

INNOVATORS: TINKER HATFIELD

This new series of features in *WSA* will aim to tell the stories of people, ideas and companies that have had a lasting effect on the sports and outdoor industry. We aim to highlight outstanding thinking and practice, from groups or individuals, that still benefit athletes and enthusiasts today and tell a powerful story. We begin the series with Tinker Hatfield, vice-president for design and special projects at Nike.

30 years in shoes, and counting

This year is Tinker Hatfield's thirtieth in shoe design. He joined Nike in 1981, but it was 1985 before he embarked on his first footwear projects. Two years later, his first Air Max design came out, causing a storm with the air cushioning unit at the heel. Nike used a Beatles song (Revolution) in its advertising campaign for the first Air Max, which no one had ever done before. Something was in the air, you might say.

In parallel, he worked on the Air Jordan III, the first version of the basketball shoes to include a visible air unit for cushioning and the 'Nike Air' logo on the heel. Legend has it that basketball star Michael Jordan had been ready to walk away from Nike after the first two versions of the shoe that bears his name, but that the design Tinker Hatfield came up with convinced him to stay with the brand. Tinker Hatfield continued working on Air Jordans, leading the design of every version up to and including XV, and made a return for the XX3 in 2008; he also co-designed the Air Jordans 2010 and XX8.

On the Air Max side of the business, the revolution continues. In spring 2014, Nike will release three new takes on the Air Max 90 version of the shoe: the Air Max Lunar 90, Air Max 90 Jacquard and Air Max 90 Ice, incorporating technologies such as Lunarlon foam, no-sew construction, jacquard weaving and Phylon cushioning material. The brand's contention is that, when he introduced Nike Air as a cushioning system, Tinker Hatfield changed the design of running shoes for ever. And he changed the company: from 1987 on, Nike said it would "let innovation speak for itself".

When asked, as he often is, to pick out his own favourite, he chooses the Air Jordan XI from 1995, for the creativity of the design and its use

Nike vice-president for design and special projects, Tinker Hatfield.



of innovative materials, including Cordura nylon, with leather, in the upper for lightweight durability. More than anything, though, he loves this shoe because of "the context". Michael Jordan had retired from basketball when Mr Hatfield was working on its design. "I was told point blank by various people higher up than me to stop," he recalls. "I just said, 'no, I'm not going to stop'. I knew Michael well enough to figure he was going to come back. I knew he had such a strong legacy of quality and excellence that his personality and mark, the Jumpman, would live on for ever. I had faith in his power. I worked especially hard on the Jordan XI, and that's one reason why there was so much new stuff in it. I wanted to prove to people that we were just skimming the surface."

He is still interested in new materials, and hopes his technical colleagues can find ways of allowing nanotechnology and microfibre materials to pass his company's strict physical testing programmes. "They are super-lightweight, and they have an interesting ability to stretch and come back into the right shape," he says. "But sometimes those materials don't pass our abrasion tests. It's a tricky combination to get a material to do several things well. We have some nanotechnology-type fibres that I would love to use." He names Swiss textile technology firm Schoeller as a supplier he greatly admires for making "some of the most amazing things you could ever imagine; they just live to engineer fantastic new materials".

Architect of his own destiny

Perhaps the revolution would have come about more quickly if Mr Hatfield had not spent his first four years at the company designing shop and office interiors instead of shoes, but he was hired as an architect, having found time to combine serious study with an impressive track career at the University of Oregon in the 1970s. He speaks freely about the benefits he feels his shoe designs have gained from his architecture background. He worked hard to build up his knowledge and expertise and is pleased to have found a rewarding way of using them.

"It was really difficult for me to do it," he says of the undergraduate course. "I don't think I was quite prepared coming out of high school. I was more of an athlete than I was a student, even though I did okay. Anyway, architecture forced me to open my eyes up and look around and pay attention to all things, thinking about what is really important to people. That's something I learned very early on in my architecture education." Perhaps the most famous example is that the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris formed part of his inspiration for the Air Max shoe.

"Design, for a lot of people, is a mysterious



Life on the streets. Inspiration for the 1992 Air Raid shoe came from watching young people play basketball on inner-city courts.

 Nike

process," he says. "I always start off with athletes: I'm a problem-solver and I want to make sure that whatever I design will help [athletes] perform better." Winner of 17 tennis Grand Slam singles titles, Roger Federer, represents a good example of this, the Nike vice-president for design explains. "He has very specific needs as a tennis player," he says of the Swiss athlete, "especially as he's always been known for his footwork. His feet are really important because how he moves around the court has probably separated him from most other tennis players over the long haul: his feet are always in the right place." Conversations around shoes have centred on how Roger Federer moves, how he starts, how he stops and what his best move is. Tinker Hatfield has tried to contour the shape of the bottom of the tennis star's shoes to tie in with this, while still making them comfortable enough to wear in the longest of matches, which can sometimes mean four or five hours. Other prominent athletes that he says engage well with the design process include Real Madrid and Portugal national team footballer Cristiano Ronaldo.

Urban phenomenon

Curiosity is an important quality for any shoe designer to have, he insists, and he uses the 1992 Air Raid shoe as an example. He spent time in New York City and on the West Coast of the US watching young people play basketball on caged-off city courts (very much an urban phenomenon, and a strange one for someone who grew up in Halsey, Oregon, which has a population of under 1,000), talking to them about what they liked and didn't like and what they needed. He recognises now that this exercise could have put him "a little bit on the dangerous side" at times, but he says it helped inform him about the best direction in which to take the product, which was a response to Reebok's Blacktop, the first outdoor basketball

shoe. The time he spent around these street athletes and observing at the same time what was going on around the courts in terms of music and “going deeply into that culture” contributed greatly to that response. Later, this included a collaboration with film director Spike Lee. “Sometimes you’re first with an idea,” he says looking back. “Sometimes you’re not first, but you just do a better job.”

Corporate animal

Even at his level, though, it’s necessary to do the job within a corporate structure. After 33 years at Nike, Tinker Hatfield has learned a lot about how big corporations work. When he completed the design of the Nike Flight Huarache in the early 1990s, he was very excited, but the corporate sales team was only able to secure advance orders for 5,000 pairs. “It looked as though the project was dead,” he says now, “because the sales didn’t meet our minimums.” He explains that the company probably would have been looking for advance orders of closer to 100,000 pairs before putting the shoe into full production. The original design looked unusual: it had no heel counter, no ‘swoosh’ on the upper, it was one-piece, there was exposed foam on the bottom, a neoprene inner bootie and an exoskeleton showing on the outside. “No one had ever done that before,” he says, “and I thought it was going to be a great shoe.” Wear-testing was positive: testers said it looked good and felt good when they put it on. But when samples went out to the sales team, the early results were poor and the shoe’s chances of success appeared to be over.

However, a marketing executive, who Mr Hatfield says believed in the Nike Flight Huarache, “stuck his neck out” and ordered the 5,000 pairs from manufacturing partners. He took them to New York City at the time of the marathon, set up a booth there and sold every pair within two days. From there, it “sailed into the marketplace” and attracted a big following among sneaker-heads. “When you design for Nike, you have three different customers,” he explains. “Your first customer is yourself. Your second customer is your internal organisation. You have to satisfy yourself first, then you have to satisfy the internal organisation. Then the final customer is the person who will decide that your design is worth putting down cash for.”

Citizen of the world

To continue to find inspiration, Tinker Hatfield still travels a lot. He says he loves living in Portland, Oregon, referring to it as a beautiful city, while acknowledging that “it’s not the centre of the universe”. So he travels far and wide, attending events, going to concerts and plays, just walking in the streets, keeping his eyes open, looking at scenery and talking to people. He’s attracted to the “honesty” he can build into his designs from doing this, even if this means appearing to “the suits” as a troublemaker sometimes. He says that if “the suits” like a new design, he feels he has failed. “They are smart and great people, but they are risk-averse,” he says, “and if they like a shoe, it probably isn’t forward enough or going to change the way shoes are perceived enough. You need to shake up the country club a bit.”

Nike Air 90





Nike Flight Huarace



Returning to the Air Jordan XI example, he relates that Michael Jordan had spoken to him years before about making a shiny basketball shoe. Tinker Hatfield's initial reaction was that there would have to be a good reason for going down that road. He found the reason much later while watching baseball in Japan, where some players had begun wearing shoes with a special patent leather in the upper. "It's culturally important there to keep everything really clean and fresh," he explains. "These professional baseball players wanted high-quality patent leather in their shoes to make it easier to keep them clean. And I got my hands on that stuff. And when Michael Jordan saw the first samples of the Jordan XI, he said, 'You wait. People will be wearing these with tuxedos'. And he was right. Before the public release of the shoes, [R&B vocal group] Boyz II Men appeared at the American Music Awards wearing the shoes with tuxedos."

Eye on the future

He thinks there are lots of talented young footwear designers around, but feels the disconnect between their ideas, in many instances, and the commercial world is that, amid the "artistic promise and passion" their designs seem to seek to solve no specific problems for wearers. It is responding to this challenge, as well as having a good story to back up the design, that will generate jobs for next-generation shoe designers, he insists.

He realises, of course, that the time must come for him to step aside, but he is on the record as being committed to "going out with a bang". He knows things now that he didn't know in the 1980s and 1990s, he confirms, meaning that extra knowledge and insight can go into his swan-song shoes, when the time comes. "I want to go out having been a positive influence on young people," is how Tinker Hatfield sums it up. "And I want to go out having contributed to the wellbeing of a very large company that provides a lot of jobs and a lot of wealth back to the community, as well as a lot of joy and interest." He has suggested that when he finally hangs up his pencil, he may devote more energy and more time to helping young designers make their own way in the world of footwear. "Maybe that would be the 'bang'," he says. "It might be some new thing that I can come up with, and maybe I'll never be done, but it might be going out as a designer and coming back as even more of a teacher." 



Ecoya® ATY

Cotton like

Eco-friendly

Color fastness to light

Color fastness to water and washing

LIBOLON

www.LIBOLON.com
marketing@libolon.com

 **ISPO MUNICH**
January 26 to 29, 2014

Booth
Hall C2.316