



Trail Glove Review by Jason Robillard 1.4.11



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In February, [Merrell](#) will launch their line of minimalist shoes. The [Trail Glove](#) is the trail-specific model in [the line](#). I have been extensively testing two different pairs of Trail Gloves since October. Over this time, I have run hundreds of miles in one pair and about one hundred in the other. Based on my testing, the Trail Glove is the first minimalist shoe I've tried that could be considered as a replacement for Vibram's Five Fingers line.



Before I dive into the details, please read my disclaimer [here](#). In essence, I made a decision to work with Merrell to develop educational materials which should also be released in February. The decision was based largely on the merits of this shoe.

When I first tried on the Trail Glove, I was underwhelmed. It has two areas of EVA padding, which immediately felt mild squishiness. Also, the medial side of the sole touched my arch. It wasn't supportive, but the feel was unfamiliar. The shoe was snug around the medial metatarsal area, much like the [New Balance Minimus Trails](#). I walked around in them a bit and decided to delay judgment until I did some running.



Within the first few miles of the first run, I knew these shoes were special. The weirdness of those first few steps disappeared. On trails, the shoes performed flawlessly. Over the next three months, I tested these shoes in every conceivable environment. I ran an PRed a 5k on roads ([Alger Heights 5k](#) in Grand Rapids, MI; 19:12), run a 50k in 20° weather ([HUFF 50k](#) in Huntington, IN), did a [30 mile training run in terrible snowy trail conditions](#), and did a 20 mile road run. Between these runs I've had countless shorter runs of varying distances on asphalt, sand, mud, leaf-covered technical trails, gravel, and everything in between.



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The conclusion- no shoe has come closer to minimalist perfection. I'll go over the technical details shortly, but first I want to share my criteria for a great minimalist shoe. A great minimalist shoe must have the following qualities:

- Zero-drop sole- the heel cannot be higher than the forefoot- the sole is a uniform thickness,
- Wide toe box- this allows the toes to splay,
- Thin, relatively flexible heel- This is not as critical as it will be determined by the terrain. The more rugged the terrain, the thicker the heel (more protection),
- An upper material that does not interfere with foot function,
- A closure system that allows for a degree of customization of fit. A liner that eliminates the need to wear socks, and
- lightweight.



The ultimate standard: can any given shoe be used to run 100 mile ultramarathons? If a shoe meets most of the criteria above, it can probably be used for 100 milers. The Trail Glove, to date, is the only shoe I've tried that meets all of the above criteria.

Other shoes have come close. The Minimus Trail is very similar, but suffers from a raised heel and slightly worse traction. Vibram's Trek is close, but the separated toes cause a variety of problems. Terra Plana's EVO II is also in the ballpark, but the fit and traction isn't quite as good.

The specific qualities of the shoe are what ultimately separate it from the others. The entire package is well-designed and uses all the minimalist shoe elements we've been calling for over the last few years. Merrell is the first to really listen, which was a major factor in my decision to help them develop educational materials.

Sole/Tread

The sole is made by Vibram. For those familiar with the Five Fingers line, you will immediately recognize the similarity between the Trail Glove and Trek tread. The sole is nominally thicker than the Trek, which slightly reduces ground feel in favor of greater protection. The tread provides ample traction in pretty much any trail condition. The addition of the toe lugs help immensely in slippery conditions like mud or snow. In extremely muddy conditions, I would probably opt for a more cleat-like shoe such as the [Nov-8 X-Talon 190](#).





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Upper

The upper serves the purpose of keeping the shoe on your foot without excessively interfering with natural motion. The tightness around the metatarsal area would be more puzzling had I not already experienced it with the Minimus Trail. It seems to be illogical as I would expect the tightness to cause problems. From a functional standpoint, the tightness keeps the foot from moving excessively within the shoe. As it turns out, this is an important feature. Instead of the foot floating and sliding within the shoe, the shoe becomes more like an extension of the foot. The Trail Glove functions exactly like any of the Five Fingers without the separated toes. The tightness is perfectly isolated; it doesn't interfere with the foot function in any way. If the shoe were specifically designed this way, it is pure genius. If it wasn't, it's a damn lucky discovery.



Liner

If I were rating the shoe's liner for sockless comfort, I would give this a 4.5 out of 5. It is the first shoe I've tried that allowed me to go sockless on a regular basis. All internal seams are covered with a liner, so there are no "rubbing points". The liner itself is comfortable. I would give the liner a 5 if it were not for one solitary issue. When running the HUFF 50k, I experienced a slight abrasion about the size of a pea on my right foot. [Jesse Scott](#) was also wearing the shoes for the same race and experienced a larger abrasion, which can be seen toward the end of [this video](#). In fairness, this is not designed to be a winter running shoe and we were running 33 miles (it's slightly longer than a true 50k... so goes ultrarunning) on trails and the temperature never cracked 20°. In every other run I've done, including a 30 miler in more rugged conditions, I have not had a problem. Still, it was worth mentioning.

Lacing

In the past, I was anti-lacing. I preferred the simplicity of Velcro. At some point, I realized the simplicity of Velcro came at a price; it was nearly impossible to customize the fit. When running long downhill sections, a loose fit causes too much movement within shoes. This became apparent with my venerable Vibram KSOs. It was impossible to make the fit snug without applying pressure across the entire foot. The result was the development of serious "top of the foot" pain. With a lacing system, it is possible to apply pressure to very specific areas while leaving other areas more "open".



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Cushioning

For me, this is a tricky issue. Generally, I hate any cushioning. It interferes with my ability to assess the ground I'm running on. I suspect this is unique to barefoot runners. EVERY other non-barefoot runner I encounter prefers some degree of cushioning. As I mentioned earlier, the cushioning in this shoe was immediately noticeable. Even though it is only a few millimeters thick, it was enough annoy me when walking around. As soon as I hit the tails, my awareness of the padding disappeared. In essence, it was a non-factor for trail running. Unfortunately, the same did not hold true for roads.

My first few road running experiences were not great. The cushioning was readily apparent and distracting. I was ready to give up on the shoe for road running purposes. While on a 20 mile road run with Jesse, we talked about the shoe's performance on roads. He noted that the shoe seemed to be performing better on roads. The first instinct was to attribute that to adaptation- we had adjusted to the unfamiliar sensation. He then proposed something I hadn't considered- the small pockets of EVA were probably breaking down. My higher-mileage shoes were approaching 300 miles, a typical point where heavily-cushioned shoes begin to lose their marshmallowness. The result- they were becoming more like my ideal road running shoes.

When I got home, I tried my newer pair. Jesse's hypothesis was right- the newer shoes had a very slight softness that was not present in the older pair. My conclusion- the cushioning is a non-factor on trails but does seem to interfere with road running, at least for me. My problem with road running is easily solved by simply breaking the shoes in. After about 200 miles or so, they become great road shoes. In the future, it would be great if Merrell decided to produce multiple variations- one with the current EVA; and one without. This would eliminate that break-in period, at least for picky barefoot runners like myself.

Toe Box

The Trail Glove is one of the few shoes that utilize a wide toe box. This is important because it allows your toes to spread out, or splay. Apparently this triggers a muscular reflex that helps coordinate muscle contractions, which leads to more efficiency when using a midfoot gait. My PT friends can do a much better job explaining this phenomenon. As far as I know, there isn't much research on this yet, but my anecdotal evidence is irrefutable. A cramped toe box makes a shoe unusable. The Trail Glove's toe box is wide and tall enough to allow for ample toe splay.





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Aesthetics

Admittedly, I think this shoe is somewhat plain aesthetically. After years of running barefoot or in Vibrams, I'm not accustomed to my feet drawing so little attention. I suppose this is good for the vast majority of runners that would prefer to not draw undue attention. Most people would jump at the chance to find a "normal" looking minimalist shoe. Still, I would like to see at least one crazy color combination in future generations of this shoe.

Durability

The sole is made by Vibram. For anyone familiar with the soles of their Five Fingers line, they last a very, very long time. It is not uncommon to hear stories of runners getting 1,500-2,000 miles off a single pair before the sole wears through. With Five Fingers, the upper is much more likely to fail before the sole fails. Luckily, Merrell apparently has a sterling reputation for quality products. I was unaware of this until I started doing research before agreeing to help with their educational materials. When talking to some fans of their products, I was shocked to hear stories of people using their hiking boots for years. They were almost fanatical about their praise for Merrell's products. It seems as if that quality has carried over to these shoes. After over 300 miles, the shoes have absolutely no signs of wear. I would not be surprised to see this shoe last for thousands of miles. I have to admit, Merrell's apparent philosophy on planned-obsolescence would make me think twice about buying stock in the company. I now understand the die-hard fans I encountered when doing research.



Trail Performance

The trail performance of the shoe is first-rate. It provides enough protection for the most technical trails we have in Michigan, while still allowing enough ground feel and proprioception to prevent injury. The tread works well in a large range of terrain from hard-packed dirt to sand. The tread works well for both uphill and downhill. The tread pattern does not gum up in mud. The light weight and flexibility make the shoe minimally fatiguing. For trail running, I am hard-pressed to find a single negative characteristic of this shoe.

Since this shoe has worked so well in testing, I decided to use it as my primary shoe for the Western States 100 Mile Endurance Run in June. This race has been a long-standing goal of mine; it easily eclipses every other race I've run. This is the shoe I'm trusting to get me through the race.

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Road Performance

When the shoes were brand new, I did not especially like these shoes for road use. As I mentioned earlier, the breaking down of the EVA made the shoes better. At this point, my 300-mile version would probably be my preferred road shoe in wet or snowy weather. If I had to wear shoes and weather was not an issue, I think I would still prefer [Barefoot Ted's Luna sandals](#).

Snow and Mud

I was slightly surprised at the shoe's performance in both snow and mud. The tread doesn't appear to be especially aggressive, but works well. Before winter, I did a five or six mile run over very muddy trails without issues. Since winter has hit, I've done multiple runs ranging from 3 to 33 miles. Slipping on snowy, icy trails was not an issue. I think form and balance plays a role, but the shoes are among the best I've tried.

I should note- this shoe is NOT designed as a winter running shoe. It is not lined or waterproof. After about five or six miles, the shoes would be quite wet from snow entering the shoe around my ankles, then melting from the heat of my foot. My feet did not get cold as long as I continued moving, but I experience the same effect when running barefoot in snow.

Negatives

I am hard-pressed to make a list of negatives attributes for this shoe. Aesthetically it is a little plain. I wasn't thrilled with the EVA padding for road running during the first 100 miles or so. These complaints are VERY minor, however. Probably my most significant complaint has to do with a problem most minimalist runners are all too familiar with- the dreaded Vibram stink. Almost everyone I know that has owned a pair of Five Fingers knows the smell. The Minimus Trails, which also utilize a Vibram sole, developed the same smell. The Trail Gloves are no different.

Message to Merrell's Design Team

I enjoy giving shoe manufacturers feedback. I am glad more and more are asking for our opinions. If I were to deliver a single message to Merrell's design team, it would be simple- **DO NOT CHANGE THIS SHOE!** The functional characteristics of this shoe are as close to perfect as a shoe can probably get. I can live with the not-too-exciting appearance. If I received word Merrell were planning on changing any aspect of this shoe, I would immediately buy 10 pairs. That would likely carry me through my prime running years. In the future, I would like to see a cleated version of this shoe for very muddy trail running. I would also love to see Merrell produce a line of business or business/casual shoes using the same design characteristics of the Trail Glove. As long as they don't mess with the basic features, they won't go wrong.

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Conclusion

The trail glove is the best true minimalist trail shoe I have ever tested. If there is a shoe that will become the “toeless” Five Fingers, this is it. I commend Merrell for making a great shoe, and especially congratulate them for having the courage to make a zero-drop shoe. I believe this shoe is a game-changer for the rest of the shoe industry. It is direct evidence that the voices of barefoot runners are finally being heard. Merrell hit a home run with this shoe, and I would expect the other manufacturers to use this as a gold standard to emulate.

I get a lot of people asking me for a shoe recommendation. This is difficult because we’re all different. What works for me may not work for all. Having said that, some shoes have characteristics that make them more desirable than others from a minimalist perspective. Specifically, some characteristics are ideal for most barefoot runners. When you need to use shoes due to difficult terrain, weather, speed, or distances, the proper shoe can be a wonderfully useful tool. Based on my experiences as a shoe reviewer, some shoes are definitely better than others. Over the years, the shoe choices for barefoot runners have been exceedingly limited. At this time last year, I did most of my running barefoot because the other shoe choices required too many compromises. I could get protection from the weather, but no traction. I could get traction, but the shoe design interfered with my gait. Every option was inadequate at best.

This year, there are finally options. Real options. GOOD options. In my opinion, the best of the best is a VERY short list. For me, the Merrell Trail Glove is undoubtedly at the top of that list. I expect many others will agree. It’s not the only option- the Minimus Trails, EVO II, Ted’s Lunas, and Treks are the other shoes I’d list as the “good” options. Due to my involvement with Merrell’s education program, I am going to resist simply recommending this shoe above all others. Instead, I urge runners to go to a store and check out all the options. Read other reviews. Make your own decisions. Above all, enjoy the process!

Pictures: All pictures appearing in this post show the shoe after about 300-350 miles of wear.
EDIT- release date confirmed for February 1st!