

## GAME CHANGERS: JOHN EBERLE

In August, footwear brand Keen named John Eberle as its new general manager for the outdoor, lifestyle and children's categories. He says the brand must know itself, know its consumers and use innovation to surprise them.



*The new women-specific Terradora light hiker shoe.*



# Element of surprise

### **Where are you from? What brought you to the role you have just taken up?**

I'm a Jersey Boy and I lived on the East Coast of the US for the first part of my life. I was a competitive runner all through high school and college. It won me a scholarship to go to Georgetown University in Washington DC; I was a psychology and an economics major. After graduating I was able to keep competing, with the 5,000 metres as my best event. I was a national-class athlete, qualifying to take part in Olympic trials and so on, but not international-class. This is what brought me into the footwear business.

### **Where did you work before Keen?**

I've worked for Nike, Eagle Creek, Montrail, New Balance and Rockport before Keen. While at Rockport, I was head of the hiking division and, in 1994, I volunteered to go to Mount Kilimanjaro to see if we could hike it in a day. I found that I wasn't affected by the altitude and ended up running up the mountain. And I thought 'wow', I want to hit more mountains. So I learned to climb and I've been climbing and teaching climbing ever since. Climbing has taken me to 30 or 40 different countries and I've



met so many friends and partners through climbing; it's become the fabric of my life. In April 2000, I was training on Mount Hood in Oregon and while there I met Michael Lemming, head recruiter for Nike. We became friends and he got me into Nike and I stayed for 13-and-a-half years. Sadly, Michael Lemming died recently: he was BASE jumping in Norway and his parachute failed to open.

*Keen's new general manager for outdoor, John Eberle.*



**Why change jobs now?**

I haven't. I retired from Nike a year ago and I have spent all of this past year climbing and guiding people on climbs. Keen was looking for someone and called me, so I went to meet the management team to find out more about what they were looking for. We spoke for four months. I learned that what they wanted was in my wheelhouse and that I can share Keen's passion, and here I am.

**What will the job entail?**

I will handle all the functional aspects of the outdoor, lifestyle and children's categories. I am going to lay down a four-year plan to take us to 2020, thinking carefully about where that will take us compared to where we are today, who our customers are going to be by then and so on.

We have amazing employees who care about what needs to be done. What I need to do is set up a slightly different structure, but still keeping the vision intact. I know it's never easy to do that, but Keen isn't a brand that needs 'fixing' so it's an amazing opportunity.

**What are the most important factors in keeping outdoor footwear collections fresh and innovative without compromising on brand heritage?**

I'd say there are three components to that. First, you have to have a good understanding of yourself and be true to who you are. Keen has that. We know who we are; that's

something that's laid down by the employees every day. Next, you have to know who your consumers are now, what they care about and who they are going to be tomorrow. And third, you need innovation so that, knowing who your consumers are, you can surprise them through what you do. We have to connect what's important to us with what's important to the consumers and surprise them. For example, our basic sandal, the Newport, is 14 years old. It's as old as the brand, but it was a leap for Keen to come out with it. Now we've just come out with the Uneek sandal and, although it's a bit minimalist [the upper consists of two interlocking cords] and some people have said they don't get it, I'll tell you now that I think the Uneek is going to be a new classic for us. Some retail partners have told us that, if it were any other brand, they would say no to it, but that Keen is cooky enough to bring off a nutty idea like this.

**If you could show us one place in the world, where would you take us?**

To Oman. When I was with Nike, I had responsibility for the Middle East region and was in Abu Dhabi. A distributor for Oman invited me to go for the weekend. It was amazing. There were rocks and walls of rock for climbing, pure desert but with natural oases, like tiny jungles, like islands of green, where you could eat five-star meals, beautiful, desolate beaches and I would go back in a second and take people to see it. No matter who you are you would be spectacularly overwhelmed by Oman. 



*You have to know who your consumers are and what they care about*

 Keen