

Transition: Running barefoot

By Aaron Kennard (Runner) and Sherry Litasi (CMT)

This article is a rare collaboration between a therapist and client documenting Aaron's transition from acute low back pain and tendon pain in the left knee, to running a half marathon (13 miles) in just eight weeks!

Aaron: I first went to Sherry because I was experiencing severe back pain. I could hardly bend over without wrenching pain. I could visibly see that I was leaning to one side because the muscles in my lower back were so tight. My back was visibly out of alignment.

Sherry: It was obvious that Aaron was in pain, just looking into his eyes and seeing his upper body rotation and leaning to the side. As he talked about that snow boarding accident 10 years prior, I was imagining there was a lot of scar tissue. Not a surprise, every muscle that I touched was tight and Aaron had multiple adhesions (scar tissue). For the first session, my strategy was to release as many adhesions as possible and improve range of motion.

Aaron: After this initial 90 minute visit with Sherry, my back felt much better. I looked in the mirror afterward and could see that I was standing upright again - and my back looked straight. It was a huge relief and a testimony to her ability to loosen muscles and relieve pain.

Sherry: It was great to see the difference, but I had more work to do. He didn't get in this much pain overnight, so Aaron booked for the following week.

Aaron: Yeah, visited Sherry every week for about two months. Each visit lasted between one to two hours. We focused primarily on my lower back muscles and my legs. I have wanted to deal with tendonitis pain in my knee that has stopped me from running very far for the past 11 years. The first two weeks of visiting Sherry I didn't run much because I wanted to give my back a chance to recover since it was feeling so much better than it had. In the third week of visiting Sherry I was trying to run again, but my left knee was locking up in severe pain after running just under one mile.

Sherry: Aaron's back was doing pretty well after the second week. When he returned the third week he was complaining about knee pain, having started running a few miles. Fortunately when the pain started in his knee, he stopped running and didn't push through the pain. People need to listen to the pain. So I focused on the muscles above and below the knee to relief the pressure on the tendons in his knees. I also added essential oils to facilitate healing. Aaron started using the Fomentek water bags that I recommend to heat up the area.

I don't sell many products, but I'm a huge fan of Fomentek bags to provide moist heat and promote healing. Heat is a vasodilator, getting more blood, oxygen and nutrition to the areas under stress. Yes, it's a bit controversial for runners trained to use ice after runs, however, I have seen faster recovery and more comfort when using anti-inflammatory essential oils and heat together.

Aaron: After the 4th week, I read the book 'Born to Run' by Christopher McDougall on a recommendation from a friend. It changed my entire perspective about

running. I immediately began running barefoot and found that very quickly I was able to run 5 miles without any knee pain.

Sherry: I have to admit that I was skeptical, but Aaron was so enthusiastic about the book and we had some great discussions. Ideas from the book agreed with patterns that I had seen with clients who depended on orthotics and supportive running shoes. I had already discarded my own orthotics in favor of minimal Keen sandals, so my interest was peaked. I bought the book from Audible.com and listened to it. I agreed with most of what was said.

I also gave Aaron some stretches that originated with Moshe Feldenkrais for his back. It's so important to continue with flexibility exercises and the Feldenkrais Method has some great movements that can really help the back. However, stretching without getting rid of adhesions (scar tissue) does not change the resting length of muscles. It's important to remove any impediments, like adhesions, that prevent the muscles from relaxing while at rest, and thereby healing.

Aaron: I was running with zero knee pain, but then started to have minor foot pain, and initially some major calf pain. The new form of running was using muscles that were not used before because of being encased in running shoes and because of landing on my heel as I ran. I bought some Vibram FiveFingers because I wanted to feel comfortable running outside in all conditions, and they really helped. I also ran completely barefoot some days in the gym which really helped me improve my running form. But it turned out the gym didn't allow bare feet so I was glad I had the FiveFingers which allowed me to run about as close to barefoot as possible without being barefoot.

Sherry: Yeah, the tension in Aaron's lower legs and the particular foot pain meant that this might take a while. Aaron has hammer toes and that didn't help matters. His little toe had been broken for three weeks so that gave him pain as well and wasn't healing very quickly. I gave him some Wintergreen oil for the little toe (very healing for bones) and Copaiba to layer on for inflammation. His lower leg pain and tension continued for at least 2 weeks until he changed his form yet again and the muscles became accustomed to new use also.

Aaron: Yes, but by then I was able to run 10 miles without knee pain! I read how to improve my running form on a web site called RunningBarefoot.org. I learned a lot by practicing the techniques taught there. Essentially, it taught me to not push off my feet, but to run with quicker steps, over 180 per minute, and to lift my feet with my whole legs rather than pushing hard off my toes. After implementing this, the soreness in my feet significantly decreased, and the calf soreness went away completely. Then I started having soreness in my hamstrings and upper quads because I was using those muscles much more. Each week as I experienced new soreness, I got it worked on by Sherry. I found that the muscle soreness went away relatively quickly.

Sherry: It was great to see that Aaron's lower leg pain was abating. The big muscles, like the quads, gluts, and hamstrings should be doing more of the work and should fatigue first. But when the smaller muscles in the lower legs fatigue, it means that the big muscles aren't doing the heavy lifting as they should be. Aaron's new gait was definitely helping him! From my point of view, it was a change for the better. As Aaron's muscles were recovering from the workouts they were all getting stronger.

Aaron: I was definitely stronger. My third week of running barefoot or with Vibram Five Fingers, I ran a total of 25 miles! That's not much for a runner, but from where I was it was a breakthrough. And my body and legs felt fantastic. In none of those miles did I ever feel a twinge of the knee pain that had held me back for so many years. But also, my back was feeling great, and had continued to improve each week.

Sherry: Aaron had been doing so well that we were ready to skip a week because of Thanksgiving. It's important to try to get into maintenance mode and reevaluate.

Aaron: On Thanksgiving Day I ran a half-marathon. (by myself, not a race) After 13.1 miles I felt fantastic! My fourth week barefoot running I ran a total of 27 miles, still with no knee pain. Also, my feet and legs felt completely accustomed to the new running form, and I no longer experienced any muscle pain as I ran.

Six days later I ran another 13 miles in the snow with my wife. This was six days after my Thanksgiving run. It was interesting to learn that running in the snow with just Vibram FiveFingers wasn't even uncomfortable. It turns out there is so much blood pumping to the feet that I was able to run comfortably in 6 inches of snow for over 2 hours. And a benefit was that without soles on my feet, I was a lot more stable on the uneven terrain. My wife Nan was wearing running shoes, and nearly twisted her ankles multiple times on the rocky trails. But I didn't have the same challenge being nearly barefoot.

Sherry: What a surprise when I learned Aaron had run another 13 miles in the snow with just the Vibram 5 fingers and no socks! But the big surprise was to come when I found that his gluteus maximus, minimus and medius were hypertonic (they had not been previously). I moved to Aaron's IT band and I was shocked at how visibly tight it was – it looks like "shrink wrap". I've seen this sort of condition on people with a lot of knee pain.

After applying my favorite "deep relaxation" essential oil, Idaho Balsam Fir, both the gluts and IT band began to relax. It took longer than last time, but when the gluts could relax, the tension on the IT band was reduced. Thinking about the run, the hill climb of 1500 feet really stressed his gluts and in turn, the IT band. The combination of the hill, the snow, and twice as much running time, and it could have been a disaster for Aaron running in shoes.

Aaron: For the moment I'm going to back off a bit – run shorter distances and build up endurance and strength without causing undo stress on the glutes... and Sherry will continue to work on me about every two weeks.

I don't feel any pain in my back anymore, which I attribute to the help from Sherry in combination with barefoot running and stretching. Now I'm really excited about being able to run long distances. I have wanted to do long distance trail and road running for 10 years now, and now I finally feel like I can do it without getting injured which is very motivating and empowering.

I keep a record and description of all of my runs at <http://www.aaronkennard.com> You're welcome to check it out to see my progress if you would like. My short term goal is to run 30 miles on my 30th birthday (Feb 2010).

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