

Back in 1912, when Mr. L.L. Bean had the idea of stitching leather uppers on to a workman's rubber boot, he was unable to test the realisation of a waterproof hunting boot before the first purchases were made. Those who bought his first attempt found that they were both guinea pig and customer. When the rubber bottom separated from the rest of the boot, they returned the merchandise and got their money back. The world has moved on since those far off days.

Today everyone concerned with producing a quality product has to carry out proper pre-testing. Simply getting company executives to try out new concepts or designs at weekends is not enough. Product testing has become far more scientific - manufacturers need to know how their products will perform under all conditions and they cannot wait around too long for the results. It explains why product testing for one golf shoe manufacturer has become par for the course.

If the shoe fits



For most kids, it brings a break from school. For most air conditioner manufacturers, it brings increased revenues. For most golf enthusiasts, summertime brings a string of fair-weather months ideally suited to their favourite pastime. During this time of year, all types of golfers begin to appear on the greens. There are the newcomers whose handicaps are nearly as high as Tiger Woods' annual earnings. And there are the experienced diehards who tee off in June and don't look back until September, when they can be found relaxing at the 19th hole.

Whatever a golfer's skill level, he or she wants to play in comfort. Anybody who's played even a single hole of miniature golf will agree that the best equipment in the world can't make up for the distraction of uncomfortable apparel. This theory holds particularly true when it comes to shoes.

So the question of the season is this: how to determine which golf shoes are best? That is precisely what the people at the Dexter Shoe Company wanted to find out when they approached Performance Field Testing, a small New Hampshire-based company that specialises in testing outdoor sporting goods.

Performance Field Testing (PFT) was founded in 1996 by Andrew Ingram, who gained experience running various product R&D and testing departments at a large American outdoor product and apparel company. Ingram started PFT because he wanted to provide a service to manufacturers interested in taking their products outside of the typical in-house testing lab. Literally. "Sure, lab and biomechanics tests reveal some information about a product's durability.

We even rely on these types of tests on occasion to supplement our field work," Ingram says. "But how can you tell if something's really going to work the way it's supposed to if you don't put it directly into its intended environment and challenge it?"

So Ingram went to work assembling a team of field testers - specialists representing just about every walk of outdoor life and located across all climates. His team is so geographically diverse that he can begin a field test on snowshoes and golf shoes on the same day.

PFT's testing system is beautifully simple. Ingram launches a test by distributing sample products to a team of testers chosen for their specific area of expertise and their availability to devote the required number of hours. Testers begin their ruthless use of the product, and submit preliminary feedback based on a questionnaire customised to suit the goals of each test. For example, if a manufacturer is particularly interested in evaluating a product's ability to remain waterproof, the testers know to focus on that one characteristic. However, most tests also reveal additional information not originally requested by the manufacturer, which is always included in the reports. Secondary reports, when requested, are also submitted after a predetermined amount of time (such as four weeks). Finally, PFT presents the conclusive test findings, complete with product improvement recommendations, quantitative scores, and subjective comments from all testers.

For Jim Walter, product manager in the golf division at the Dexter Shoe Company in Massachusetts, PFT was a natural fit. "We do have an in-house testing lab, but it's mainly used

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**- Andrew Ingram,
Performance Field Testing**

“One tester who wore these almost every day throughout the testing period has worn some holes on the inside heel area. Testing should be done to ensure that the correct materials are being used in this high-wear area. We would be happy to send this pair to you for review in exchange for a replacement pair since this tester doesn’t want to part with them!”

- From the Final Golf Shoe Report submitted to Dexter

to test materials,” Walter says. Dexter typically sends prototypes to the lab to test a product’s ability to withstand abrasion, stretching, tearing, pulling, and exposure to water. “The value of PFT is that they actually perform wear tests, and find out how a product will be used in real life,” says Walter. “Before we found PFT, our field testing involved a bunch of guys we know who would go out on the course once a week or so to see how our shoes felt. We got good feedback, but it wasn’t organised or quantified the way it is with a PFT test.”

Dexter’s dual objective with their first field test was to check on the quality and fit of a new last they had just developed. Walter puts the company’s goals simply: “If a Dexter shoe is going to be on the course for several hours, it absolutely has to perform well. We also wanted to come out with a new shoe that doesn’t look like old funky shoes somebody’s dad would wear.” Dexter felt that once they zeroed in on a high-performing last with a proven fit record, they could use it on other shoes in the company’s pipeline.

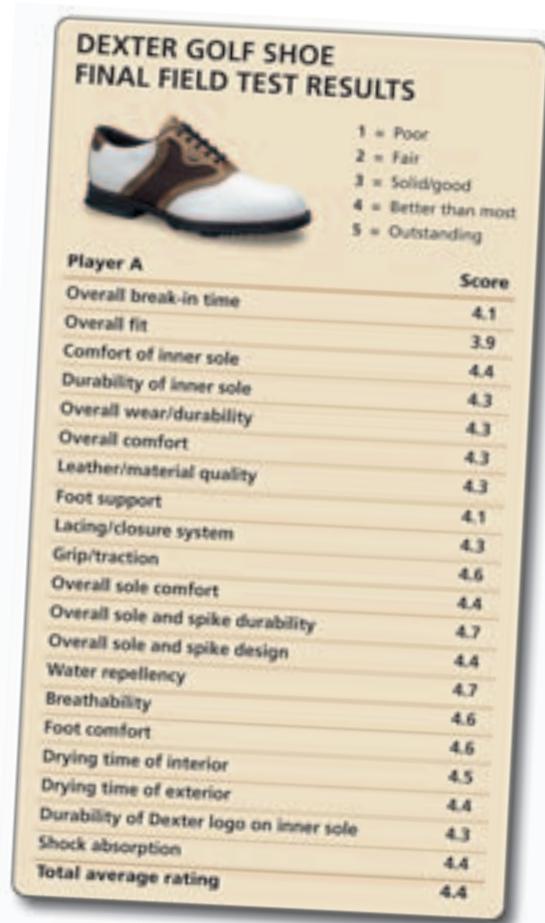
PFT instructed twelve of its testers (targeted for their lower handicaps) to wear the golf shoes for a minimum of 50 days. During the course of the testing cycle, the testers were instructed to evaluate the following characteristics:

- Overall comfort and feel
- Waterproofness
- Spiking system
- Integrity of the polymark stamping process

PFT provided Dexter with two reports: the Initial Test Evaluation at the two-week point, and the Final Test Evaluation after eight weeks. The Initial Test Evaluation identified obvious product problems, design irregularities, comfort issues, and “out of the box” performance. The Final Test Evaluation included numeric scores and written comments with details of overall results.

Dexter was pleased with the favourable final test results, but took careful note of the product improvement recommendations. The company made two major modifications to the shoe as a result of PFT’s findings:

- Add a doubler in the vamp area to soften the flex in the forefoot
- Rework the rear portion of the last to improve the fit around the heel



DEXTER GOLF SHOE FINAL FIELD TEST RESULTS	
	1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Solid/good 4 = Better than most 5 = Outstanding
Player A	Score
Overall break-in time	4.1
Overall fit	3.9
Comfort of inner sole	4.4
Durability of inner sole	4.3
Overall wear/durability	4.3
Overall comfort	4.3
Leather/material quality	4.3
Foot support	4.1
Lacing/closure system	4.3
Grip/traction	4.6
Overall sole comfort	4.4
Overall sole and spike durability	4.7
Overall sole and spike design	4.4
Water repellency	4.7
Breathability	4.6
Foot comfort	4.6
Drying time of interior	4.5
Drying time of exterior	4.4
Durability of Dexter logo on inner sole	4.3
Shock absorption	4.4
Total average rating	4.4

Dexter’s improved prototype for the shoe proved to be a huge success. “Since we launched the two products that PFT tested, we’ve seen a sales increase in the neighbourhood of 25-30% for our golf shoes in that price point,” Walter says. “These products gave our customers that much more confidence in the Dexter brand overall.

“We’ll continue to use PFT as we develop new styles, both within the golf division as well as with other product categories,” says Walter. “The value of using an outside testing company is that you get better feedback right away, and the results come through without any bias.”

According to PFT’s Ingram, his company continues to come up with new and improved testing methods. “We’re constantly tweaking our in-house processes to meet the demands of the various types and sizes of tests we do,” says Ingram. “We modify our methods according to the size of the testing group, the product development time frame, and the number of samples being reviewed.”

If Dexter’s success with its line of golf shoes is any indication, there appears to be enormous value in obtaining feedback from the field before a product gets into the hands - or feet - of consumers and media alike. “The benefit we provide is really two-fold,” says Ingram. “First, of course, we are freeing up the time of product managers and other key development personnel. Secondly, we are here to make absolutely sure that when a company finally puts its name on a product, it can feel confident that quality is built in.” 

Mary Thomas

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- Jim Walter, Dexter Shoe Company