.

And even after your feet have got used to them, do the bulk of your running in normal running shoes.

The Nike Free shoes are available at Nike Concept Stores from this month. Prices range from \$149 to \$159 (without GST).

Use only as a training tool

LIFESTYLE showed the Nike Free to three experts and all felt that it could work as a low-mileage training tool but not as a replacement for running shoes.

Mr Gino Ng, a physiotherapist at the Singapore Sports Council's sports medicine and sports science division, looked a little sceptical when first shown the shoe as he felt it had too lit-

tle cushioning and stability control for a running shoe.

After slipping them on to check for flex, cushioning and support, he said it was "probably okay" for efficient runners who have very "neutral feet".

This means feet with no injuries, no flat or too-high arches and no pronation to either side.

Podiatrist Tye Lee Tze, who runs a clinic at Tanglin Place and works with the Sports Council on some related issues, warned that using Nike Free as one's primary running shoe could be hard on the feet.

Dr Kelvin Chew, deputy director of the sports medicine centre at Alexandra Hospital, accepted Nike's finding that running barefoot allows foot muscles to remain active. The toes are brought into play to grip the ground.

Many running shoes provide support to the foot such that it may weaken over time as they restrict rotational movements of the midfoot, he said.

But he hastened to add that this support is needed when running on harder surfaces.

Barefoot running, the three pointed out, is done mostly on soft surfaces like grass or sand. But most joggers and runners in cities like Singapore tend to pound the pavements and roads.

Given the unforgiving nature of such surfaces, the feet will need the cushioning that normal running shoes provide.

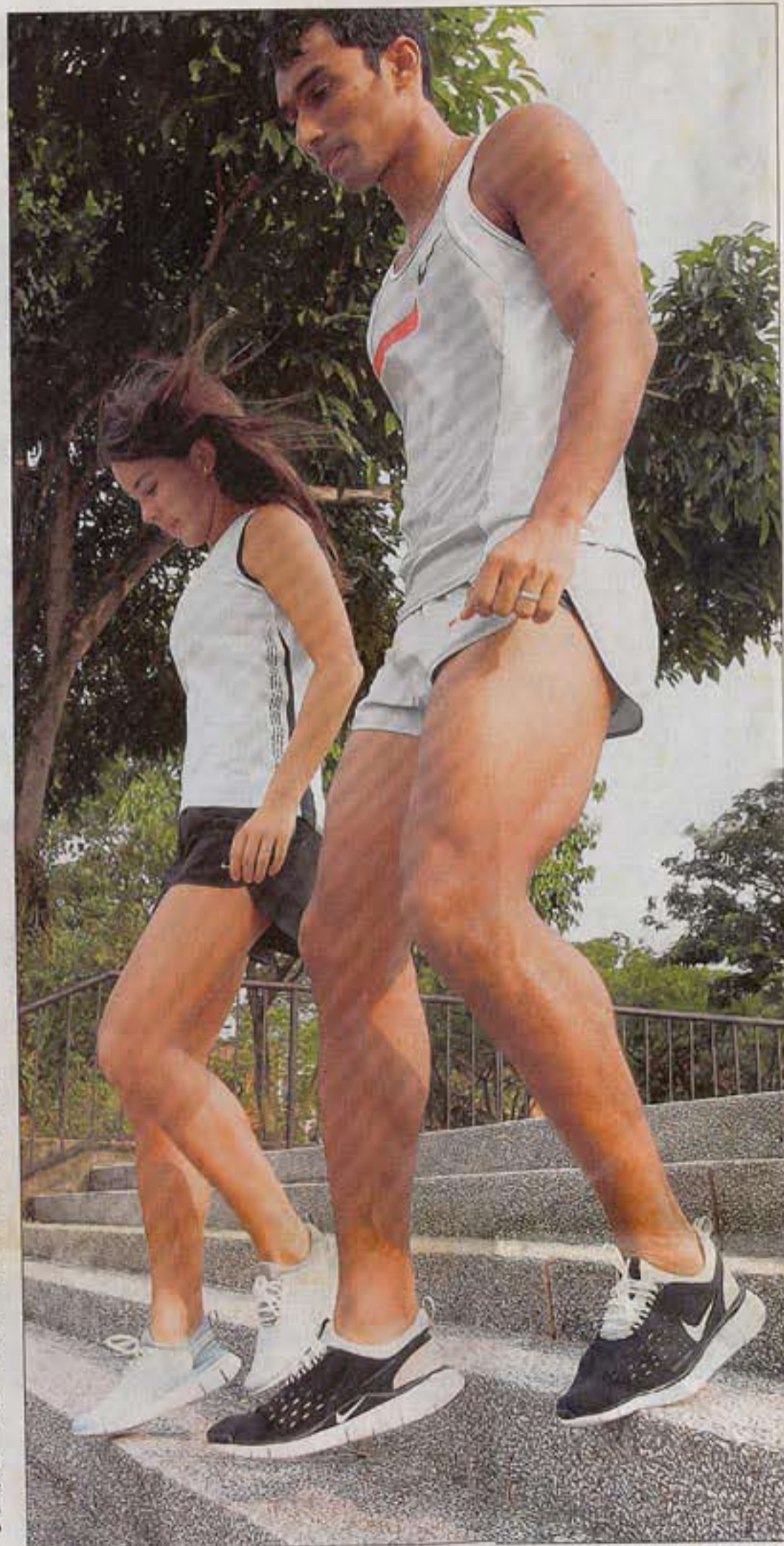


PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW

THUMBS UP: Athletes Victoria Campbell and U.K. Shyam say that the Nike Free shoes give them more control when running.

► How Nike Free is different

• Lighter. Feels almost like wearing a thick sock

• No outsole, hence less cushioning for the foot



Normal running shoe

• Flimsy upper, which provides hardly any support

• Extra grooves on the sole, which provides maximum flexibility



• No heel counter. A heel counter grips the heel and keeps it stable