



Focus on footwear

Super Show - ready to retire?

The self-diagnosis from within is that "the sporting goods industry is faced with changes that are advancing so rapidly on so many different fronts that, combined, they pose a challenge of unequalled magnitude". Changes were evident in Atlanta last February where the once mighty Super Show put on a less than stellar final performance at sixty percent before moving on to Las Vegas for 2001.

Changes are occurring in the infrastructure of the industry, both at the manufacturing and retailing levels. In addition to shifting consumer buying patterns due to e-commerce, two major bankruptcies by top ten footwear retailers (Just for Feet and Jumbo Sports) within six months have left the industry reeling. Another burning question for retailers in today's society is whether to open stores in 'outlet malls', fast growing around the United States. Changing demographic and generational differences have shifted towards the 'baby boomers' who are less inclined to participate in the 'grunt' sports and more likely to take up health conscious activities such as walking and yoga. The show was not helped by Nike's withdrawal in 1998 which has largely resulted in most of the other major footwear suppliers such as Adidas, Reebok, Asics, and K-Swiss, electing not to show at this year's Expo.

The notable exception was New Balance which continued to parlay the stagnant sport shoe market at this year's show. Rolling out its new acquisition - Dunham Bootmakers - and boasting a 28% increase in walking category sales, New Balance continues to improve its market position with its 'More intelligent way of shoemaking' and "Endorsed by no one" approach.

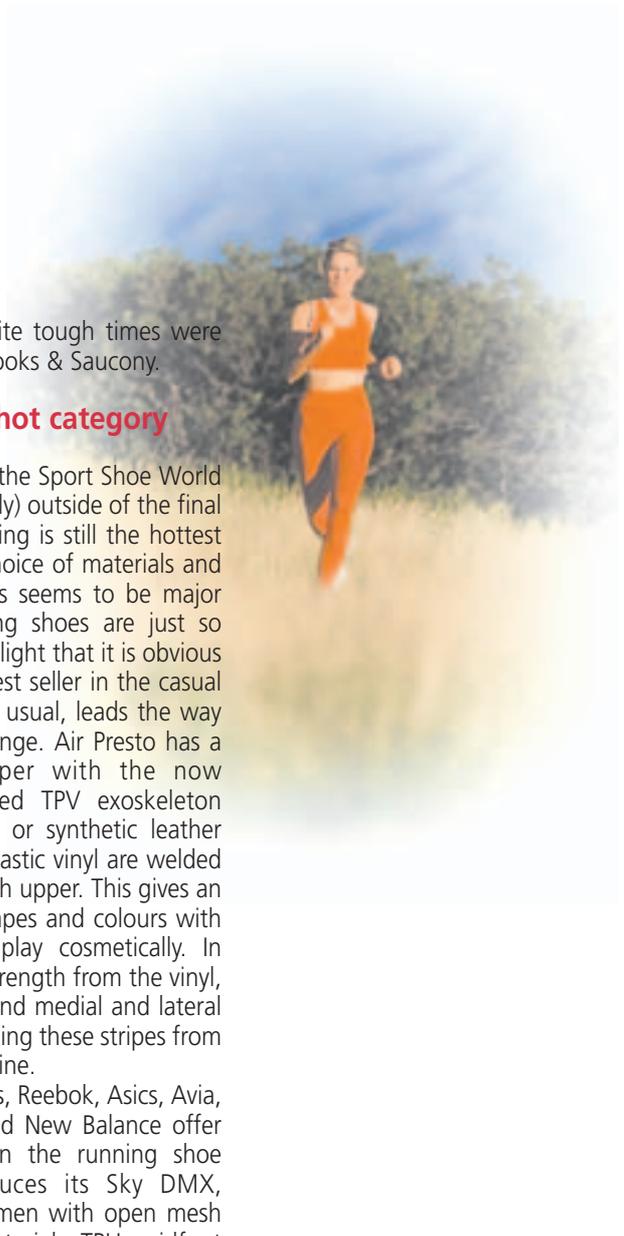
Having built its business on a traditional shoemaker's feature - width fittings - NB claim as much as 50% of close to its \$1 billion world wide sales to be in shoe widths other than men's D and woman's B fittings. Another company on an up beat at the show was American Sporting Goods with its stable of Avia, Turntec, Nevados and recently acquired Ryka and Yukon brands.

Others looking good despite tough times were running shoe specialists Brooks & Saucony.

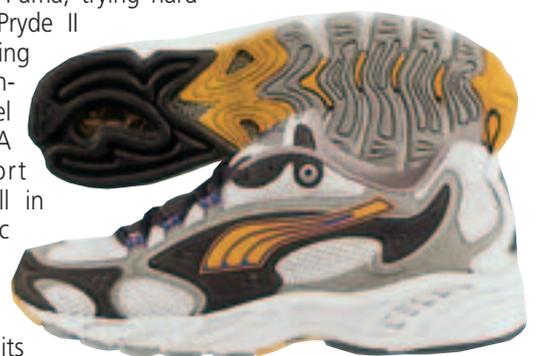
Running is the only hot category

Here is an industry look at the Sport Shoe World from both inside and (mostly) outside of the final Atlanta Super Show. Running is still the hottest ticket at the retail level. Choice of materials and 'factory nightmare' designs seems to be major emphases for Fall. Running shoes are just so incredibly comfortable and light that it is obvious why they are a constant best seller in the casual American market. Nike, as usual, leads the way with a striking cosmetic range. Air Presto has a stretch mesh nylon upper with the now universally popular 'welded TPV exoskeleton overlay'. Instead of suede or synthetic leather overlays, strips of thermoplastic vinyl are welded directly onto the nylon mesh upper. This gives an inexhaustible variety of shapes and colours with which the designer can play cosmetically. In addition, with the added strength from the vinyl, eyelets can be reinforced and medial and lateral support achieved by extending these stripes from the eyestay to the feather line.

Minus the air bag, Adidas, Reebok, Asics, Avia, Brooks, Saucony, Puma and New Balance offer similar strong showings in the running shoe category. Reebok introduces its Sky DMX, available for men and women with open mesh upper, 3M Scotchlite material, TPU midfoot support bridge, 3D Ultralite and DMX 10 chamber cushioning system. Puma, trying hard to rebound, rolled out its Pryde II model featuring puff moulding detail, iCell cushioning technology in the forefoot and heel and two-density CM-EVA midsole Arch Tec support system. Brooks showed well in Atlanta with new cosmetic versions of its popular Beast and Trance models. Brooks has specialised in the running shoe category for years and its



Pryde II by Puma.





The innovative new Spring-Air System by Aura.

traditionally best selling sports category and there is so much more scope to innovate technically and cosmetically in a larger basketball shoe. Nike still dominates a slightly reduced market segment with six of the top 20 selling shoes in this category. Cosmetically spectacular models this year are the Air Pippen IV with a synthetic nylon upper and Zoom Air sole unit, Air Garnett mid-cut and Air Jordan XV and BG Air Jordan XV (yes, he's still around). And 1 brand has made a nice inroad into the basketball niche with its Double Cross Mid and Smooth low-cut models. They feature the usual mandatory shock-absorbency system, which in this case is called DuraSpring.

Converse, having recently suffered yet another undulating dip in fortune by being taken off the stock exchange trading board, showed some excellent models both in its 'Classics' range and in continuing the recently introduced Helium gas cushioning system. As the longest surviving specialised basketball brand in existence it was somewhat sad to see the company tucked away in a room off the main traffic area at the show. At least Converse supported the show.

Reebok has introduced its Full Court DMX model with a new lacing system and it still has one of the better selling models at retail with its Answer III DMX.

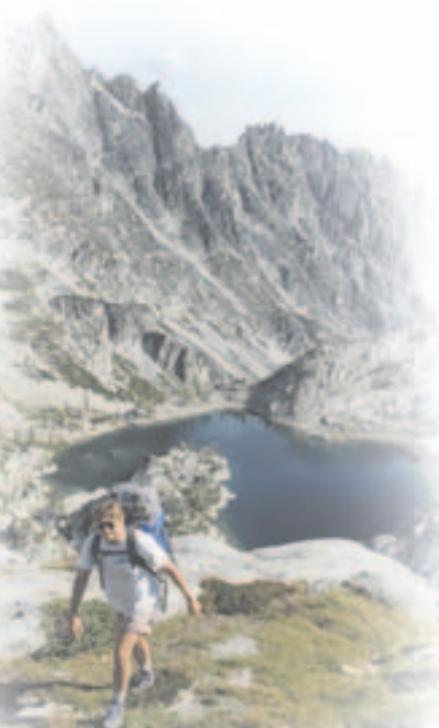
Fila, an almost forgotten shoe brand these days, is still around in basketball with its Duo Matix model. Fila was the first brand to start the current cosmetic trend in sports footwear ten years ago. Unsustained by a lack of technology and now surpassed by other clever cosmetic brands, Fila has suffered one of the biggest declines in sales in the sport shoe business in the past five years.

technology emphasis on cushioning, forefoot flex path and stability shows well in a controlled quality range. Avia's entry features its 2091A and 686 WBS models. Both have the familiar mechanical Cantilever shock absorbency system and are priced with an aggressive marketing and promotional direction. Adidas, not to be overlooked in one of its traditionally strong categories, offers the Incision model which is available in both men's and women's versions with a water-resistant mesh and synthetic upper, EVA/Carbon TraXion lugs, TorSion stability and adiPRENE technologies.

Not shown in Atlanta but rejuvenated in the market is the Z-Coil 'Ultimate' running shoe. First launched two years ago, the Z-Coil consists of an exposed steel spring embedded in the midsole at the heel area. The spring measures three inches wide by an inch high and is cone shaped to allow compression within itself. With each step it compresses 25 millimetres, compared with the average running shoe, which compresses 10 millimetres. The spring absorbs the impact of each heel strike, reducing stress and pressure on the body. Will it be a commercial success? Well, springs and wheels have been talked about for years in the shoe industry, and remember what happened when the old quad-wheel idea was transformed into inline. One never knows.

Walking

Walking continues to do well. One of the generation changes to benefit a category, walking is a major category for brands such as New Balance, Nike, Reebok and Adidas. New Balance, with its traditional width fitting appeal, has carved out a strong position in this segment of the market. NB divides its walking category into country and athletic models. Combined, NB has 30 different walking models for men and women from a sporting looking Racer (MW840WB) to the brown Outdoor (MW972GN) model featuring Abzorb cushioning and waterproof uppers. Adidas offer a new walking model it calls Salus for Fall 2000. It is a more jazzy racer featuring a two-colour, full-grain/mesh upper with flex grooves, TorSion, adiPRENE and adiPRENE+ technologies (adiPRENE is an exclusive Adidas EVA midsole compound). Saucony's Grid Motion is one of its better models with visible rearfoot soft grid shock deflecting



Saucony's most technical men's walking shoe with grid motion.



Basketball

Basketball continues to be strongly attacked at the manufacturing level mainly because it is a



system; instep bridge and motion control device.

Nike, not to be ignored in any category, lists its lead walking shoe as the Air Radiant with mesh/SLP/synthetic overlays, full-length PU midsole, and Vis-Air sole. This model also follows the mini-trend of adding colour to mesh vamps and side quarters on exercise walking shoes.

the Adidas Quake model with welded Napos Cage (its name for TPV or TPU welding direct to nylon mesh), Reebok's Crackerjack Low DMX (also with welded cosmetics) and Ryka's with a Guidance Control collar and advanced Nitracel sockliner.

A major niche category of note (other than traditional studs and cleats) is the tennis segment, which as usual is well represented by its specialised devotees such as Prince, Wilson, and Head, as well as by the major high-profile brands. Fila also has a strong history in this category and has decided to rededicate itself to its tennis roots. Nike's Zoom Beyond Plus features synthetic leather and mesh supportive upper with midfoot shank and Zoom Air bag encapsulated in phylon EVA. Prince offers its Overtime model with a leather and mesh upper, moulded medial and lateral vents, ShockEraser heel cushioning system and self-cleaning herring-bone pods outsole. Wilson updates its Pro Staff Extreme for the fourth time with a visible TPU Stable-Wrap, midfoot bridge and visible cushion core midsole technology. Reebok leads its tennis range with the Rapidfire II DMX featuring Duracourt Plus toe guard, spinner toe overlay and pillar designed outsole.

From Adidas comes the Equipment Barricade with synthetic leather upper, metal reinforced ghillies and extended TorSion system in the midsole. Adidas, in obvious devotion to its founder Adi Dassler, has also included in this shoe adiPRENE, adiPRENE+, adiTUFF and aidiWEAR technologies.

Interesting newcomers at the show were Aura's Spring-Air basketball entry and a resurfacing of Kappa's founder Thom Adams from the San Antonio area with a plethora of brands under the In-Stride caption. Aura's entry is an interesting one in as much as the fact that five years ago the technology contained in this entry-level shoe would have been sensational. Today with the technical athletic support industry in Korea and Taiwan at such a high standard and so readily available, it is truly amazing how quickly and easily a high-tech shoe can enter the marketplace. The problem of course is that everyone else has the availability too. 🌐

Mel Cheskin

Outdoors

The outdoors (category) is maintaining its sales appeal, albeit not at the hot pace-setting rate it enjoyed a few years ago. This category has some major players other than the crossover giant brands from athletic performance. Timberland, Rockport, Merrell, Wolverine and Hi-Tec (to name a few) enjoy large shares of this market. There are many smaller brands both from the US and Europe also vying for market share. Some of the better ones are Bite, Danner, Teva, Dexter, Rugged Shark, Sorel and Lowa. Other than the serious mountaineering rugged boots, most brands today follow the lighter, hiking/trekking styles popularised first by Adidas in the 80s, then by Nike, Reebok and Hi-Tec a decade later. Nothing outstanding was shown in Atlanta but there are many excellent models from many specialised brands in the outdoor market. Most brands have full-grain or nubuck uppers (some with breathable mesh panels), full, protected toe boxes and prefabricated EVA or PU midsole units combined with rugged carbon rubber lug soles. Waterproof outer materials or Gore-tex membrane or Thinsulate liners are common. Goodyear and Vibram branded soles are still popular with many makers.

Fitness

Fitness (nee cross training) has moved away from the original 'all white' look. Except for the original aerobic look, fitness shoes look more like running shoes with more stability features built in. Good-looking models were to be seen from Avia, Adidas, Nike, Reebok and Saucony. A relative newcomer to this category is K-Swiss which unveiled its S214 model in some colourful combinations. Following on the modern idiom, K-Swiss is using an all synthetic upper with TPU welded stripe treatment. The shoe has two layers of shock spring in the heel and one in the forefoot. Most outstanding in this category was

