



Shoes

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by Ross Weiter

The author is a proud owner of 5 pairs of climbing shoes (some worn out but still good for dunking in water at Blackwall Reach.)

Thinkin' about forkin' out two hundred bucks for a new pair of banana shoes to take to Mount Cuthbert ? Fancy a pair of sturdy hard Boreal Aces for Bob's Hollow ?

.....**STOP !!!**

Do not be a victim of pretty colours, rampant advertising and fawning of magazine reviewers (mags get paid lots of \$\$\$ to advertise shoes, hint, hint).

This article reviews important aspects of shoe construction and how they relate to climbing technique. It will hopefully provide some food for thought to stop you from wasting hard-earned credit on the wrong shoes.

OK - for best performance, you need to marry the right type of technique with the right type of shoe. Only that way, a long lasting bond will result (or at least one lasting long enough to place some good protection !!). Here goes:

Smearing (frictioning on fairly blank rock) – the purpose is to put the maximum amount of rubber in contact with blank rock. The sole should mold around any irregularities such as crystals and tiny edges. To do all this you will need flat & soft soled shoes. Toes should not be curled at all or only a little bit.

At home: Mt Cuthbert, Mt Frankland

Edging – the purpose is to transmit your body weight to the front of the toes and press them down to stand up on thin edges or large individual crystals. The shoe needs to concentrate your body weight onto the front of the toes and on both sides of the front of the foot. A sling-shot rand and a stiffened mid-sole is good for beginners who have less foot power.

These shoes should be tighter than smearing shoes as bunched-up toes grip way better by directing the pressing power down - equivalent to crimping on holds with fingers.

However, on the contrary, some expert outdoor climbers can edge with very soft shoes and may prefer soft rubber as this lets them go by “feel” (feeling if the shoe is slipping off the edge, “feel” improves with a softer shoe). They can do this because they have strong feet and honed calf muscles !

Width is important – the shoe must not be too wide else it will roll around the foot. Any roll kills edging.

At home: Plaque face at Toodyay Boulders, Churchman's, Urban Ethics face in Mountain Quarry.

Crack climbing – smearing shoes will do. Edging shoes may be unusable in a thin crack (they will not fit in if the toes are bunched too much) or too painful (try locking your toe-knuckles into a crack !). But given the near absence of crack climbing in this state, don't worry about this one too much.

At home: some routes at West Cape Howe

Overhangs/pockets – You need something that will let your foot press down when the bod is hanging away from the rock - viva la banana shoe ! Banana shoes are bent mutant things made on a curved last - the idea is to transmit most pressing power to the big toe. They will let you press into shallow pockets and conserve arm strength so you too can sport climb like a dungeon master !

The bad news is that they are utterly useless for slab climbing and quite painful.

At home: Bob's Hollow, Wallcliffe.

Big wall – you need shoes that will support you for hundreds of metres and all sorts of terrain. Study, flat lasted, internally lined shoes with quite stiff soles are best. Alternatively, any well worn-in, comfortable shoe will do, really!

At home: Bluff Knoll, Peak Charles.

Gym climbing – Indoor climbing is very tolerant of shoes. There is no such thing as a smear or a desperate edge in a gym - this just cannot be made from epoxy resin! Get a thin, soft, comfortable shoe that you can wear forever; alternatively pension off your old rock shoes to work as gym shoes.

Slippers are convenient and great, but so are soft lace-ups. I have a pair of LaSportiva Mythos that I can wear for 3 hours straight. I would not dream of wearing them on rock though, these days they are way too stretched !

That's it, in a nutshell. If you are an expert climber, you may have slightly different opinions – all good

and well, if you know what you are doing, this article is probably not for you anyway!

Fear not, there is no need to rush out and spend big on lots of freaky shoes for every special application. Most climbs require the use of several techniques anyway. Some hints:

Beginner or intermediate outdoor climbers are best served by a pair of moderately stiff, sturdy-built, flat-soled shoes. Forget new-fangled super-shoes. You will not climb any better in them, your feet will hurt more and they will last shorter since they are lightly built.

Experienced climbers: a lot of WA climbs (and everything near Perth) require a combination of smearing and edging. For this reason, my personal preferred shoe is a quite (not very) soft shoe, with a flat sole and a stiff "chisel" front, sized for bunched up toes.

Gym climbers: if you have no intention of ever climbing rock then get something convenient and more comfy for the gym, a slipper is ideal.

A note on size and wearing in: soft-soled, unlined shoes without cross-stitching will stretch - a lot. Hard soled, lined, cross-stitched shoes will stretch a little. Every shoe will stretch at least a bit so take this into consideration, but do not buy a shoe that is too painful after wearing it for one minute in a shop ! Also, if the shoe does not have an insole, the front sole will soften up a lot.

Shape is as important as size. Some manufacturers traditionally make wide shoes, while others make skinny ones. Try them all on first. For example, I wear 5.10 Razors; this shoe softens up a lot when worn in but keeps the front chisel shape. It also fits my wide foot.

Resoles: once the rubber starts wearing through all shoes can be resoled. Contact Grant Edwards on 9447 3670 for all yer re-soling needs.

Occasionally, you will run into an expert rock climber tearing up a grade 24 on an old pair of home-resoled dinosaur shoes with the big toe sticking out up front. What is going on ?

.....well,.....ehm,.....it's not all in the shoes, ya know !