

## The Masai Anti-Cellulite Plan By WILLIAM GRIMES

**THE shoe is no beauty.** With its thick, convex sole, it looks like something designed for Elton John in a sporty mood. And the name, Masai Barefoot Technology, is a doozy. You can't play basketball or tennis in it. Running at top speed is probably not a good idea either. Even climbing a flight of stairs can be tricky. But the MBT, as it's called, sells like hot cakes in Europe, and now it has found a toehold, so to speak, in the United States, where it has been a sellout item in the Bliss spa catalog, thanks to its billing as "the anti-cellulite sneaker."



Cellulite was not on the original agenda of the MBT's creator, Karl Müller, a Swiss engineer, who developed it as a way to relieve joint pain. Named in tribute to the long-striding Masai of East Africa, the MBT has been sold in Switzerland and Germany as a quasi-medical product. But in Britain a health writer named Harriet Griffey changed all that. She tried a pair and, in *The Times* of London, wrote that simply by wearing them and going about her daily rounds, she saw her cellulite disappear as if by magic. Under the headline "Cellulite Busters," the article created a whole new identity for the shoe. A cult was born.

I have no cellulite, but my feet certainly hurt after a hard day of pounding the pavement in New York. My posture is poor, too. I have the slope-shouldered profile of modern urban man, oppressed by anxiety and weighed down by existential burdens. The MBT, sometimes referred to as the anti-shoe, sounded as if it was worth a try. Nancy, my wife, volunteered her cellulite as part of the experiment.

There are 10 outlets in and around New York that sell MBT's. Some are shoe stores. Others, like the Breathing Project in Chelsea, are yoga or Pilates centers. We headed down to Eneslow, a specialty shoe store in the Flatiron district, which carried three styles: casual, sport and sandal, all of them unisex. We settled on casual, which looked marginally less hideous than sport or sandal.

Buying the shoe is the easy part, once you get past the idea of paying \$250 for sneakers. Then comes the training. With each pair of MBT's, the buyer should in theory receive a ticket for an MBT class and an instructional DVD. I got only the DVD, because the company was just beginning to establish a network of training centers in New York. By doing a little research, however, I found that I could take a class at the Breathing Project.

The shoe feels strange at first. The top two-thirds of it look like a fairly orthodox running shoe, but the sole is bizarre. Two inches thick at the midpoint of the heel, it tapers gradually toward the toe and swoops upward at the rear, creating a cutoff effect. The wearer steps down on the fat part of the heel, the "sweet spot," and a springy sensor bounces back, encouraging the foot to roll forward toward the toe.

This, we are told, is the gait of the Masai people, renowned for walking great distances as they move their herds of cattle across the savannas of Kenya and Tanzania. They have no apparent cellulite.

I took an exploratory walk around the neighborhood, struggling a bit to keep my ankles steady and my feet rolling in a straight line. I quickly gained control and began to enjoy the shoe. I did feel a little as if I were walking on stilts or riding in an S.U.V., but the roll and bounce in my walk felt efficient and purposeful. Supported by umpteen layers of rubber, a fiberglass-carbon plate and something called technical textile, my feet luxuriated like an insomniac on a Serta Perfect Sleeper. After a good long walk, I experienced no calf or thigh fatigue. My feet felt fine, except for the soles, which ached. This was a new sensation.

Leslie Kaminoff, the president of the Breathing Project, explained why my soles hurt. "It's because the intrinsic muscles of the foot are being used the way they're supposed to," he said. Years of walking on flat surfaces had caused my intrinsic muscles to go dormant, a bad thing. "The problem with losing intrinsic strength is that it connects to abdominal support," Mr. Kaminoff said. In a kind of physiological domino effect, the weakness travels all the way up the body, resulting in bad posture.

I am putty in the hands of people like Mr. Kaminoff. I have no countertheory to offer. If he tells me my problems begin with my intrinsic foot muscles, which I was not aware I had, I just nod my head in agreement the way I do when a mechanic tells me that my camshaft is tilted 10 degrees off-center and my engine needs to be rebuilt.

Mr. Kaminoff turned me over to Rebecca Runze, a sales representative for Swiss Masai, the company that makes the Masai Barefoot Technology. Ms. Runze analyzed my gait, then put me through a few exercises to correct my overlong stride. Evidently, my knee was getting too far ahead of my foot. Or maybe it was the other way around. In a nearby room, a dozen pregnant women were getting a sales talk on the MBT as they finished a yoga class. Cellulite was Topic A.

The company does not quite know how to deal with the cellulite issue. "Really, we prefer to emphasize that the shoe helps tone your muscles and improve posture," said Ms. Runze, who used the shoe to help restore her balance after suffering an injury that did severe damage to the left side of her body. In the pregnancy class also, the instructor tried to bring a little sanity to the discussion. "Your cellulite will look different, but it will not disappear," she said. At the same time, Swiss Masai does make sure that its press material includes a reprint of the "Cellulite Busters" article. It is just too good to pass up. The sad fact is that cellulite is more powerful than any shoe. "It's anatomy," said Dr. James M. Spencer, the vice chairman of dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York. "Ninety-five percent of women over 35 have it, and the other 5 percent think they do. It's normal." And, he added, unalterable.

After a few weeks with the shoe, I asked my wife to weigh in, as it were, on this issue. Nancy delivered a mixed report. "At first, I could swear I saw some cellulite disappear, but then it seemed to come back," she said. She acknowledged that it might have been an optical illusion.

On the other hand, her back felt great. A painter, she stands for hours a day in front of an easel and comes home with an aching back. The shoe seemed to help. A study completed last week at the University of Calgary, with financing from Swiss Masai, found that the MBT does decrease the "load" on knees and hips compared with standard running shoes.

I too could see some differences, although it was hard to draw any scientific conclusions. Did I look more toned and feel more energetic because of the shoe, or because I was walking more to test out the shoe? Hard to say. It is impossible to be an experimental subject and a control group at the same time. I really did notice a difference in my posture when I wore the shoe, and it seemed to carry over, at least temporarily, on days when I did not wear the shoe.

Dr. Thomas M. DeLauro, a podiatrist who teaches at the New York College of Podiatric Medicine, said that he was puzzled by the MBT. The idea of a rocker sole, he said, is nothing new. Podiatrists use it for patients with injuries to the front of the foot or who have an ankle in a cast. The rocking motion can help compensate for immobility and allow patients to move without putting stress on injured joints. But the foot in its normal state is flexible and adaptable. "Why you'd benefit from this shoe seems mysterious," Dr. DeLauro said.

About that name. Mr. Müller, the creator of the Masai Barefoot Technology, may be a little confused about the Masai. For one thing, says James ole Tira, a Masai who travels the world as an unofficial ambassador for the tribe, only women and children walk barefoot. Young males walk in a sort of cowskin wrapper. As a rite of passage, adult males receive a sandal with a sole made from tire rubber. While it is true that the Masai walk over uneven surfaces, it is not clear why the shoe should seek to replicate the sensation of a foot in sand, as its advertising literature says.

"The Masai walk on grassland," Mr. Tira said. But they do have excellent posture. And now, so do I. At least, I think I do.



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