

'Shoe man' helps solidify foundation for athletes
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Name brand is always a primary consideration for kids -- and for that matter, many adults -- when it comes time to buy sneakers or cleats.

And once consumers have aligned themselves with a particular company -- be it Nike, Adidas, Reebok or whatever -- a number of other dominoes in the purchase process begin to fall, such as style, color and eventually, price.

Yet the most important factors in choosing the right sneaker or cleat, at least in footwear specialist Tim Hart's view, is the one that very few people ever pay attention to: How does the product fit, and how well is it going to perform?

"The lower body is basically a suspension system, and we're trying to get that suspension system working in balance," says Hart, who owns The Balanced Athlete, a small shop along the canal on West Avenue in the village of Fairport that specializes in custom-fit athletic footwear.

"It's like in NASCAR, when you change the setup of the cars for different tracks because of how they lean and bend and stuff like that. If the car is out of alignment, it's never going to drive straight, so it's the same thing here."

Hart, who refers to himself on his Facebook page as a Masterfit Technician, worked for about 25 years custom-fitting ski boots for both recreational and competitive skiers. He branched off into golf shoes when he opened his Fairport shop a few years ago. And now he has extended his business to youth sports and is fitting cleats for baseball and lacrosse players, as well as ice skates for hockey players and figure skaters.

Throughout his career, Hart has studied the impact that properly fit footwear has on an athlete's balance, performance and overall bodily health. There's no question in his mind the right cleats, sneakers, shoes or boots make a big difference.

"Right now there's a need in youth athletics," says Hart, whose daughter, Meredith, plays for the Fairport varsity lacrosse team. "These kids are playing longer seasons, multiple seasons, they don't get a break, and that's where you see that higher rate of injury.

"If you have any imbalances in your feet, it's going to be exaggerated playing sports, especially in a sport like lacrosse where it's a lot of full-out running, hit the brakes, change direction. I see girls playing with knee braces, ankle braces, that sort of thing, and something's not right. So what we started looking at was the footwear."

Hart orders footwear from companies with specific guidelines in mind, none of which have to do with how cool or flashy they look but rather structure and support. He then takes a mold of a customer's feet and creates a perfectly fit foot bed that replaces the one that comes with the footwear. This provides the ultimate fit and comfort.

"Once you get the footwear right, you come in with the foot beds and that gets you back to a better balance, and we're finding that it's actually enhancing performance," says Hart.

Along with reducing stress on joints, Hart's custom-fit footwear also helps athletes in the recovery process from existing injuries because they are running more efficiently, he says.

Hart's first big client was PGA Tour pro Boo Weekley, whom he met when Weekley was playing in the Nationwide Tour event at Irondequoit Country Club from 2005 through 2008.

Weekley had long struggled with foot problems and didn't even wear golf shoes because he could never find a pair that fit properly, opting for sneakers when he played. Then he met Hart, and he's been wearing golf shoes ever since.

"Tim the shoe man" is what Weekley calls Hart.

Hart has fitted scores of area skiers and golfers at all skill levels, and he's just now building a clientele in youth sports. He has worked with several local high school and college athletes, and most recently he did some work with the Rochester Greywolves, a semi-pro box lacrosse team.

"It's just consideration for the footwear, which hasn't been out there," he says.

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If you go

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Hours: By appointment.

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Web site: thebalancedathlete.net.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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