

## A Muse on Shoes

By Dave McGovern

As this is **WALK!** Magazine's shoe review issue, I was inspired to write about our collective love of walking shoes. Or is it just me who gets emotionally bonded with my athletic footwear? When Nike discontinued the Air Skylon Light, I felt the same sense of heartbreak and betrayal as when Veronica Raba broke up with me behind the library in the eighth grade. And when New Balance announced they were changing the MRW100 racewalk shoe, was I the only one who felt like I just witnessed my dog getting run over by the UPS truck? Maybe so. But I don't for a minute believe that I'm the only walker on this planet who becomes somewhat irrationally attached to his shoes somewhere between that first whiff of new-glue smell as the shoes first emerge from the box, and that first moment of painful realization that the end is nigh when the first small patch of ghostly white mid-sole makes its appearance through the newly formed hole in the low-carbon-rubber outsole.

I remember my first pair of "real" athletic shoes as clearly as my first car or first kiss. I was a runner back in junior high school, and the goofy-looking pair of bright orange Marshall's specials I wore to my first seventh grade cross-country practice didn't exactly earn me the awe and admiration of my peers. (And if a pack of scrawny junior high cross-country runners thinks you're a geek, you're really doing something wrong!)

The next day, out of sheer embarrassment, I raided my piggy bank and carried a crumpled wad of paper-route money to school. At practice I peeled off from the rest of the runners at the turnaround point of our 4-mile loop and kept running all the way to Marty's Sporting



Goods, the Mecca at the time for all the serious local runners. I found a pair of Onitsuka Tigers that were highly rated by Runner's World that year. I gulped at the \$30 price tag, but plunked my money down out of a mix of peer pressure and fear of the crippling injuries I was led to believe my el Cheapo shoes would surely inflict upon me.

My old shoes were summarily deposited in the Dumpster behind the store and I ran back to school in my new Runner's World-approved Tigers. I ... was ... in ... HEAVEN!

The next day at practice I collected the well-earned "attaboys" of the eighth graders and embarked on a school-year-long love affair with my Tigers. I wore them through rain and snow and dark of night, long past their useful life, ushering them into an ignoble afterlife as they were relegated to the ranks of "lawn-mowing shoes" the following summer.

That first pair of "real" shoes was replaced by another, and another, and another, each new pair earning a slightly diminished level of ardor than the one before. But occasionally passion was reignited: Who could forget the Asics X-caliber GTs with the gold mylar stripes on the uppers; the adidas racewalk shoes with their suede uppers and rock-solid mid-soles; the Nike Air Streak Lights with the cool Japanese kanji symbol for "speed" sewn into the tongue; or those long-gone New Balance MRW100 racewalkers?

To the sedentary observer, such emotional attachment to inanimate objects must seem a bit peculiar. Or pathetic. But to walkers passionate about their pedestrian pursuits, it makes perfect sense. And if you agree with the view that we walkers share an addiction, then you must also admit that we tend to surround ourselves with coteries of enablers: training partners who show off their latest acquisitions, internet chat groups abuzz with advice on the best shoes and where to get them for the lowest price, and race expo dealers who push their wares on us, their willing con'shoe'mers.

As walkers, our shoes are our fortunes. And whether we spend a fortune on them, or we revel in our thriftiness as we hunt for last season's closeout specials in the back of the running shoe catalogs\*, we shouldn't feel self-conscious about our attachment to our walking shoes. I know of an octogenarian who still has a petrified slice of her wedding cake squirreled away in the back of her refrigerator. Now that's odd. Me? I'm just sentimental. But who wouldn't feel a little love for a pair of old friends who walks with you for an hour or more per day, day in and day out?

After nearly 30 years of walking and running, I still love that new-shoe smell, and still get a touch of Christmas-morning giddiness when a new pair of shoes arrives in the mail. Even so, nothing will ever top the feeling of proudly running back to school in my first pair of "real" athletic shoes, and probably nothing ever will. Will Onitsuka, then, be my "Rosebud?" And you? On your death bed, will you whisper Tiger Paw? Or Phantom? Or Hersey? Turn to page 3 for what could be the start of a beautiful relationship.♦

**Dave McGovern** is a member of the U.S. National Racewalking Team and the author of **The Complete Guide to Racewalking** and **The Complete Guide to Marathon Walking**.

\*Check out the latest shoes deals on Dave's web site: [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org)

## World Class Racewalking Training Camp

October 31-November 4, 2007

At the USA Triathlon National Training Center, Clermont, FL (Orlando area)

Fee: \$725 (Includes first-class lodging, meals, Triathlon Training Center facility use, airport transport, etc., etc., etc.)

For more information or a registration form, go to [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org).