

The story of the five fingers

A 'revealing' interview with Robert Fliri in Milan, 2006



ND: It is seven years ago that you had the idea for what is now Vibram's Five Fingers. Can you tell us something about how that idea was born and what you did to make it happen ?

RF: It was in the summer of '99 and nothing was clear for me at that time, but I had good emotions that spring and summer and I was open to try out everything. I lived in the mountains, where I worked with my body the whole week, as a lumberjack. In the evenings I would go biking or walking and in the weekends I would go up to the summit. My body was really strong. On mountain treks I often took off my shoes and tried to walk barefoot for ten minutes or so, but I had no hard skin and felt unprotected. After only a few meters I was afraid to hurt myself. So I could feel this great power from the body, but I was unable to go on.

This caused a great desire to walk barefoot in the mountains, but without the fear of hurting myself. So I started to think.

I was in my first year of the design school in Bolzano and one of my professors started a project: sports is fun. It was about sports as leisure, not as a profession or a power-thing. I decided to work on my idea of going barefoot protected and with this professor I tried out all kinds of solutions. Instinctively I knew it had to be a glove. We have five toes: when they can move and grasp the ground independently, and when you can really sense the surface under your feet, your body is able to do what it is designed for by nature. That is a powerful feeling. But a good professor will tell you it is impossible, so I tried a lot of other options, like putting different toes together. But even with very thin material, like ladies tights, I would still feel the little resistance it causes and it was not like barefoot. So in the end I did create a glove for the foot ...

Was it difficult to develop the five fingers or did you get a lot of support?

There were times that I thought "I quit", not because of the product as such, but because of the environment I worked in. The concept is totally new and very different from what is usual in the footwear-industry. I had to fight for every step on the road. I had to convince the people I worked with that it had to be a glove and that a glove is not a shoe. Shoe-people think a shoe needs shock absorption,

cushioning, support. Innovation for them means more spacy material, more technology – but not a totally different concept. So it was difficult for people to accept. But I was also very fortunate. I had the opportunity to work in the special office of Vibram's owner, where we have a platform to develop the five-fingers. Sometimes you just have to decide to do something and go on with it, but it is a risk of course, also economically. So it was tough keeping to my original ideas. But every time I had the chance to walk and run barefoot, I came back to the idea and said, okay, go on. It is a good motivation. For me it is very satisfying to feel my body working. And of course, after the conception of an idea, it is always just hard work and you will encounter problems. But we hope this will be a sustainable product on the market, so that we can support further development and make it better every time.

What distinguishes this five finger's concept from a normal shoe?

The biggest difference is the five toes which make the foot move like in nature and you have much more body-smartness. You can move and feel better, and have more power. With the five-fingers every toe can spread out and work independently from the others, grasp the ground, feel the ground. Totally different from a shoe where the toes are stuck together, even if the sole of the shoe is very thin and flexible. It is very joyful to move around on the five-fingers, you will become really happy to move. Your movements will be more flexible, more supple. For example if you walk in the mountains on heavy boots, you loose around 20% of your energy to the shoes, because of their weight, their stiffness and the impossibility to move your feet. On the five-fingers that doesn't happen. I experienced myself, you just want to go up and up. When I see a rock or a tree, I want to climb it. It makes you very playful and energetic.

You have to be a little careful though, because our bodies are not used to go barefoot for a long time. In the beginning you have to allow your body to adjust to the new freedom. Your muscles have to strengthen. You need to develop a new way of walking. With time all the muscles of your legs become stronger and your sense of equilibrium increases. The great advantage of the five-fingers is that the foot works with every muscle, receptor, nerve, so that all your muscles become stronger and not just one, while the others stay weak. It also improves your grounding.

What we communicate to people who buy the five-fingers is to first go entirely barefoot for a few minutes. The body needs this to reset and forget the shoes. You cannot move with this product as on shoes, because it is not natural having the entire impact on the heel. The heel is a great shock-absorber, but you have to take your weight in a good balance between heel and forefoot. When you run barefoot you even take the whole impact on the forefoot. Walking is quite simple, but running needs training. Don't over-stress your body, especially in the first period when you are learning to use them. In the first year I was wearing these shoes, old mountaineers said I was crazy, because I was on these flat, low shoes, instead of on high, heavy boots. Among mountaineers, young and old,

there is one rule: wear high shoes, over the ankle. That is true for normal shoes. With a rigid, hard sole your feet cannot adjust to the uneven surface and you can sprain your ankle. With a thick sole, you're suspended from the ground and when there is an unevenness and you go out over the side, you're not warned by your senses in the forefeet. Barefoot, that never happens. Your body is too smart. Whenever you risk losing your balance, the senses in the forefoot will register it and your muscles will adjust. The sign doesn't even need to travel all the way up to the brain. Every sense of misbalance will go directly to the muscles and they will adapt themselves. Your body knows perfectly well what is going on - in a way you become more animal-like.

JT: What I think about shock-absorption is that when you have it, you can walk with a heavy heel on the floor. But when you don't have it, you have to be kind to the floor, and one way to be kind is to use your pelvis. If the pelvis doesn't move completely, you hit the ground in a heavy way, but if the pelvis modulates, you don't have this strong hit on the ground. With shoes like the five fingers you either hurt yourself, or you learn to walk with the pelvis. While on normal shoes you are forgiven and lose the need to move like this. You get spoiled in a way, and blocked. RF: I agree. When I walked these shoes for the first time in the city, I thought "maybe I look a little "gay...".

What about using them in the city? Do you recommend it?

Well, sometimes I use them in the city, but it is not perfect. You better take good leather shoes with cushioned heels. The city's surface is too flat, the feet cannot adapt to the ground and your body is not happy to walk like that. Maybe it will find some joy in feeling the different materials of the tram, the train, the pavement, but it is not as nice as when every step is different. Our body has evolved in a chaotic natural environment. It is only in the last thousand or so years that we have created an artificial world and we still have not adapted.

For me it was interesting to experience this, when running down a mountain. You'd actually better not to do that because it is heavy for your knees and for your whole body - but when you are a trained you can do it. So when I run down a mountain and the terrain is natural - here is stone, there is a stone, etc .. - my body is in control and it is working really well. When I run down a stairs, I have problems. I asked myself if this was because I was a child of the mountain and I worked in these mountains every day or that it had a different reason? I believe the latter. For us humans the memory of the brain works like this: when it sees a stone, which has a chaotic form ... it recognizes it - some curve, some form - and it can distinguish it from another stone, which is equally chaotic, but has another form, another shape. On a stairway every step is the same, so you do not have this really fast and instinctive way to recognize and control.

What do you think about Nike Free and Masai Barefoot Technology?

The nice thing about Nike Free is that it is very light-weight and flexible. But the toes are still together in one pocket, which makes it a compromise. The five fingers is not a compromise. Nike Free is a nice idea but it is not barefoot, because it has shock absorption. It can be smart on the hard surface of the urban environment, but it is not barefoot.

I tried Nike Free in the mountains but I got no sensations from the ground underneath my feet. In the city it is a good approach, but in the natural environment I don't see much difference with a normal shoe. They are light, they are flexible, okay, but many skills of the feet or the body are not supported by them.

Masai is interesting, because I think it is used in the same way as the five fingers. When it is used with the right consciousness, it is a good thing. But the Masai are still not my choice, for two reasons. First you are very far away from the ground. My first impression was like I was on platform soles. The good thing is that you have to learn a new and maybe better way of walking, but when you have learned that and you go on, every step you take is the same. Even more then with a normal shoe, because on the MBT you cannot do anything else. You have to do it like the shoe prescribes. In the first place that is pretty boring and second it is not possible for the body to play. It is good to use it as a fitness centre, like they promote the shoe, but it is the only way to move. And the best thing is changing, playing.

JT: Galen Cranz uses the same argument for chairs: the best ones are those in which you cannot always sit in the same way, but in which you can move. It is natural for the body to change. A perfect ergonomic chair that keeps you in the same position all the time is worse then a hard one, like the Bauhaus chairs. They are not perfect ergonomically, but they make you move around. You have to adapt.

Do you think the market is ready for this product?

Maybe not. Because working and thinking with the body is not a common thing yet. But things change. We are now creating five fingers for indoor use, with a thinner sole and we are also developing aqua-socks for use in water. People also ask me if we can do them for children. Well, I say, maybe in the future this will be technically possible, but actually I think this product is more suited for adults. As adults we are growing older every day and we become more closed off, even in our movements. Children are playing. They do the same thing in a different way every time. We as adults do the same thing in the same way. I say with this shoe you will be happy on chaotic surfaces, it will inspire you to explore and discover something and play with it. You will receive pleasure by moving, which is a good thing for adults. Children are playing anyway, shoe or no shoe. We are not playing, so it is better for us. At least, that is my opinion.

Nelleke Don (ND) and Jader Tolja (JT) spoke with Robert Fliri (RF) in Milan in 2006.

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