

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: ENDA

Kenyan start-up Enda believes the country's reputation as a producer of world-class runners means it should be capable of also producing world-class running shoes.



Enda targets pacesetters of running shoe market

Look down the list of medallists at every middle and long-distance running event at the Athletics World Championships or Olympic Games in the last 30 years (for both men and women) and there will likely be a Kenyan flag alongside at least one of the names. The East African country has a rich history of producing runners capable of defeating the best athletes the rest of the world has to offer. No Kenyan brand has yet capitalised on this domination to launch an elite running shoe; start-up company Enda is trying

to do just that. It has launched the Iten shoe, named after the town that is home to Saint Patrick's High School, where several of the nation's greatest athletes, including legendary 800 metre runner David Rudisha, spent their formative years.

Enda means 'go' in Swahili, an apt name for the company given the nature of its product. It was founded by Navalayo Osembo-Ombati, a trained lawyer and accountant from a village near the running heartland of Eldoret, and Weldon Kennedy, a US native with a

Enda enlisted experienced Kenyan runners to test the prototypes of its shoe and their feedback was vital for the final design.

 Enda



Company founders Navalayo Osembo-Ombati and Weldon Kennedy believe Kenya should benefit from its reputation as a running powerhouse.

 Enda

background of working with social change start-ups. Describing their venture as a “social enterprise”, the co-founders want to do more than develop an elite running shoe; they hope their success will contribute to improving the lives of ordinary Kenyans.

Ms Osembo-Ombati admits there are “lots of challenges to making a great running shoe”, the most significant of which is the up-front costs. Enda set up a campaign on crowdfunding site Kickstarter to help get the project off the ground, easily surpassing the initial target of \$75,000 set when the campaign launched in May 2016.

Focus on design

The technical skills and expertise required to create a high-performance running shoe has meant “working with experienced designers and developers was essential”, Ms Osembo-Ombati tells WSA. Enda recruited Steve Burris, a designer who has developed sport shoes for consumers and athletes during time spent at adidas, Nike, Reebok and New Balance. The start-up took advantage of his strong relationships with suppliers to source high-quality materials. It also worked with Birdhaus Design, a studio that has designed and manufactured athletic shoes for Under Armour, Reebok and Keen. The Iten model went through a prolonged design and prototyping process; an estimated 10-13 versions were produced before it settled on the final design.

“Competing with established brands comes down to satisfying the needs of runners better than anyone else,” Ms Osembo-Ombati says. “From the very start we listened to Kenyan runners about what they wanted from a shoe.”

The result is the Iten, a shoe with a 4mm difference in height between the padding at the heel and at the forefoot (around half the drop of a conventional running shoe). This encourages the wearer to land on the mid-foot or forefoot, the preferred technique of many of Kenya’s most successful runners. Enda says too much foam under the heel will result in it hitting the ground first; not enough cushioning on the heel and the runner will have insufficient protection on rough terrain. It has attempted to find the middle ground between a training shoe and a flat shoe designed for racing; the Iten is comfortable enough to be worn during long training sessions but light enough to allow the wearer to run quickly in competition. It has a lightweight, flexible and breathable upper. A wide toe box prevents the toes being squashed, promoting a natural splay of the toes, which helps evenly absorb the impact of hitting the ground. The midsole has been brought up to cup the heel so that the shoe moves with the foot. This is beneficial on uneven terrain when the foot impacts at an unusual angle or rolls slightly on impact. It is made from high-abrasion ethylenevinyl acetate (EVA). The full rubber outsole has an “earth-hugging” tread pattern for good grip.

Tribute to Kenya

There are nods to Enda's Kenyan heritage in the Iten. It will be available in the colours of the country's flag - red, black and green. The company's logo, a spear tip, also takes its inspiration from the flag, which features a shield with two crossing spears. The word 'Harambee', an official motto of Kenya meaning "all pull together" in Swahili, is written under the sole. It represents a tradition of communities coming together to achieve something that they couldn't achieve individually. The side has 12 lines in honour of the date the country became independent - December 12, 1963; it became a republic one year later. The design on the heel is based on the country's Great Rift Valley, from where many of its best runners originate.

Ms Osembo-Ombati says the company "wanted to make sure it stood out as a fashionable shoe", which could be worn during leisure time as well as on the track or road.

Giving back

After what it describes as "tremendous success" with the Kickstarter campaign, Enda says it now has enough investment to ship pre-ordered shoes to its first 1,000 customers as well as fulfilling some wholesale orders. It aims to start shipping in early 2017 following a slight delay caused by a change in upper supplier and the company wanting more time to perfect the moulds needed to create the midsoles and outsoles. It plans to embark on another round of investment to increase its inventory and to finance marketing efforts. Ms Osembo-Ombati says it has already started to design its next model and to "plot out the process of launching a complete product line".

At present, the only aspect of manufacturing that takes place in Kenya is the final assembly;

the materials and components are sourced from China. She explains that even though there "aren't all the right people with all the right skills" to manufacture the shoes in Kenya, "there are enough people to get us started"; they are capable of assembling the product and doing the injection moulding. Enda aspires to gradually increase the amount of the manufacturing that takes place there, with an end goal of a shoe 100% produced in the country. This ties in with its desire to create jobs in a country where youth employment stands at 17.4% (according to the World Bank). The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which gives certain products (including footwear) from sub-Saharan African countries duty-free access to the US market, works in its favour. Kenya's AGOA status was recently renewed for a further ten years by the US Congress.

The company feels it has an obligation to share any potential success with the people of Kenya and plans to support local community projects. When fully operational, it will set aside a portion of its profits to this end after identifying the charitable initiatives most in need of help. By offering those who contribute to the online funding effort the chance to vote on which ones it supports, Enda hopes to connect runners from all over the world with local projects in Kenya. It believes it is time for the country to benefit from the incredible achievements of its athletes. By offering "a more socially responsible choice of running shoe", it is confident of success. This will allow it to "have a positive impact in communities with the greatest need". Ms Osembo-Ombati acknowledges that competition in the running shoe market is fierce, but insists Enda is "ambitious and stubborn enough to overcome the challenges".

The Iten shoe will be available in red, green and black, reflecting the colours of Kenya's flag. There are several tributes to Enda's heritage in the design.

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