The Shoe for You

It's the single biggest topic at any trail run or mountain race. Every runner has a different opinion. What shoe is best for trail running? But despite never ending opinion and argument there is no answer, because as Michael Jacques points out, the best shoe is always going to be the one that suits you and your next race!

Every runner is different and every race is different, and as such there is no best shoe. In fact, with ever-advancing technology there is no longer such a thing as a bad shoe. A cheap entry level shoe today is as good as an advanced shoe from 20 years ago. So the trick to trail running shoes is working out what shoe suits you and then working out if that shoe is suitable for the races and runs you do. A good running shoe retailer will help work out the best options for you, but here are a few tips to get you started:

Personal Fit
Feet are like finger prints; every foot is shaped differently so a shoe that works for your mate might can be potentially unstable and even cause injury for you.

The shape of your foot is easily addressed by drawing around it on cardboard & comparing it to the shoe shape. If you have low arches, avoid shoes that have big cut-out areas under the arch. If you have high arches make sure the shoes is very flexible. If you have troublesome heels and Achilles tendons avoid shoes with super-padded heel tabs.

Most people pronate (roll in) at foot strike and may require anti-pronation features on the shoe, but a good running shoe shop will analyse this and advise on what features to look for.

Weight
Trail runners get wet and muddy, which means shoes get heavy. In short, you need to think about shoe weight. The only time this is less important is in heavier runners who often need added protection in a shoe and thus the shoe becomes heavier.

The Upper
This is the materials the shoe is made of. It needs to drain well, but also needs to have stronger reinforced areas around the outer edge of the foot to guard against the wear that occurs from rubbing against tree roots and rocks.

Some shoes are super waterproofed and super reinforced, but sometimes these shoes don't drain well after river crossings. Even the most water-proofed shoe will take on water in a river, but these shoes often struggle to let water drain after the river. Shoes with reinforcing around the edge of the feet and free-draining materials on top are usually best.

Trail shoes also need to fit very firmly around the heel, 1) for stability on rough surfaces, 2) to avoid the heel slipping in the shoe when wet, 3) to avoid the shoe being sucked off in mud.

The Inner Sole
The inner sole is important for absorbing the friction between your feet and the shoe. For long races you might consider upgrading the factory innersole with some of the specialist innersoles available.

Some people wear orthotics because of biomechanical problems, but orthotics are usually stiff and raise the foot in the shoe, which can lead to instability when trail running. So orthotic wearers might try using a mouldable innersole like Formathotics when they are trail running.

A tip for all trail runners is to glue the innersole into the shoe, because when shoes get wet the inner soles often start scrunching or even slipping out the back of your shoe.

The Midsole
This is the cushioning element of the shoe and requirements for trail running are vastly different than for road running.

For trail running stability is more important than cushioning, so look for shoes with firmer midsoles.

Likewise, try to avoid shoes that are too high in the heel area. To aid stability and develop a feel for the rough terrain you need to be close to the ground. But obviously your shoe also needs to have some cushioning.

The Outer Sole
A trail shoe needs good grip, but different trails and terrain require different types of grip. E.G: The tread pattern that's good for mud and rough tracks might be hopeless on slick rocks. But not many people are able to have a collection of shoes for different runs and races, so the general rules are as following:

The sole should have a studded profile for grip, but avoid too many studs because this can clog up with mud and become heavy and slippery.

Harder rubber soles are good on rough tracks over tree roots etc, but are usually slippery on things like wet rocks. So a softer rubber is usually better for all round use.

Shoes with the outer sole overlapping the midsole on the toe and heel area will provide emergency grip in slippery circumstances.

Some shoes also have thin grooves cut across the outersole in the midfoot to forefoot area to make the sole more flexible, which is great for trail running because increased flexibility allows you to be more nimble on your feet.

Laces
This might seem silly, but a lot of shoes come with laces that are hopeless when wet. Often they stretch or slip in the knot, meaning you have to stop to retie them.

The best laces for trail running are bungy-type laces as used by triathletes and also some kids shoes. These elastic laces hold their tension and are also fast to get in and out of. Best of all, they don't stretch or slip when wet.

As well as bungy laces, also give some thought to lacing pattern. The way you lace up your shoe can make a big difference. Especially to how firmly the heel of the shoes is held.