

The Running Life: The Stuff Dreams are Made Of

Confessions of a Gear Goddess

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Like many others who started running later in life, one of the reasons the sport appealed to me was its basic simplicity. With no learning curve, no team to join, and no expensive equipment to invest in, I had the opportunity, literally, to hit the ground running. In the beginning I ran in my brothers oversized sweatshirt, my own aged sweatpants, and pink, ankle-high Reebok aerobic shoes with huge, slouchy cotton socks. For months I could be seen on the roads of my neighborhood swathed in 100 percent cotton everything. Almost overnight, I became a runner. Because I ran alone, I was uninfluenced and unconnected to running culture.

Eight months later, the day before my first marathon, I found myself wandering awestruck through the Marine Corps Marathon expo. As far as the eye could see, there were booths filled with endless sports bounty. I found shorts that looked nothing like the winter sweats I had cut off at the knees when Washingtons sultry summer made running an exercise in survival. These shorts were tiny and sleek, with a built-in liner, offered in colors from subdued to neon. The expo was a revelation. I was introduced to singlets and shimmels, tights and T-shirts. I found wafer-thin socks and waist packs that held water bottles for long runs. There were huge booths with mounds of sport sunglasses, bins full of hats and gloves, bars and gels, and every kind of watch imaginable. These watches measured pace, counted laps, woke you up in the morning, and, oh yeah, told time.

And the shoes: Who knew there were so many different kinds? Did I pronate? Did I supinate? Did I need a shoe with support or cushioning? Should I consider a racing flat or make do with a trainer? The reaction to my pink aerobic shoes, which by that time had been run flat and thin, was universal. Each person who saw them somehow managed to convey a reaction that was equal parts horror and amusement. That day my purchase of head-to-toe running gear marked the beginning of an inexorable process. The seed was sown and from that seed sprouted a minor gear deity. I became steeped in the culture of running stuff. It would take the impact of more than a decade for me to turn into a fully formed Gear Goddess.

For some people running provides, among its myriad benefits, a refuge from consumer culture. They steadfastly refuse to spend time or money chasing the coolest clothing or the latest technical breakthroughs in shoe design. While I understand and respect this point of view, since my first expo experience, advances in running apparel and accessories have captured my imagination. Developments in technology, nutrition and fashion make me eager to learn how they can make me faster, healthier, and, OK, I admit it, cuter. Not that I'm an easy mark, mind you. It can take months or years for me to acknowledge the benefits of the latest technology. From the outset, I decried the use of CD or MP3 players on the run. Last year my son gave me an iPod for Christmas, and my life has been forever changed for the better. While I still run free outside, on nasty days when a treadmill provides my only running option, my iPod gets me through the workout with a smile on my face.

Whether by design or default, *Running Times* Editor at Large Jim Gerweck and I have become the go-to gear gurus at the office. With the aid and abetment of other RT edit staff, we sift through an astonishing number of products, some of which we review or display on these pages. Sorting the detritus of the offerings and managing to cull the most useful, most efficient, or most ingenious can go from the ridiculous to the sublime in no time. Early in my gear career, a staggering array of socks came into the office for an upcoming apparel guide. Each was carefully numbered on the toe and edit staffers were assigned six or eight pairs for review. We were to wear and launder the socks over the course of a few weeks and carefully evaluate each pair. My eye rolling and sarcasm signaled my obvious disdain to my colleagues.

It seemed impossible that a pair of socks could make a significant difference in my running experience. But over the course of a month I was reminded of how a very small change in apparel could profoundly affect my ability to perform. Something as simple as a pair of socks can make or break a run. If socks could do that, imagine the impact of a perfectly fitted, chafe-free running bra, or compression tights that warm and support muscles, or an energy bar with just the right balance of carbs and protein. Think of how much better a run on a bright day would be with sunglasses that protect your eyes, fit your head, and make you look fierce. Imagine the benefit of training smarter with an easy-to-use heart rate monitor.

While most runners would agree that when it comes to running apparel, form and function trumps fashion, many of us still love to follow trends in what we wear on the roads and trails. As the lines between sportswear and everyday clothing becomes less defined, well-designed, great fitting running clothes become a more important component of our wardrobes. Besides, I'd rather

spend money on running gear than on work clothes any day.

If necessity is the mother of invention, runners have proved to be clever mothers indeed. Technology, design, and new ideas have helped us stay fit, fashionable, and injury-free better able to appreciate the running life.

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