

Make It Matter

Sole Survivors

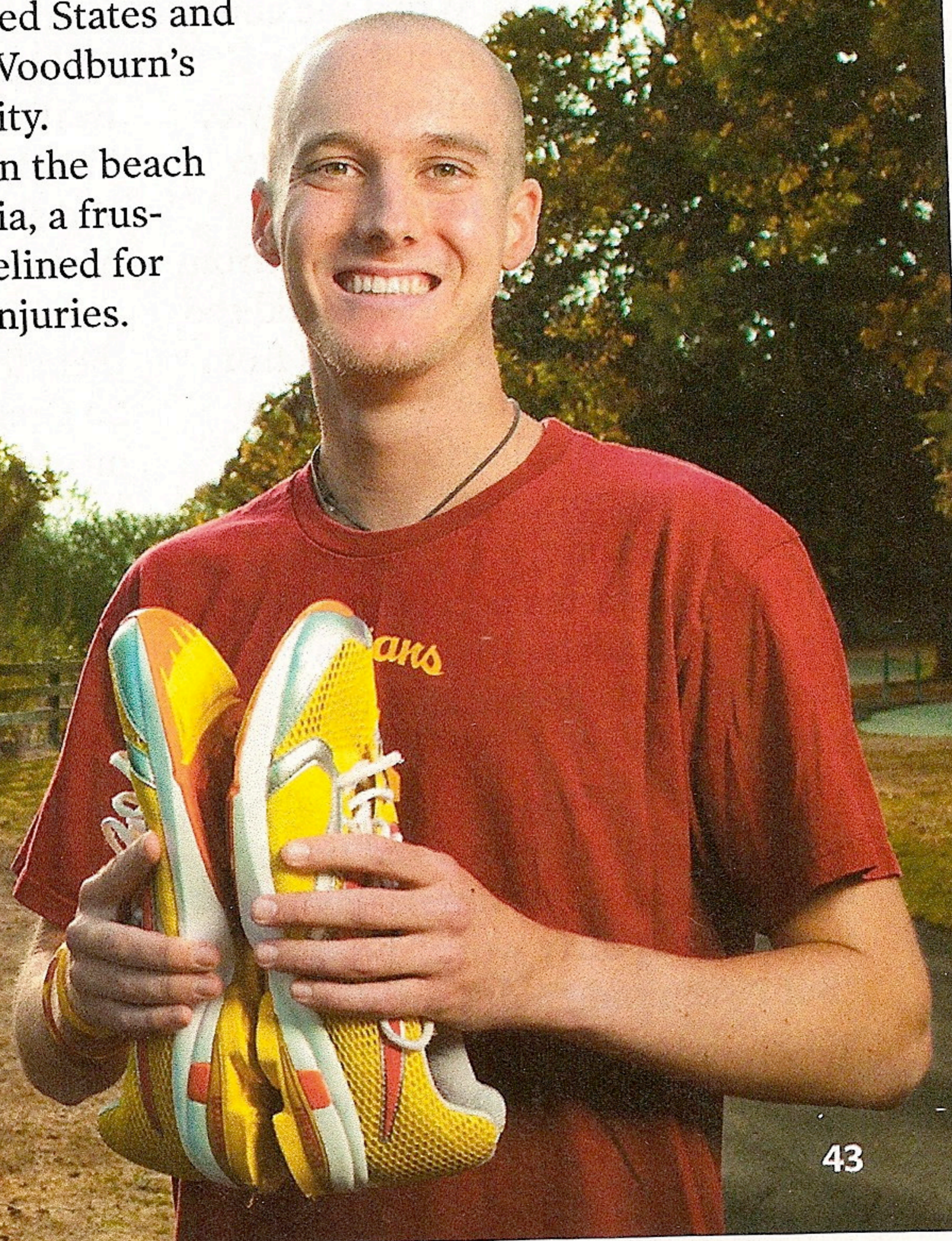
Recycled sneakers, a runner learns, will take kids places they'd only dreamed they could go

BY SALLY SCHULTHEISS

Greg Woodburn, a sophomore at the University of Southern California, spends a lot of time cleaning sneakers. Some of them once belonged to him; some belonged to his friends. But soon the shoes will have new owners: underprivileged children in the United States and 20 other countries, thanks to Woodburn's Share Our Soles (S.O.S.) charity.

A high school track star in the beach town of Ventura, California, a frustrated Woodburn was sidelined for months with knee and hip injuries.

Greg Woodburn's sneakers are fit for sharing.



"I started thinking about all the things I got from running—the health benefits, the friendships, the confidence," he says. "And I realized there are children who don't even have shoes."

Woodburn gathered up his own stash of slightly worn sneakers, then

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put out a call to teammates and the town. His goal was to have 100 pairs by Christmas 2006. When the count climbed to more than 500 pairs ("everything snowballed," he says), he decided to turn the shoe drive into a year-round endeavor.

Back then, the sneakers came from donation boxes at the YMCA and the local sporting goods store and from door-to-door pickups. Woodburn has now set up collection boxes at two high schools, USC's gym and recreation center, and area races, and he has started accepting adult sizes and sandals. To date, S.O.S. has collected and donated more than 3,000 pairs.

And Woodburn has cleaned almost all of them (his parents and track-mates help at exam time). "People think of it as dirty work," he says. "But I like doing it. It's inspiring. It's not work I want to pass off to someone else." After sorting the shoes by

size, Woodburn selects the sturdiest pairs for the washing machine and the threadbare ones for recycling. The rest he piles up by the kitchen sink at his family home in Ventura, and using a scrub brush and dish-washing liquid, he "gets in the zone," he says. "As I work, I imagine who will get each pair." It takes three to five minutes to clean one pair, he estimates, and he'll do up to 100 pairs at a time. "I try to set aside a good amount of time."

To ship the footwear, Woodburn teamed with Sports Gift, a nonprofit organization that provides soccer and baseball equipment to children around the world. Keven Baxter, founder and president, says, "We'd send kids shin guards, balls, and shoes, and I'd hear that for many of these kids, the cleats were the only pair of shoes they had. They'd wear them to school and to do their chores. So Greg's running shoes were a nice addition for us."

In just under three years, Woodburn has started three chapters of Share Our Soles: the original in Ventura, another at USC, and one at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts last January, when a student there wrote asking to get involved. The organization's website (shareoursoles.org) keeps a tally of sneakers that have been cleaned and distributed and sells wristbands and socks (the proceeds go toward new shoes and socks for children).

For many recipients, the shoes represent opportunity. Two young boys in Southern California attended school on alternate days because they shared a pair of shoes, held together with duct tape. They were too big for one boy and too small for the other. Thanks to S.O.S., each brother received his own pair of

shoes. The boys now attend school daily and look forward to recess with their friends. When they graduate, they say, they will help a stranger, just as Woodburn helped them.



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