

VIEWPOINT 

More Fs than Bs



Do sports companies focus on features and ignore the benefits needed by the user? One of the outstanding players in Euro 2004 was England's Wayne Rooney but the spectators got little chance to see him as a result of an early injury to a metatarsal.

The last decade has seen a spectacular rise in the wealth of athletes as sports footwear and clothing has hit the fashion scene as everyday wear. The brands involved have joined the most famous and important companies in the world.

Sports stars can earn a fortune endorsing products and sports brands are convinced that player support drives their top line activity.

It would seem logical that this mutual back slapping should lead to better products that improve performance and play. Yet, looking at sports footwear, there are few examples where the development has been proven to be more than a fashion or design tweak supported by extensive promotional claims.

This is to be expected in a market which is normally defined as mature. In these cases we see consolidation of sales into the hands of the bigger players where marketing and innovation become the primary differentiators. They are the tools to stop the industry's products becoming commodities with an associated margin reduction. Making significant innovations a matter of routine is not an easy thing and is reflected in the accelerating skill of marketers to make an incremental improvement appear of earth shattering importance.

In sports areas such as soccer and rugby there have been surprisingly few improvements in the 100 years that specialist footwear has been made. As

Cameron Kippen of Curtin University in Perth, Australia, puts it most changes "surprisingly appear to have been stylistic as the football codes have become more glamorous rather than forged by any desire to play better or decrease the rates of injury.

"As if by irony it appears that there have been more injuries caused by boot innovations than appear to be resolved by new designs."

Kippen notes the fact that shoes are, in fact, not made for feet but built around a model of the foot, the 'last', which is a tool for mass production. Sizing lasts up and down creates deviations from the real dimensions found in the foot. Yet studies show that most shoe manufacturers imply injury is due to the anatomy of the individual who 'happens to be constructed incorrectly'. Obliging the routine of incremental changes has been established to counteract these imaginary skeletal defects. Kippen concludes: "shoe manufacturers appear to be engrossed in trumpeting design features that they have patented and in knocking their rivals".

Metatarsalgia is a forefoot pain which is not only found with soccer players, although soccer creates more opportunities than most for this injury. Sprinting and the associated stopping and swerving to cut off a player or capture the ball puts a lot of stress on the metatarsal bones.

Of course, the athlete has to take some responsibility. Buying shoes which are too small, with pointed rather than squared toes, or wearing them when the mid soles and insoles are damaged will increase the likelihood of injury. Getting into a correctly sized shoe is not always easy. When FootJoy introduced its laser measuring for feet, after extensive research at the

University of Massachusetts (UMASS), it discovered that over 70% of golfers were in the wrong size. Shoe shops are inclined to stock sizes which are too narrow and persuade the purchaser to buy a size larger in a narrow width, which requires the foot to adjust from its natural shape to fit volumetrically.

Is this the moment in all sports equipment for companies to come clean and separate the hype out from the reality? We know that they are able to make significant improvements. The Predator boot from adidas is an example, as is the change to softer and lighter leathers that do not absorb water and increase weight.

In nearly all sports the message for footwear is to avoid shoes which are too light, too flimsy or just wear out too quickly. Unevenly worn shoes are exceptionally bad. Problems such as these, along with insufficient support or cushioning, will quickly lead to repetitive stress damage, especially if used on a hard surface like a road or a frozen surface. Children are particularly at risk wearing shoes which are too small, tied too tight or have studs or cleats wrongly placed.

With so much development targeting looks and colours, along with light weight and flexibility, has the health of our athletes taken a back seat? Perhaps some extra effort on arch support and enhanced sole cushioning would not go amiss.

If we get our sports companies in both clothing and footwear to concentrate on benefits rather than just features then, hopefully, we can look forward to the 2006 World Cup in Germany in which Wayne Rooney and his worldwide colleagues will be limited only by their ability and not their injuries. 