

TOPIC OF THE MONTH FOR APRIL 2004

SELECTION OF SHOES FOR KICKERS AND PUNTERS

The selection of properly-fitted shoes is critical to foot-on-ball contact and to player balance. No one company makes shoes specifically for football kicking, and no brand is perfect for any large segment of athletes who kick and/or punt. Expect to try on many shoes to find what is best for you. Few high school teams cover the cost of shoes for kickers, and most college teams wait until a player becomes a starter before buying special requests. Since high school athletes are constantly growing, shoes may need to be replaced frequently. Shoes should also be discarded when wear detracts from balance or stability. Check for:

- Cleats worn down lower on the back or outside,
- Widened ankle closures,
- Uppers that have pulled away from the sole at the toe,
- Uppers that have "rolled over" outside the sole, and
- Torn linings on the inside of the heel.

If you have the luxury of kicking or punting without playing another position, dress each foot separately for the job it will perform. This may mean wearing two different shoes, not a matched pair of soccer shoes. The purpose of the plant shoe is to enhance balance, regardless of field surface. It must absorb the impact of landing all weight on one foot while the other leg swings in a much larger arc than used for walking or running. The stress on the ankle may be three times greater than walking. The purpose of the kicking/punting shoe is to enhance foot-on-ball contact. The goals are to embed the foot in the football, forcing the back side of the ball to indent toward the front side of the ball, and to leave the foot within the ball as long as possible. The list below identifies characteristics to examine when considering new shoes for football.

Once you have selected appropriate footwear for plant foot and kicking foot, reserve those shoes solely for football games and practices. Be sure that you break them in several weeks before the first game. Carry them to and from the field. Put them on after warm-up running. Change into all-purpose athletic shoes before post-practice conditioning drills. If you play soccer, do not wear your favorite pair of soccer shoes for football kicking and punting. (Because of the nature of the game, your "favorite" soccer shoes are probably already so well broken in that they are "broken down." They would not last all

season.) If possible, have "game" shoes and an older set for practices. If you have only one pair, never wear them to practice on rainy or muddy days. Wear regular football cleats or tennis shoes.

If you play a position on offense or defense, you must dress your feet for maximum efficiency at that position. Accept that you will have less control during kicking and punting. Rarely is there time to change shoes before and after kicking or punting plays. Easily attachable velcro straps are available to convert regular shoes for toe kicking. If you kick straight-on, wearing a square-toed shoe on the kicking foot provides a rigid surface for ball impact and protects the toes from damage.

PLANT FOOT

- Sole should be wider than the foot. (Soccer shoes have narrow soles, allowing the foot to roll sideways too easily, particularly on uneven ground.)
- Sole should be rigid, with cleats correct for surface. (If you can bend the shoe backwards in your hands, it will not provide a firm enough base for the foot.)
- Sole should not be much taller than on a kicking shoe.
- Shoe should have well-constructed arch support. (Soccer shoes often are flat inside, allowing the foot to slide within the shoe.)
- Shoe should not force the middle of the foot to become narrow. (Like going up stairs, the foot must spread to establish balance when all weight is on one leg.)
- Ankle bone should be covered and supported. (Shoe does not have to have a high top, but soccer shoes are cut too low below the ankle to provide stability.) Wearing a lace-up ankle brace inside the shoe is a good plan. (You would not play without helmet and shoulder pads. The ankle brace prevents injury and increases balance.)
- Shoe should fit snugly at ankle opening. (After the shoe is laced, you should not be able to insert your fingers between the shoe and your foot. Soccer shoes often have so large an opening that you cannot tighten the fit at the ankle. If your shoe is loose, jam pre-wrap into the area around the ankle before tightening the laces. Like packing a glass for mailing, this spongy substance will prevent movement of the foot within the shoe.)
- Shoe may have straps, extra panels of leather, or any other additions that aid balance and decrease foot or ankle movement when the weight lands on the plant foot.

KICKING/PUNTING FOOT

- Sole should be narrower than the foot.
- Sole should be rigid. (The sole serves as a board to support the foot. If the shoe can be bent backwards, the foot is bent at impact, allowing the bones to separate. Think about the function of boxing gloves.)
- Shoe should have well-constructed arch support.
- Shoe should fit tight through the arch/in-step, without pinching the toes. (Many players buy kicking shoes one half size smaller than regular shoe size. Think of the way surgical gloves would fit a doctor's hand.)
- Shoe should be light in weight.
- Leather upper should be sewn, not glued, to the sole. (The wear from striking footballs will pull the shoe apart. Shoes that are sewn usually hold together longer and have sufficient leather to be repaired.)
- Ankle bone may be left exposed.
- Shoe should have no extra straps, panels of leather, or laces to interfere with foot-on-ball contact. Cut off a floppy tongue at the ankle. Keep shoelace length to a minimum, with no knots on the top of the ankle. Tie laces on the outside of the foot, and insert loops into the outside of the shoe. (Again, think about the fit of surgical gloves.)