

Blazing a trail through outdoor

The faster and more hard-core the sport, the more technical and brighter the product', that was the clear message at the recent OutDoor Fair in Friedrichshafen, Germany, reports Penny Leese. While traditional hiking and walking have received a massive amount of support and still attract new members, thanks to the current crazes—trail walking and running—there are some truly exciting new footwear developments on the scene.

Nordic walking is still going strong, but seems to have been adopted with enthusiasm by the more mature segment of the market as a means of getting fit. Colours and styles are conservative beige, brown and black, with nubuck, suede uppers and chunky shock absorbing soles. Membranes are popular, as the shoes can then be worn in all weathers. The borderline between hiking and walking is blurring with many more 'casual walking' shoes, suitable for short walks on all terrains and even in the city. Low cuts which are softer and don't need 'wearing in' are also gaining ground over heavier traditional walking boots.

Trail walking and running, on the other hand, are viewed as young and very trendy sports, which was evident at Outdoor in the vibrant colours and novel use of materials on show. Trail walking shoes have been developed from hiking boots which, in the not too distant past, were considered the only correct footwear for serious walkers. However, there is now a demand for lighter footwear, especially for walkers who just want to get out and enjoy themselves. Trail walking footwear has improved over the years with components such as suede uppers, Cordura, padded collars, Vibram soles, waterproof membranes and good heel support. Italian factories from the Montebelluna area have quickly followed the lead from German-speaking brands such as Lowa and Meindl



Bright colours now dominate. (left) Technical trail runner by Montrail and (above) Salomon's LightHiking range.

 Montrail / Salomon

by producing comfortable low cuts thus making trail walking a much more accessible pursuit than hiking in heavy boots.

While trail walkers may be considered 'amateurs' by serious hikers, fell runners were once considered total and utter maniacs by 'true' British walkers only 20 years ago. Running alone across the Derbyshire Peaks in weather that can change from sunshine to thunderstorms within the space of a minute, without proper equipment, was considered irresponsible. Attitudes have changed drastically since then, and trail running is now an 'aspirational' sport. ACG makes trail running shoes, but not trail walking shoes, because it is a 'cool' sports shoe company with a 'young' mindset. The trail running shoes of today come in all sorts of vibrant safety colours, and are extremely light and relatively unstructured.

Colours are often wild, demanded by the English fell runners, who still like to feel they are an eccentric breed.

Green remains the 'in' colour

The environment remains popular and was a strong theme across the collections on show. ACG's 'Considered' trail running shoes use no glue and lots of recycled materials. Reinforcements are kept to a minimum and the entire shoe is so soft it can be rolled up and put in a back pack. The bottom midsole is reinforced with hemp, in a sacking look open weave, but is combined with fashionable colours such as faded pinks for the ladies' collections. The shoes are extremely open and breathable, with a minimal heel cap and a fast lacing system. The company tries to source raw materials within a 200km radius of production and many components are recyclable. In the factory, the rubber is reground and reused.

Well-known for its environmental consciousness Patagonia launched a new footwear collection, in line with its organic and ethical clothing philosophy. Through a deal with Wolverine's Outdoor Group which includes Merrell, the brand launched a new 31-style range of footwear that is in keeping with its ecological policies. "We have had increasing requests to completely outfit our customers from head to foot—the launch of our footwear collection allows us to do just this," says Casey Sheahan, Patagonia's president and CEO. This led to a range of new approaches and materials including latex from the milk of *Hevea* trees, sustainably grown and which actually benefit from the milking; hemp uppers in some styles; vegetable based laces for some styles; a new Ecostep outsole formulated by Vibram which uses up to 30% scrap rubber; and environmentally-friendly leather, which meets ISO 14001—a tough environmental management standard.



Soft shell walker by Salomon.



Natural fibres and materials featured prominently in other collections too, with silver ions used in insoles as a non-allergenic anti-bacterial. Vaude uses Cocona, made from coconut husks to accelerate moisture transport and DriLex has now incorporated Portuguese company Tearfil's Sea Cell into its range, a technology based on seaweed which conquers the eternal problem of body odour clinging to synthetic fibres.

Natural materials are not only a substitute for synthetics to protect the environment either, their integration offers improved comfort and wearability too. Timberland and SmartWool joined forces when Timberland acquired SmartWool and the two companies' products are now becoming more synergised. Whilst last season there were merely visual collaborations—a nice boot with a woollen outside collar, the products are now properly integrated to provide a comfortable pre-moulded removable footbed with an elasticised removable SmartWool sock cover that can be taken off, washed and dried, keeping odour to a minimum and comfort to a maximum.



Patagonia's Huckleberry shoe.





Even dogs are catered for in trail walking and running. Dog shoes from Ruff Wear.

 Ruff Wear

Demand shapes the market

In contrast to the stiff and hard leather trekking boots of bygone days, lighter, more comfortable and flexible shoes are now the popular choice. As people now carry their own luggage, everything for hiking and trekking is pared down and lightweight. Travel shoes have become a category in their own right and this has led to new developments. Tecnica's travel line is called T shoes which are twistable, packable and flexible with the uppers made from very light synthetic textile with the minimum of seaming. Lowa's walking shoes are lighter, with its Exo Skeleton styles proving very popular. Meanwhile, Salewa launched its 'Well Considered' footwear line which is said to offer a blister-free guarantee and uses different thicknesses of leather for the uppers to reduce weight and provide a better fit.

Lightweight footwear is particularly relevant for female trail walkers and runners and women-specific ranges were prominent at Outdoor. Trail walking and running are friendly, often non-competitive outdoor pursuits, that appeal to women, and their families. Until recently women have been poorly supplied, but authentic sports brands such as Rossignol and Salomon have now designed women-only product from the bottom up (and not by merely producing male products in pink shades and smaller sizes, but by looking at women's specific needs). In Merrell's line, the men's and women's shoes look similar, but they are in fact built on totally different lasts and hoe brands are finally following suit.

Even canine trail runners are now catered for! Ruff Wear from America makes running shoes with Vibram soles for dogs. They protect their paws from broken glass and in winter prevent snow from compacting into ice and cutting them. The Ruff Wear shoes have a jogger type toe, coming up the front of the toe box, and a reinforced toecap.

Cool shoes for hot days

As July 2006 was the hottest ever recorded in many European countries, cooling systems for shoes are more in demand than ever before. Trezeta's Dry on the Move is both waterproof and breathable; a three-dimensional fabric which is applied to the footbed and along the sides of the ankles provides a ventilation channel that pumps the hot air out of the shoes. Ecco's trail runners have metal mesh panels that help keep feet cool while still protecting them from thorns, brambles and sharp objects such as broken glass (a common hazard today in the outdoors, unfortunately). Aqua socks and sporty sandals are also overlapping these days. The new sporty sandals have big rubber toes, complex lacing systems and lots of mesh and cut outs. From Timberland there is high grade nubuck, mesh for water to drain out and technical dual density soles with sticky rubber lugs in strategic patches. With the demand for greater speed and lightness, drainage has become important in water footwear. The North Face's water collection even has non-marking soles, to consider the environment. 

Lightweight Tampa Lady GTX boot by Meindl.

 Meindl

