



On March 21 2001, the last pair of American-made Converse All Stars was stitched together at the plant in Lumberton, North Carolina. The factory gates were shut and, for a while, it seemed as if the trainer that had been recognised by Vogue and GQ magazines as a fashion classic would be left to fray on the feet of millions, writes Chris Stevens.

Sole survivor: the Converse All Star

The Apollo 13 crew wore them and both Kurt Cobain and River Phoenix died in a black pair. The US Army wore them to Vietnam, civil rights activist Hosea Williams was buried in his and Magic Johnson played the game of his life in a pair. The Converse story spans over a hundred years and the All Star trainer embraced both the invention of vulcanised rubber in the 1900s and the less beneficial invention of grunge-chic in the 1990s. Behind the shoe's fantastic success hides the charismatic grin of Chuck Taylor, flawed basketball star and Forest Gump of the All Star brand, who is almost single-handedly credited with the success of the most popular sub-culture badge of the last decade.

Since its introduction in 1921, Converse has sold over 600 million Chuck Taylor All Stars and,

in all this time, the design remained unchanged. Today it is popular with skate boarders, rock stars, movie directors and nostalgic baby-boomers. In the late 1960s, All Stars commanded over 90% of the professional basketball trainer market in the US. Far from the ideals of the disciplined sport that inspired them, in the 1980s and 90s Chucks came to represent artistic licence and freedom from the world of work. Their multi-colours, low cost (\$10-\$20) and clean lines made it easy to make a fashion statement. The All Star became a badge of cool and all the more so because it was a footwear choice not prescribed by slick advertising.

Chuck Taylor spent most of his adult life travelling the US in his Cadillac, preaching Basketball and the merits of the rubber-soled All Star. Single handed, he set up basketball clinics to tutor local teams and befriended coaches with



his warmth and enthusiasm. He lived in hotel rooms all year round and so relentless was his dedication to the brand that he had no house or apartment until he was 60 and, instead, stored his belongings in a warehouse. Today, All Stars are more popular than ever. But they almost didn't make it this far, as after Chuck Taylor died in 1969 Converse fell into decline. Then adidas introduced a new type trainer, with the sole bonded by adhesive, rather than the vulcanising process Converse had popularised.

The leather and nylon upper of adidas trainers made the All Stars canvas upper seem flimsy. The All Stars simple design and comfortable fit gave way to an era of air-filled soles, pseudo-science, marketing gimmickry and superstar endorsement, championed by companies such as Nike and Reebok. All Stars, the shoe once advertised with the slogan "When your feet start to slip and slide, buy the sneaker with the star on the side", had itself been hustled off American basketball courts by companies whose marketing vision went beyond one man and a Cadillac.

Many people recall their first pair of 'Chucks' with the same wistful joy a mother uses to describe the arrival of a child. They are perhaps the only shoe ever truly loved, and the only one to have the distinctive styling that defines ageless fashion. Like the VW Beetle, they are universally recognised - there is no mistaking them: a string of eyelets running ankle-high, extra-long laces tied crisscross and an All Star patch with the name Chuck Taylor. Such is some wearer's devotion that when Converse filed for bankruptcy, one woman phoned the company switchboard in Massachusetts and ordered 50 pairs of All Stars for her husband, explaining that Chucks were the only shoes he would wear. All Stars are even exhibited in the Smithsonian and the National Museum of American History.

Although Chuck Taylor is honoured in the Basketball Hall of Fame, he was only inducted a year before his death and, in fact, never played professionally. Although a high school basketball star, he dropped out of college at twenty and began working for Converse in 1921, having walked into the Chicago headquarters and talked his way into a job. He was keen to prove Converse's appeal to professional basketball players and quizzed coaches about what they thought would make a great trainer, finally deciding on an ankle boot with flexibility, grip and ventilation. Despite the All Stars prototype having been produced ten



years earlier, it was Taylor who secured its reputation by suggesting changes to improve support, traction and ruggedness. Converse adapted the shoe and a classic was born.

Taylor would roll into town, head to the nearest sports shop, promote Converse All Stars to customers and managers, before giving free basketball tuition at the local high school. When, in 1923, his name was added to the trainer's ankle patch, it confirmed what anyone who met Taylor already knew - the best-selling basketball trainer was uniquely his. Louisiana state athletic director, Joe Dean, recalls "He lived a fabulous life, did what he wanted to do and knew every coach and athletic director in America. He was unpretentious, but in the athletic world there was a period in the 60s when everyone knew who he was." Converse sold over 10 million All Stars in the 1960s. Gymnasiums across the US echoed with the shrill squeak of the All Stars rubber soles, whilst Taylor drove his Cadillac further afield.

Wherever the feet of Americans went, a pair of All Stars went too. The crew of Apollo 13 wore them to the launch site and GIs were issued Chucks in World War II. Taylor himself was behind this. Appointed fitness consultant to the US Army, he tactfully suggested All Stars were the best shoes for soldiers to train in. The same grip and flexibility that fared so well on the basketball court were soon being tested on airstrips to much more life-dependent effect. Post-war, Taylor saw basketball teams were threading their Chucks with coloured laces or dyeing the uppers - only available in black or

1. Lightweight canvas.
2. 'Foot Form' curvature for fit, comfort and support.
3. Sponge insole and arch cushion.
4. The "Peg-top" upper on the high top shoe gives extra support without binding the ankle.
5. Loose lined and ventilated army duck uppers.
6. Under-stitched web tape backstay for extra strength.
7. Rugged protective toe guard.
8. Permanent-set eyelets.
9. Double sole binding for flexible strength.
10. Non-marking, positive traction outsole.
11. Ventilating eyelets





white. Seeing a need to add variety, Converse began to produce different colours in 1966, a change that meant by 1988 there would be over 56 colours and designs. This spread the All Stars appeal and transformed it from the serious athletics trainer Taylor had envisaged in 1921 to the cultural icon it would eventually become.

But, during this change of identity, the brand suffered in the international sports market. Rivals' technological innovations and the explosion of high-tech sports shoe ranges meant the All Star brand just could not jump as high as its competitors, at least on TV. Although the scientific reality of many marketing campaigns was often as vacuous as the air in the soles of the shoes, Converse soon found itself failing in a market that, ironically, it had created a few decades earlier. But the fact was that, by the late 1960s, players were bigger and faster and the sport more physically demanding. The All Stars excellent grip was no compensation for its lack of cushioning and ankle support. Soon a shoe that had been a must-have for athletes earlier in the century would be found improbably on the feet of grunge-rock star Kurt Cobain and other alternative culture idols.

As the new millennium began, lacklustre marketing and a series of misguided attempts to revitalise the brand with new but flawed designs pushed Converse into bankruptcy. Plummeting sales and massive debts meant all Converse plants were closed and, on March 21 2001, America's last pair of canvas shoes trundled off a conveyor belt and fell into a box that must have felt like a coffin for the famous All Star. Perhaps Chuck Taylor had spent the previous twenty years peddling All Stars to the angels, because this was far from the end for Converse. Soon after the company's collapse, entrepreneurs and Chuck-fans William Simon and Marsden Cason bought Converse and quickly began manufacturing All Stars again, though this time in Asia. The two owners are now planning to once more make Converse a public company and a planned share offering is expected to raise more than \$85 million.

The All Star had been the world's first mass-produced canvas and vulcanised rubber shoe, produced by a company whose roots traced directly back to BF Goodrich. Moving production to Asia resulted in manufacturing changes and loss of the



'Made in USA' heel-tag. While many fans of the original were disappointed to lose this detail, All Stars are now available in a range of completely new colours and designs, changes Converse

had lost enthusiasm for in the US. Visually, the design remains unchanged, its construction

almost identical to the original Chuck Taylor design and his name is still on the ankle-patch. "A famous baseball player?" suggests a group of Chuck-wearing skate-boarders. But, as coach Bill Stearman said, "Better players have come and gone, but none have done more for a single shoe." 🏀