

BRAND PROFILE: VIBRAM

The Italian company is accelerating its developments and has announced a raft of launches and collaborations that are helping it to power away from problems of the past.

Vibram develops most technical sole yet

Vibram is proving there is more to the brand than FiveFingers with a host of developments and new styles in recent months, including what it describes as its most technical sole yet.

Arctic Grip provides grip on wet ice using thermochromic [temperature sensitive] lug soles that are heat activated and change colour from white to blue when the temperature reaches freezing point. Previously, grip could only be attained by inserting metal support devices into the footwear, which could damage surfaces and cause the material to deteriorate—so Vibram went in search of a “more practical solution”. The new material does not absorb liquids and dirt and bagged the company a gold award at the recent ISPO trade show in Munich, while hundreds of curious volunteers took to a wet ice incline at Salt Lake City’s Outdoor Retailer show in January to check the benefits for themselves. Wolverine World Wide group was quick to snap up exclusive rights until winter 2017, and the soles will appear in autumn-winter 2016 collections for its brands Merrell, Saucony, Sperry, Cat, Wolverine and Hush Puppies.

To appeal to a more urban type of consumer, Vibram has also created a winter version of the wrapping sole, first launched last spring. The research and development team drew inspiration from the ancient Japanese art of wrapping items in cloth, naming the shoe Furoshiki. The original design used super soft, thin Vibram soles, while the winter version uses a MegaGrip sole with a thicker tread and insock. The neoprene and shearling models also use the company’s EcoStep sole, which incorporates production scraps and reportedly reduces the use of virgin materials by up to 30% over standard soles.



The Saucony Razor Ice+ winter running shoe featuring the novel Arctic Grip sole.

 Vibram

Also new for 2016 is the advancement of Vibram’s partnership with Korean tyre company Hankook Tire. The pair have created prototypes of both shoes and tyres using each other’s expertise. The DynaSTRYKE BKL and DynaTREK FiveFinger-style shoes use a design it says is inspired by tyre tread, while the DynaMIX and DynaSYNC tyres incorporate Vibram’s nylon fibre which distributes the point of impact over a wider surface.

Back to its roots

The focus on winter safety and collaborations with tyre manufacturers hark back to the company's beginnings in the 1930s. Climber Vitale Bramani had been part of an expedition in the Alps during which six members died of exposure and, disturbed by the tragedy, he set about looking for technical equipment that would help keep climbers safer. He came across vulcanised rubber, a fairly new product at the time, and realised it could offer an improvement on the current soles with its durable waterproof and weather resistant properties. Backed by tyre company Pirelli, his design was patented in 1937 and he established the first Vibram sole production company in Varese, northern Italy.

Its unique offering helped the company grow quickly, and in the mid-60s, in a bid to conquer the North American market, Quabaug Rubber signed up to become the exclusive licensee and manufacturer in the US. (Vibram acquired Quabaug in 2015.) A production centre in

China followed in the 1980s and the company began to move away from specialist safety soles into the commercial market. Key launches included Gumlite, a rubber-foam compound 30% lighter than rubber, and Evaflex, a light sole made of EVA.

Seeing opportunity in different sectors, it set up its Creative Lab in Milan in the 2000s and a Technological Centre in China, as well as a factory in Brazil to service the South American markets. The renewed focus on research and development produced designs including the radical FiveFingers in 2004 and strengthened ties with brands including Timberland, Nike and New Balance.

Onwards and upwards

However, following the 2014 settlement of a court case raised by a consumer in Florida alleging the company had overstated the health benefits of FiveFingers, specifically the shoes' ability to help wearers strengthen muscles and

The new SkiAlp Team includes a British, a Swiss, two French and two Spanish athletes who will promote the brand around Europe.

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Vibram has teamed up with Hankook to produce new footwear and tyres using each other's know-how

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reduce injury, the company has been keen to distance itself from the controversy (see *WSA July-August 2015*). It has gone back to its roots with more technical sole launches in the past two years, including the MegaGrip for the outdoor sector and a Smart Sole that wirelessly communicates with smartphones.

To promote its sustainability agenda, the company has been driving a tour bus around trade shows, resoling boots and shoes to help the environment by preventing worn-out products ending up in landfill. On board the Sole Factor truck, cobblers are provided with the Vibram catalogue, and the company will be opening Sole Factor stores in London, Paris and Athens this year to provide a similar service. At the recent ISPO and at the Pitti Immagine fashion show in Florence, visitors could leave with an Arctic Grip sole on their outdoor boots.

Next on the cards is a development that would have been close to Mr Bramani's heart. The company has ski mountaineering in its sights, after noticing increasing participation from consumers, and has enhanced its range within the sector. It has sponsored six European athletes who make up the new Vibram SkiAlp Team and who will represent the company at 30 events this year while feeding back on the latest technology.

"We are seeing a real increase in the number of people practising it, sport enthusiasts looking

for pistes far from the beaten track, attracted by the 'social' aspect of the discipline, which is a very different approach to traditional skiing," the company stated.

One product the team will be testing is the ultra-lightweight Litebase Tech, which Vibram expects to bring to market with its partners next winter. The barefoot running controversy is fast becoming a distant memory. 



The Furoshiki by Vibram unwrapped shearling winter-ready boot.

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