

THE FIRST SHOE I REALLY LOVED

The New Balance 1400 v3

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Photography by Trevor Raab



“WHAT’S THE ‘Z’ FOR?” I ASKED MY BUBBIE, LOOKING AT THE LARGE WHITE LETTER SEWN ONTO THE WIDE GRAY SNEAKER.

“It’s an ‘N’—for New Balance,” my grandmother responded.

My Bubbie, or Bub, as I affectionately called her, wore no other type of shoe that I can recall. My mom once told me that was because New Balance was the only brand that made shoes in double E to accommodate Bub’s wide feet. That may have been the case. But I wager that it was also because the shoes were no-nonsense, comfortable, functional. Bub didn’t have time for baloney. (Like Bub, neither do I.)

A couple of times a year, Bub would go to the New Balance headquarters in Boston to load up on her double-E gray shoes, with an N, not a Z. On one of these pilgrimages, she took me with her. I can’t remember if I needed new shoes or just wanted them. When it comes to grandparents, it doesn’t really matter. They’ll spoil you either way.

We walked in, and there were rows and rows of tall metal filing cabinets filled with shoes. Bub let me pick out whatever my tomboy-self wanted: gray shoes with a rough texture; yellow and black laces; black, ridged soles—which, thinking back on it now, must have been some sort of trail shoe—and a big black N.

To my 10-year-old self, wearing a shoe like Bub’s echoed all the other similarities we shared: We were hard workers—that particular breed of true plugger—loyal and active.

And though on that initial shopping trip I could never have known it, I would, just like Bub, become a New Balance lifer.

I DIDN’T ALWAYS like running. That may seem hard to believe because I’m now an editor at *Runner’s World*. But when I joined

winter track my sophomore year of high school, I found that I couldn’t think of anything much worse. Maybe that’s because I felt so slow, plodding. But the team’s culture played a large role, too.

I vividly remember a practice when we were asked to run a four-miler in the snow. A group of a dozen or so teenage girls headed out together. Clad in baggy sweatpants that read “Trackies” on the butt—high school in the early aughts was all about the butt copy—I cued the latest *Harry Potter* on my cassette player while trying to keep pace. I fell off. Fast.

The snowfall picked up, the sun went down, I got lost. Eventually, after trudging through calf-deep snow, I made it back to the school—long after my teammates had gone home, taken hot showers, and were sitting down to dinner—where my mom was pacing the parking lot, panicking. This moment well represents high school track for me.

For my first indoor meet that year, I wore a pair of gray Nikes, picked at random from a department store. I was running the 1500 meters. I sat by myself in the bleachers trying to do homework before my race to ease my nerves. It didn’t help. By the time I lined up at the start, I was nauseous and shaking, the harsh gym lighting heightening my anxiety. Prerace nerves are normal. But when you’re woefully unprepared, it’s a whole other ball game. In a race that is 3.75 laps, I couldn’t count how many girls lapped me. My chest hurt. My mouth filled with spit. I came in dead last in 8:38. I hated this sport.

I’VE BEEN A RUNNER for more than 15 years now. I train four days a week, logging 20 to 30 miles over two speed sessions, a long run, and an easy day. I wear a Garmin GPS watch. When I get dressed for a run or race, I put on Tracksmith or my Boston Marathon long-sleeve shirts with shorts and, depending on the workout, my flats (for speed) or trainers (for everything else). I cringe thinking of my teenage self, donning Trackies sweatpants, a cheap cotton sports bra, and whatever shoes were on sale in the department store.

I don’t run like I used to, either. I got fast. And I attribute that to a decision I made at age 16.





ABOVE: The author with her grandmother, Bub, on her wedding day, October 1, 2011. Two weeks later Irvine would run her second half marathon. **LEFT:** The author hits her watch as she breaks 20 minutes in the 5K on October 14, 2016.

bigger was happening, too: Running was giving me an identity, a place in the world, and a tightknit group of friends.

Bub, in her ever-present gray New Balance shoes, helped make this happen. She let me host team dinners and encouraged my teammates to drop by and use

her pool to cool off during or after workouts.

In 2013, when I ran my first Boston Marathon, a race Bub's brother ran well into his 70s, Bub wrote, "Good luck, Heather. Love, Bubbie" on my singlet. She was on dialysis and couldn't make it to the course; she missed me race the 2014 Boston Marathon for the same reason. But she told all of her friends that her granddaughter was running "The Marathon." Boy, was she proud.

Bub passed away in January 2015, 11 months before I was offered a position at *Runner's World*. She never knew that I landed my dream job, or that I'd soon run exclusively in her trademark shoe brand.

FOR ABOUT SEVEN YEARS, I'd worn Nike, Adidas, and Brooks running shoes, relying on fit recommendations from specialty-shop employees. None of the models felt ideal, but admittedly, I didn't yet understand what "ideal" really was. I wasn't experienced enough to know that you don't run in a shoe just because someone else said it would be good for you.

I was introduced to the now-discontinued New Balance Vazee Pace at a specialty store's group run. It was a lightweight, low-drop, supportive-but-still-neutral trainer. Maybe it was pure coincidence that I stumbled across a New Balance shoe

I loved. Subconsciously, though, it was also a way to keep Bub with me every mile I ran.

A COUPLE OF MONTHS into my job as food and nutrition editor, *Runner's World* had its annual employee shoe sale: a purging of the gear warehouse in which all shoes were sold for \$15, proceeds going to charity. By this point, I was all-in as a runner, seeking speedier and speedier times, and searching for the right gear to help make that happen.

Because I loved the New Balance Vazee Pace, when I spotted a pair of New Balance racing flats, I made a beeline for them.

They were purple with orange trim. They felt like nothingness in my hand. The drop looked low, and the toebox wide, perfect for the pesky bunion on my right foot (for more, see "The Geek Out," at right). I tried them on: spacious for a flat, light, comfortable. Sold! They were the New Balance 1400 v3.

My first run in the v3s was my last hard workout before the 2016 Boston Marathon. Slipping them on, the fit was perfect, and I felt fast before I'd even stepped out the door. I jogged to the track and put in six miles at marathon pace (7:45) with 200-meter pickups in the last lap of each mile. I felt like I could really push off with each stride. Now *this* is a fast shoe, I thought.

Two weeks after Boston, I ran a 5K PR in my v3s: 20:40. Then in May, I pulled out the v3s for the Brooklyn Half Marathon and another PR: 1:34:50. Fueled by new confidence, I set a goal of breaking 20 minutes in the 5K in October at the *Runner's World* Half and Festival.

AT THIS POINT, I'd been running long enough to know that when you start to really like a shoe, buy more. Inevitably, the manufacturer will take what you think is perfect and change it in a way that's no longer perfect for you. So that summer I ordered a new pair of the 1400 v3s in bright orange. Hitting the "buy" button, I realized, if I'm buying shoes identical to the ones I already own, this was no fling. The v3s and I were in it for the long haul. Or about 300 miles.

Like any true love, the v3s supported my quest to be better. I got excited to put them on, line up on the track, and turn left until I wanted to puke (avoiding the shoes, of course). They also gave me something I only subconsciously knew I needed.

My husband asked me one night: "Why do you like running so much?"

No one had asked me that before. I had

to pause to really think about it.

"Because I can measure exactly how much better I'm getting," I told him. Numbers don't lie. I was putting in work and seeing exactly what the payoff was. I took my marathon time from 3:56:42 in April 2013 to 3:31:42 in October 2014. My half-marathon time was 1:55 in May 2011 and 1:34 in May 2016. In September 2011 I ran a 6:17 mile—my first since high school—and by September 2016, it was 5:37. That doesn't just happen. It takes dedication, focus, grit. It takes someone who isn't afraid of hard work.

Which is why running faster and faster in the v3s wasn't just about feeling fucking awesome. They made me feel like I could do anything, even if it was difficult. And that made me feel like Bub, who raised four small children on her own after her husband died at just 39 years old.

At the *Runner's World* 5K in October, I laced up my second pair of v3s and ran 19:46.

I was in the best shape of my life. I ordered a third pair of v3s, in that same *hello!* orange. The shoes arrived on December 8, 2016. Hours before that, I found out I was pregnant.

I put my brand new shoes in the closet, still in their red and gray box. I knew that for at least the next year, my racing days would be on hold. In the back of my mind, a nagging fact I'd learned while working at an NYC running store: Even if you keep shoes in a box, they will break down over time. To date, my third pair of v3s has been in the box, untouched, for 19 months.

As the months of my pregnancy stretched on, I watched my speed slip away. Gone were my 40-mile weeks. Like those boxed shoes, my peak fitness started to break down.

As I started running less and less, thanks to a growing belly and shin splint pain, I felt less and less like a runner. Aside from a few runs—a 4 x 400 relay in which half the team was pregnant, and the *Runner's World* Taco Mile—I stopped wearing my flats. I told myself this was only temporary. Then I would wonder, *What if it wasn't?* What if I could no longer gauge success in running by steady progress? Would I love it less? Would I love *me* less? Could I still be proud of nonrunner me?

I couldn't wear flats if I couldn't run fast. That'd be like people who wear fuel belts for 5Ks. You just...don't. And look, I know that becoming a parent is supposed to trump everything, that you're supposed to selflessly put aside your needs for your kid's. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to

THE GEEK OUT

New Balance's 1400 v3 was different from the v1 because of the last it was built on: The sleek racing last has lower sidewall heights to the midsole, a streamlined topline to the upper, and a shape that looks "fast," but is also generous through the forefoot to allow for a grippy toe splay. An ample toebox—i.e., the area of a shoe that encases your, well, toes—is something people don't think about unless they find that their foot slips around (too wide) or they feel constricted (too tight).

At 5.5 ounces, the v3s didn't just look light: They weighed in at 2.5 fewer ounces than the average trainer. The ultralight feel comes largely from the proprietary New Balance RevLite foam, the lightest and most responsive in the NB line, which I find to be supportive, comfortable, and snappy. The v3s weren't as light as a track spike—which often come in at 6 ounces or lighter—but their sturdier build meant I could actually train on them for the typical 300 miles.

Finally, a shoe's drop is the difference between the height of the heel and that of the toe. A thick heel, which generally means a higher drop, forces you to heel-strike. Flatter shoes, which typically have lower drops, make it easier to land on your midfoot—the preferred running form to avoid injury. I like a low drop (4 to 6mm), yet the 1400 v3s have an offset of 10mm. Because the entire shoe is relatively low to the ground, I can still strike on my midfoot. #shoemagic

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give up running hard. That doesn't mean I'm ready to give up my v3s.

With this mindset (and my doctor's permission), I started the long haul to get back into shape after my son, Finn, was born in August 2017. Maybe it wouldn't be prebaby shape, but I also wasn't going to settle. After four months off running, the once simple, natural act took some getting used to. Eventually, my muscle memory kicked in. And my v3s were there, ready to go fast again.


This past March, I ran a 20:05 5K in my second pair of v3s, coming in second for all women in the race. Finn and my husband were there, cheering me on. The result was far better than I'd ever imagined I'd be capable of just seven months out from childbirth. It gave me a renewed sense of hope that, once I slip on my boxed-up pair, I may be able to push faster than ever.

I've got a lot riding on that third pair of v3s. I'm gearing up for the Fifth Avenue Mile in September, a race I love. I didn't run in 2017, just three weeks after Finn's birthday. So I thought it would be fitting to target Fifth Ave as my first postpartum goal race, almost exactly a year after he was born. And what better time to unveil my third-time's-the-charm v3s.

Here's the rub: Once I open that box, that will be it. New Balance discontinued the v3s in 2016. Yep. They no longer exist. Well, there are a few pairs out there, but only in miniature- or gargantuan-foot sizes versus my down-the-middle 8.5. Trust me. I've spent hours trolling the Internet looking for them on go-to discount sites.

It's a funny thing about love: You can be so loyal, so committed, all in. And then—*poof!*—it's over. New Balance has my whole heart, and it stomped on it with its 1400 v4s and v5s. The updates—nearly an ounce heavier, tighter toeboxes, the shoes now run a little small—felt like seismic changes to me.

So, as I eagerly count down the days to September's Fifth Avenue Mile, I also dread beginning the last hoorah with my favorite flats. On race morning, I'll slip on my third and final pair of New Balance 1400 v3s and toe the line to see just how much of a pluggler this mom can be.

After that, I'll have 300 miles to see how far my v3s can take me before it's time to hang them up for good. A lot can happen in 300 miles. I'll start the journey with one. 

4 SHOES SIMILAR TO THE NEW BALANCE 1400 v3



1. Mizuno Wave Sonic: This doppelgänger has the v3 trifecta: fast, light, reliable.

2. Brooks Hyperion: On paper, the Hyperion is the most comparable to the v3—a 10mm drop, 5.3 ounces. This may be my next flat.

3. New Balance Hanzo: Like the v3, the Hanzo is feather-light at 5.4 ounces, with a low drop (3 to 4mm); designed for serious road runners targeting 5K and 10K PRs.

4. Saucony Type A: My original flat. Lighter than the v3 (5.1 ounces), making it best for short, short distances (not much more than a 5K).