CHOOSE your WEAPON

Pick your shoes for AR and trail running carefully

TOP ORTHOPAEDIC TIPS:
• **Try on shoes at the end of the day** When you've been up and walking for a few hours, your feet have collected more fluid in them and are slightly larger than in the morning. • **Re-measure your feet each time you buy new shoes.** Your shoe size can change over time. Brands and even models vary in fit, so don't buy a shoe based on size alone - try them on!

A woman called to ask me to recommend a trail shoe brand and model to her for running Cape Odyssey in October. Instead of a recommendation, she got a lecture on choosing shoes.

Trail, or off-road shoes have a tread more chunky and aggressive than road shoes increase traction over a variety of surfaces (rock, grass, sand, mud, gravel). The firm upper is usually darker in colour (to hide the dirt!) with reinforced stitching for durability and protective toe bumpers. They generally have a lower-profile (you gain less height and your foot sits closer to the ground) than road shoes to prevent ankle twists. Most shoes have a midsole plate to protect your sole from injury and bruising (thorn penetration, rocky surfaces). Overall, trail shoes have a more supportive and protective structure; and cushioning is reduced, as off-road surfaces are softer than tar.

Fit

I can put my foot in a shoe and know immediately whether I'm going to like it, without taking it for a run. Things that press the red-light button are seams and midsole bumps where they doesn't feel natural; constrictions around the forefoot, just behind the toes; too little space in the toebox to wiggle my toes a little; and too much space in the heel cup, such that every time I take a step I can feel my heel sliding up and down. Running and trail shoes do *not* need to be broken in.

Take your favourite off-road running SOCKS with you to the store. Socks make a BIG difference to fit and comfort.

Look for a secure fit in the heel and arch, with more room in the forefoot and toe area. Remember that lacing also makes a big difference to fit so lace the shoes properly in the store (loose laces lower down adds forefoot space). Move your foot into a downhill position to feel whether the rear heel tab jabs into your Achilles and your toes whack the toe box.

Although brands do have reputations for attributes like fit (narrow fit: Brooks, Nike, Asics and Puma; wider toe box: Adidas and Saucony; accommodating: Montrail, Salomon, New Balance), do not rely on rumours or recommendations from friends. Try all of them for yourself. Girls, women's shoes generally have a narrow heel with narrow longer, slimmer toe box; and the sizes usually stop at UK8. Don't be scared to try on men's shoes – I've been running in them for years.

Line up all the shoes that pass this foot-in-feel test and then consider the following.

Neutral vs stability

Most trail shoes are neutral, with mild midsole stability elements to prevent ankle twists. They are not full-blown stability shoes. When you run off-road, your feet need to roll inward and outward according to the surface. For this reason trail shoes do not try to limit your foot's movement with hard-core stability posts. Most inner soles can be removed to accommodate orthotics; but not all. Check before buying.

Laces and lacing

Salomon has their distinct *Quicklace* system; most other brands use traditional lacing setups – with slight variations in angle, length, number of eyelets and eyelet positioning. There are also different types of laces: flat, bubble, rope-like, elliptical, round… Fortunately you can change the laces if you don't like the originals.

Sole (midsole and outsole)

Aggressive tread patterns are most suitable if you regularly run on single track, rock, mud and sand, surfaces where traction is needed. Rocky surfaces are a little different; softer outsole materials give better grip – but they wear more quickly than harder treads. So it is a toss-up between traction and durability.

If your regular route takes you over rocky ground, you'll need a forefoot protection from a midsole plate, a good toe bumper and aggressive tread. On forest trails. shoes with good cushioning, traction and stability are top priority.

The distances you run should also be considered. Over long distances – like off-road ultra runs, adventure races and rogaines - you'll appreciate good cushioning and support. The downside is that softer midsoles and complex support systems cost a few more pennies and they don't last as long as less expensive shoes with stiff midsoles and less cushioning. Think about this when you're budgeting for 1-4 pairs of shoes a year at R700-R1200 each.

Lighter, low-profile shoes with aggressive outsoles are suited to fast, agile runners.

Upper

Off-road shoes with lots of mesh let in sand and grit. But they're cooler and more breathable and they dry quickly.

Look for shoes with little or no leather overlays on the upper. Goretex versions of shoes are available; but remember that although Goretex keeps dew out, it also keeps sweat in.

The toe bumper is another important feature, especially if you regular run over rocky terrain where toe stubs are likely. Some bumpers are barely there – others are too firm and broad.

There is no best brand or best shoe. With experience you'll learn about your preferences for terrain and conditions, which will make later decisions easier. And even then, forget brands and what your friend says. Let your feet choose.

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