

4-H Consumer Judging Guide

Athletic Shoes

Selecting the proper sports shoe is not a simple matter these days. Here are some questions to guide you when buying athletic shoes. When will you wear your sports shoes? Do you engage regularly in one specific sport, or are you a versatile athlete? Do you plan to wear the shoes only for action sports or as casual footwear too? Do you want your shoes to be functional, fashionable or both?

Once you have answered these questions, you need to know what to look for when you go shopping for shoes. Remember to take the kind of sock you'll be wearing to ensure the best fit. Also, make sure you simulate the kinds of stress your shoes will face once they leave the store. Not only is a poorly fitted shoe uncomfortable, but it can also damage your foot.

Some features to look for:

- **Sports shoe uppers** (the part that goes around the upper part of the foot) are available in a variety of materials, and each has its own advantages. Vinyl is lightweight and the least expensive. Canvas and nylon are lightweight and inexpensive, and they breathe well. Leather uppers tend to be warmer, but many have holes around the arch to help keep your foot ventilated. Leather uppers are more durable than other types, but they also cost more.
- **A padded collar with tongue at back** gives added protection to the ankle and Achilles tendon. This is essential for sports like basketball and tennis.
- **Toe guards** are also a plus, as they add to the life of the shoe while protecting the toes.



- **Soles built for cushioning and traction** are necessary in all sports shoes. Most athletes recommend a padded insole and a relatively thick rubber outsole. Most soles combine features such as wedged heels for better cushioning and flared heels for better balance. Soles that do not curve inward around the arch offer better arch support, whereas those that curve upward, both at the heel and at the toe, absorb shock well, adding to durability.

- **Tread patterns** provide the athlete with traction. The three basic types of soles on the market are slab (smooth or flat-surfaced), herringbone (patterned) and nub (looks like a series of pencil erasers). Slab soles, most common on deck sneakers, offer the least traction of all types. The variety of herringbone soles ranges from shallow zigzags to deep grooves. These offer good traction on most playing surfaces. Of course, the deeper the groove, the better the traction. Basketball players and joggers need this type of tread. Tennis shoes, on the other hand, usually come with nub treads, which make an almost flat outsole. These offer good traction.



When choosing sports shoes, try not to let price be a factor. Decide what you want and see what's available in different price ranges. Some lower-priced shoes may serve your purposes better than higher-priced shoes. Too often people sacrifice performance for fashion.



If you plan on wearing your shoes for a variety of activities, avoid those with special functional features designed for a specific sport. Instead,

choose a multipurpose shoe in either a basketball or tennis style. Because of their flared soles, for instance, jogging shoes wear out very fast on a tennis court. If you are going to use your shoes for just one sport, check the styles of different manufacturers; most specify the intended sport for each style. Above all, trust how they feel on your feet!

Following are some additional characteristics to consider and terms to know when purchasing athletic shoes:

- **Shock absorption.** How well does the shoe absorb shock during a moderately paced walk?
- **Support.** How well does the shoe support your foot? You do not want it to be floppy.
- **Cushioning.** Is the “mattress” of the shoe comfortable? 
- **Ankle collar.** Is it padded for comfort and support?
- **Midsole.** It is generally made of flexible and lightweight plastic foam that provides cushioning? It may have plugs, wedges and layers of varying density to add stability or shock absorption.
- **Outsole.** It is usually made of durable rubber? Grooves, rough texture, dips and bumps are designed to ease bending or to add traction or cushioning.
- **Insole.** This is designed to add cushioning and may add arch support. Many shoes have removable insoles that can be cleaned, aired out and eventually replaced.
- **Rocker profile.** The bottom of many walking shoes resembles the runner on a

rocking chair. This feature is considered an advantage by some if it is turned up slightly at the front and beveled at the heel.

- **Heel counter.** This feature stiffens the back of the shoe for added stability.
- **Upper.** Typically, this is made of breathable leather. It also may be made of vinyl, canvas or nylon. 
- **Achilles notch.** A shoe without this cutout may irritate the tendon between the heel and the calf.
- **Heat.** How well will the shoe keep the foot moderately warm?
- **Wear.** How well will the shoe stand up to wear?
- **Flexibility.** To what extent can you bend the shoe?
- **Weight.** How heavy is the shoe?
- **Stability.** How well does the shoe counteract the foot’s tendency to roll sideways? 
- **Moisture.** What is the shoe’s ability to disperse sweat?
- **Toe room.** This area should be wide enough to accommodate the foot’s spreading as it rolls forward and long enough to provide a space as wide as your thumbnail in front of the longest toe.

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