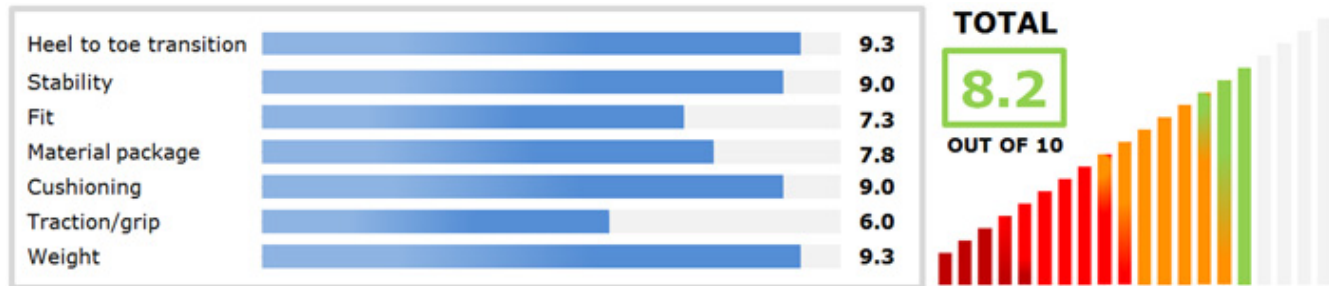


2014 Nike Free 5.0 review

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solereview

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- [Tech specs](#)
- [Summary](#)
- [Also see](#)

Color: Military Blue/White-Pearlized Blue-Midnight Navy

Intended use: All runs except trail. Suitable for all foot strike positions.

Surfaces tested on: Road, synthetic track 21° C/70° F

Upper: Fused synthetic leather on mesh, midfoot Flywire cords, knitted mesh.

Midsole: Injection molded EVA variant, 8 mm heel to toe drop.

Outsole: Carbon rubber, injection molded EVA variant

Weight: 256 gms/9.3 Oz for a half pair of UK10/US11



The Nike Free's 10th anniversary.

The last ten years have gone by rather quickly. For it was in July 2004 that Nike introduced the Free concept to the world, inspired by Stanford running coach Vin Lananna's coaching techniques. Vin had his athletes train barefoot on grass, with the goal of strengthening foot muscles. Nike's Free concept sought to emulate that experience at some level by offering a degree of flexibility unprecedented in running footwear.

As it turned out, the shoes were much ahead of their time. It was a U-turn as far as footwear design was concerned, challenging the paradigm that more cushioning and support is good. People were skeptical initially, and minor bugs like the thin heel mesh tearing off quickly and premature outsole wear did not help the cause. The minimalist boom was yet to arrive, which meant runners transitioned straight from a foam and mesh overdose to a Nike Free detox, getting sore body parts in the process. What is remarkable though, is that despite Nike's reputation of having a short attention span (Alpha project, Shox, tuned air, anyone?), it kept on pushing the Free with fierce aggression. Every year after 2004 saw a slew of new Free models added to the line, but not without some notable missteps.



Pre-2009, Nike Free sales were not exactly on fire, so the brand took some desperate measures to make Free commercially viable. The 2008 Nike Free Everyday for example, which was essentially a traditional running shoe featuring a chunkier version of the Free outsole. This shoe was designed to lure the mainstream running community, who so far had shied away from lacing up on the purer versions of Nike Free (3.0, 5.0). The lowest point was when Nike removed the 5.0 callout in the 2010 and 2011 versions of Nike Free Run. With all the back and forth, nomenclature wasn't always consistent – initial successors of the 5.0 were called Nike Free 5.0 V2, V3 but later changed to Free Run, which ran its course from 2010 to 2013. For the average runner not aware of inner workings, this naturally led to some confusion on which shoe meant what. For those who came in late, here's a useful graphic to clear the air:



But Nike needn't have worried, because the minimalist running movement accelerated at hyperdrive speeds after 2009.

With the running populace (and industry competitors) adopting running footwear minimalism, Nike's original segmentation of the Free series returned in 2013, with 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0 versions claiming their rightful places in the hierarchy. Nike Free 3.0 being the most minimal, the Free 5.0 being an entry into the Free line, and 4.0 sandwiched between these two. Naming conventions aside, the Free 5.0 has always been Nike's push in this category because of its neutrality, and hence its appeal – a shoe which balanced extreme flexibility and traditional shoe benefits like cushioning and support.

Design and construction: Upper forefoot



2014 Nike Free 5.0 toe box

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It is best to start in the front, where the Nike Free 5.0 sees a clean, near seam-free execution. Moving forward from a traditional, stitched-on overlay construction of the 2013 Free, this year's 5.0 forefoot uses Hyperfuse layers over a mesh which is textured like Flyknit and fits gorgeously. The lining beneath is a single layer mesh bonded to the underside and its coverage extends from mid foot onwards. Owing to the materials and design, the forefoot area is effortlessly flexible, allowing the foot to bend naturally. There are no overlays on the

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arch side of forefoot, and that area is only covered by the mesh. On the toe bumper, part of Hyperfuse extends to cover the toe area with a small mesh window – a canopy of sorts for the big toe.

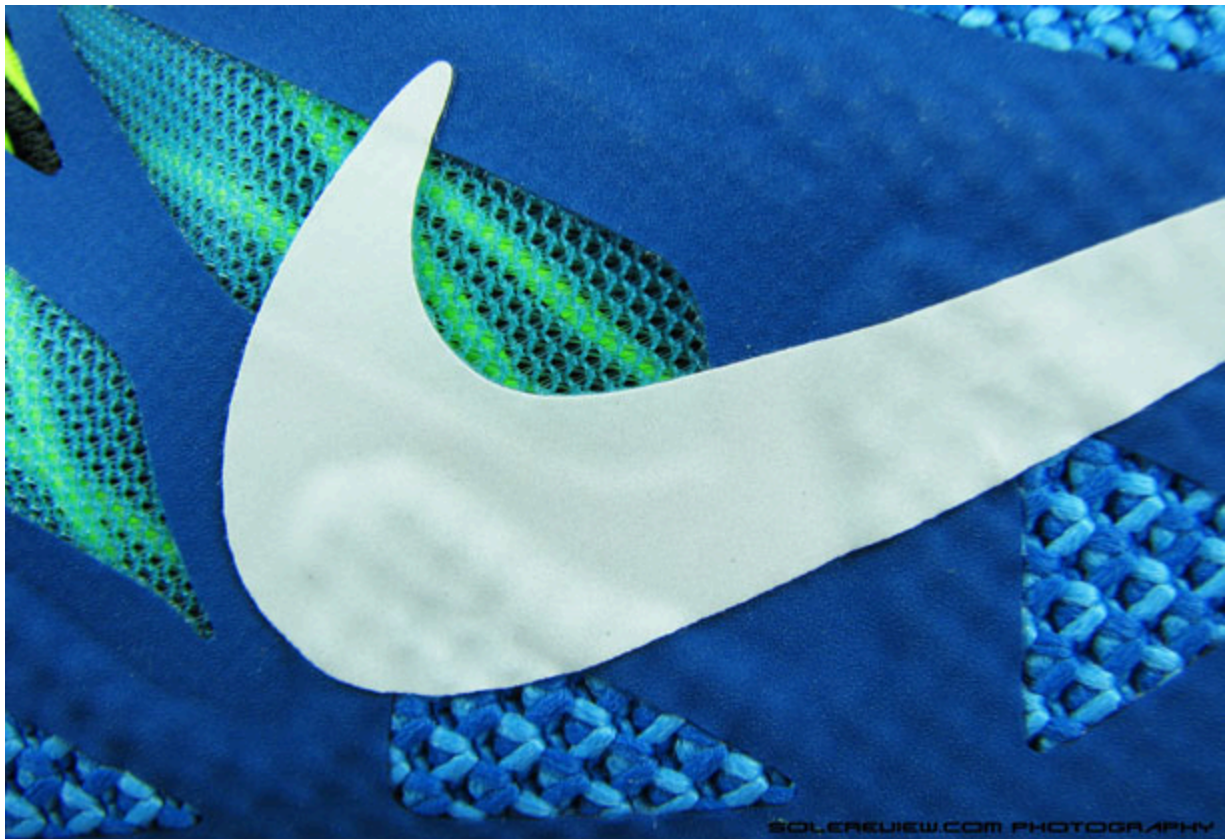
If there's one big plus we'd like to call out, that'd be the forefoot space. The combination of material and pattern engineering results in an abundance of forefoot space, giving the toes enough room to splay out, with room available both across and vertically. On the flip side, a minor mis-engineering of the Hyperfuse overlays comes to light during runs, which we'll cover in the dislikes section at the end of this review.

Design and construction: Upper midfoot

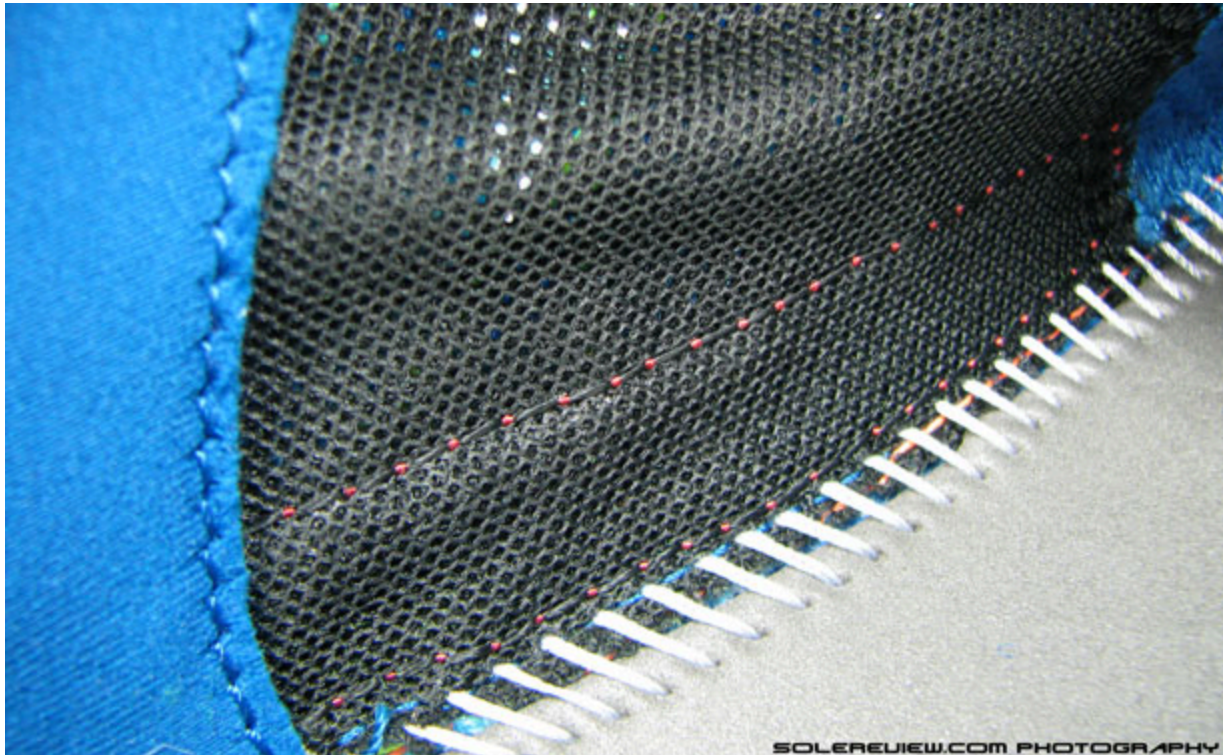




Flywire cords of Free 5.0



The Hyperfuse cut-outs and mesh detail look amazing.



See the red stitches at the base? Place where Flywire loops start their journey.

Aesthetically, midfoot design of the 2014 Nike Free 5.0 looks absolutely breathtaking. Unless you've got a pair of black-on-black, the different design elements come alive with a contrast of shape, color and material. The Hyperfuse panel dominates the mid-foot landscape, and mesh underlays add that extra design dimension. The diamond shaped window at the base reveals a glimpse of the Flyknit inspired mesh, and upper see-through mesh windows gives a peek of the Flywire cords underneath. The cords begin their journey at the base of the upper and end at the top, forming loops for the laces to pass through. Tug on the laces, and the Flywire cords increase tension around the mid foot.



The uniquely shaped Free 5.0 tongue. Served with sideways slide.



Thin tongue = more lacing pressure

The eye-stay design is asymmetrical, reducing lacing pressure but giving the shoe a lopsided look. The tongue is a minimal affair; it is attached to the front by a Hyperfuse layer and features multiple patterns, with two types of mesh underlays peeking through the triangular

Hyperfuse windows. We were particularly intrigued by the novel tongue design, which splits the top into three separate flaps. Our first thought that it was an antidote for tongue slide. But our enthusiasm deflated quickly as the tongue slid to one side during our first test run. The thin tongue also lets the lacing pressure pass through, and tightness is felt at the top, where both ends of the laces come together.

Design and construction: Upper rearfoot



Collar is snug and pliable. Nicely done, Nike.



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Heel with a window. Not XP.



Hyperfuse layer over two different mesh types on the heel.

The 2014 Nike Free 5.0 has an uncomplicated rear foot design. The collar construction and material is a carry over from the 2013 version, featuring a single fabric lining backed with

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foam lining. The heel, has the case been for the past versions, is free of internal stiffener and is pliable as they come. It has some degree of ventilation, with a single layer open mesh over the lining fabric wrapped over the curvature of the heel. The base of the heel is covered with a near invisible layer of film, most likely placed to result in better bonding with the sole unit.

Design and construction: Updates on the sole unit.

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No sideways grooves. No gap. Better flexibility.



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Transition is smooth and seamless.

For the first time since 2004, the sole design transforms itself with radical newness. The new geometry ditches the familiar layout of intersecting linear flex grooves and progresses towards a setup favouring hexagonal columns separated by deep but razor thin flex grooves. Each column of foam act as independent structures, acting as cushioning or transitional units whenever they are called upon.

The flexibility radiates in multiple directions, as opposed to the somewhat linear flexing of the older design. Rubber usage is minimal and limited to outer heel and forefoot tip. Visual lack of rubber might alarm some, but based on our past experience (with Free) the foam should be hardy, capable of lasting hundreds of miles before affecting ride performance. We'll make a note to update this section after long term ownership.



Prominent flare below arch. Supports nicely.

The forefoot and rear foot also loses the prominent (and outwards) flare seen in the past models – they are rounded off, and the top profile appears narrower. Initially, it might seem that the shoe is less stable, but start running, and the rounded edges only add to improved transition. Under the arch, the midsole flares add up as a support, and the underfoot is a Ortholite insole lined with a foam strobel.

The 2014 Nike Free 5.0: The experience



There's no denying it. The ride is lovely.

The 2014 Nike Free 5.0 has been thoroughly re-engineered, right from the upper materials and design to the striking new sole in its hexagonal glory. That is impressive, but what really shines is how all the new parts are so well glued together. And we mean not only structurally, but on the playfield. The forefoot is roomy, sufficiently ventilated and bends nicely. The Flywire cords in the midfoot do their bit to hold the foot in place. The collar has a padded grip on the ankles and is non-interfering.

But the real magic lies in the how the new Free outsole behaves. Test run after test run, the shoe delivered a ride which felt truly effortless and a transition equalled only by a few others. You see, the old Free had two things which this new one does not. Firstly, the original Free configuration depended on deep flex grooves cutting across each other at 90 degree angles. Which meant the sole had deep flex grooves go from one side of the shoe to another. During runs, the weight would transfer from heel to toe and splay open the outsole in the process. The splaying of the sole meant gaps between the foam above which the foot had to roll over, the result of which was a broken transition, especially in areas where the pressure led to flexing. The heel and forefoot area were good examples of that happening.

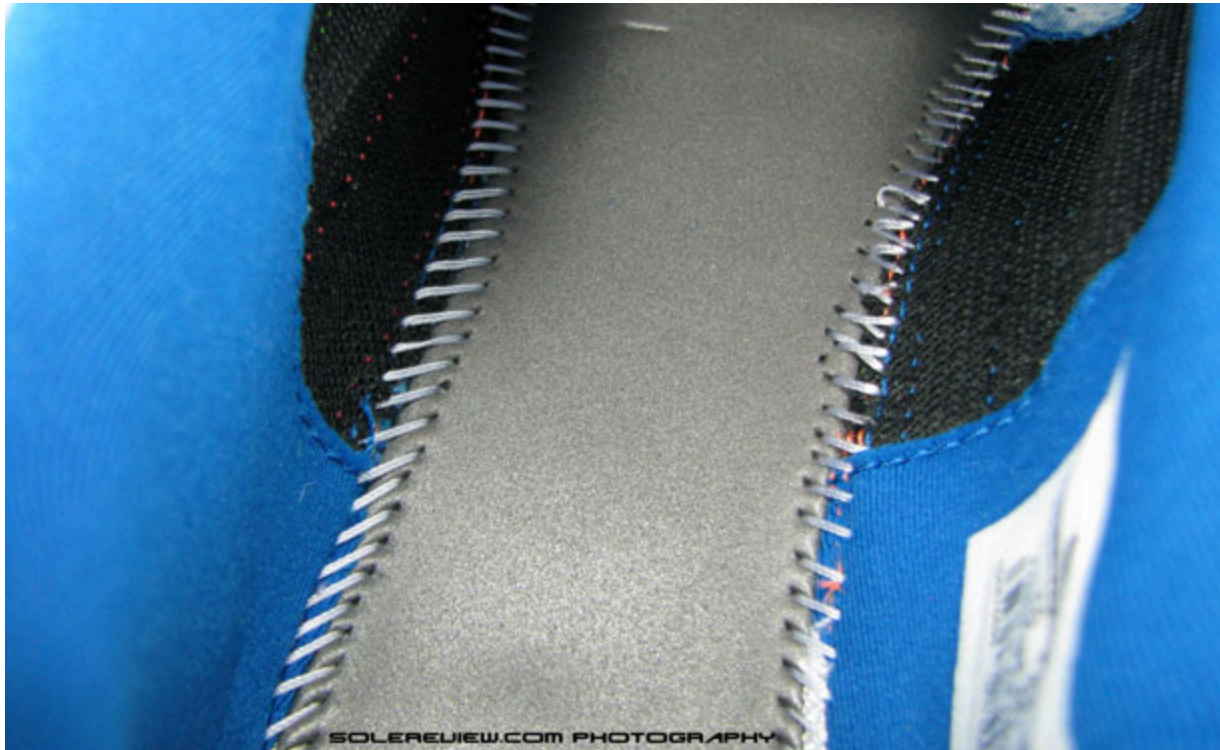
The 2014 Nike Free 5.0 corrects that by use of smaller, hexagonal shapes in the outsole which are closely nested against each other. So when the shoe flexes at forefoot during push offs, part of the outsole foam is always in full contact with the ground – unlike the earlier version where the pressure would be on the chasm between flex grooves.



No outsole flares under the forefoot and heel. Tucked in.

Secondly, the new Free gets rid of midsole flares in the front and heel and tucks them under the upper. The positive outcome of that is less pressure on the edges, and a ride sensation which feels like the weight is spread evenly across the outsole. Foot-strike transition is extremely smooth, in absence of any underfoot gaps or pressure points.

The ride is also helped by the rounded-off heel area, which betters the landing experience for heel strikers. The 2014 Free 5.0 also scoops out some of the midsole foam from the centre of the heel to under arch area, designed to help the foot transition smoothly during the gait cycle. Talk of the arch area, support is impressive, with a longer and prominent midsole flare just under the arch.



Below the insole is another layer of foam. Called the Strobel. Notice lack of Nike Plus Cavity.



The removable Ortholite sockliner. Cushy cushion.

The Free betters itself on cushioning too. By that we don't mean a distracting, plush sink-in feel. The shoe delivers muted dampening throughout, as if the road you're running on has been covered with a rubber mat. The reason behind the improved feel? The new midsole material is softer than the 2013 Free 5.0, so there's improved material compression there. The small hexagonal lugs on the bottom also act as mini 'pistons', pushing inwards under pressure to take the weight off. And both of that is topped off with a few more millimeters of EVA strobel and memory foam like Ortholite insole.

So while the Nike Free 5.0 will be classified by most as a minimal shoe, it will surprise many with its ample cushioning. On a related note, the Nike Plus cavity no longer features on new

2014 Nike models. The Nike Free 5.0 is one of the newer shoes sans the cavity and the 'Nike+' call-out. So if you're old school and still dependent on the Nike Plus hardware, the Free 5.0 might not cut it.



Warning label. Adult supervision required.

The combination of flexibility, smooth transition and cushioning makes the Free ideal for a variety of running workouts, right from fast short runs to long distance mileage. Runners moving up to the Free from full-feature traditional shoes might experience temporary foot soreness initially, but it is nowhere as bad as abruptly switching to Vibram Five Fingers. Nevertheless, the shoe box comes with a warning label (sort of) to educate new adopters on how to ease into the 5.0.

The 2014 Nike Free 5.0: Dislikes

With all the lavish praise showered on Nike Free 5.0, you'd think this shoe was perfect. It would have been, but for a few areas of gloom. Here's our list:



Alas, not all is perfect.

A) There's this forefoot seam at the small toe base, and it digs in during forefoot flex. Not very noticeable when wearing cushioned socks, but downright uncomfortable when trying the shoe barefoot, or wear one of those thin Injinji socks. So don't buy without trying on your size and assessing the fit beforehand.

B) Tongue slide. Funny that a brand whose annual revenue is almost twice the GDP of Iceland still makes \$100 shoes with tongue slide. In the 2013 Free 5.0, this wasn't an issue because the tongue was properly gusseted (attached to the sides). The 2014 Free 5.0? No sir, the tongue is a free agent, going into a sideways slide. Really, Nike?

C) We've never been a 100% convert of the Flywire cord lacing system. They localise pressure too much during forefoot flex, and in our case, we felt a more than ideal tug on the arch area during runs. The sensation increases with speed, as the foot flexes and correspondingly applies a higher pressure on the lacing system. The original Flywire system worked great, with Vectran fibres sandwiched between urethane panels. (2010 Nike Lunaracer is a good example). The cord based lacing is too buggy, and we wish the Free 5.0 moves to full or partial Flyknit like its minimal 3.0 and 4.0 brethren.

D) The lacing pressure is tighter at the top where the laces tie together. The tongue is unpadded so the pressure is directly transferred onto the foot.

E) Lastly, the deep flex grooves are prone to trapping debris, practically making the Free 5.0 outsole community living for small pebbles, dead insects, wood chips and things of that nature. Nothing can be done about this as deep cuts are fundamental to the Free outsole

design. So while you'll have to live with it, care should be taken to restrict usage to clean roads, running tracks and treadmills.

CONCLUSION:

There's no denying that the 10th Nike Free 5.0's tenth year anniversary is a complete reset, bring in its wake a veritable army of evolutionary changes, most of it impressive. The high point of the 2014 Free 5.0 is its redesigned sole unit which delivers a smooth, cushioned ride with a seamless transition and multi-directional flexibility. The upper is re-decked with new materials and construction techniques, and barring a few gaps, the overall package would please most runners. Upper kinks notwithstanding, the fact that the new Nike Free 5.0 platform has immense potential is unquestionable.

At which point, we cannot help but think that the new 3.0 and 4.0 Free Flyknit models would make for interesting reviews. Soon, soon.

THE 2013 NIKE FREE 5.0 Vs. 2014 FREE 5.0:

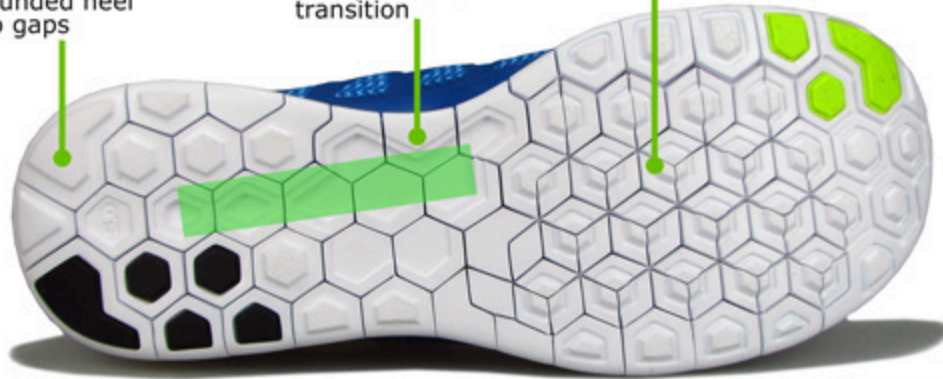
We've covered a lot of the improvements and changes comparing the 2014 version with its earlier version, but here's a recap. All in pictures for easy reference.

Hexagonal flex grooves.
Multi-directional, and
always has ground contact

Less rubber,
rounded heel
no gaps

Heel to midfoot
cavity betters
transition

2014 NIKE FREE 5.0



2013 NIKE FREE 5.0



Want to know the difference? Easy peasy.



We like all the changes. Except the tongue.

(Disclaimer: Solereview paid full US retail price for the shoe reviewed.)