



» THE TECHNICAL SANDAL TURNS 20—AND CONQUERS THE FOOTWEAR MARKET.

KICK » off your shoes



TO trace the first Golden Age of the performance sandal, you must go back in time...way back...to the Roman Empire. Wearing leather strap sandals with iron hobnail soles, fighters for the Roman Legion traversed and conquered massive territory. With the fall of the Empire, the technical sandal seemed to fade away, until...well...about 20 years ago.

BY MARCUS WOOLF

In 1984, Mark Thatcher officially launched the Teva brand, offering the first modern “technical” sandal with a rubber sole and durable webbing secured via Velcro. He’d begun thinking about his creation as early as 1975 when he worked as a boatman in the Grand Canyon. Shoe companies at the time did not offer adequate footwear for him and his fellow boaters, so Thatcher went to work on his new idea. By 1983, he was selling his new concept out of the back of his Datsun. One year later his new brand would not only gain a foothold (sorry for the pun), but would also begin changing the face of the outdoor footwear market.

Twenty years later, performance sandals have transcended the core outdoor market and secured important wall space in all types of stores. I’d say we’re actually witnessing a new Golden Age of the performance sandal the likes of which Roman Legion soldiers never experienced. With technologies that rival those of any other footwear, modern sandals are once again carrying people to far corners, if not to conquer, then to explore.

SANDALS GET A GRIP

When asked why technical sandals made

such a splash in the market, Thatcher said, “I think there was really a pent-up demand, and the demand was much broader than I realized.”

One reason the concept may have taken off so quickly is that Teva entered into a licensing agreement with Deckers in 1985. The large footwear company was simply able to broaden distribution of the sandals and introduce them to a wider public. “The broader distribution must have accelerated it,” said Thatcher. “You can hardly estimate what might have happened if we had taken a different course and tried to remain more exclusive in our distribution. I think that would have been a mistake. The concept was so interesting to people, and so much more useful. It was so bound to affect so many people.”

Having witnessed Teva’s success, other major footwear brands quickly followed suit, offering their own versions of technical sandals. Timberland introduced its River Sandal in the late ’80s, infusing it with qualities that matched the character of the Timberland brand. Known for its rugged leather footwear, it was the first company to bring performance-grade leathers to a technical sandal. “The River Sandal is an example of where we combined ruggedness with our history of making boat shoes,” said Jay Steere, Timberland’s global category director for outdoor.

The company’s TNT Trainer—a multi-

lug dayhiking shoe—was adapted to make the TNT Trail Sandal. “That’s when we hit our stride and realized customers wanted from Timberland rugged features like waterproof leather straps,” Steere said.

Merrell introduced its first sandal, the Belize, in 1990. “Merrell took a bit of a different tack (from other brands),” said Merrell President Jacques Lavertue. “Rather than webbing, we used quick drying synthetics. We built more of a rugged sandal with a high-traction outsole—not so much a water sandal.”

In the outdoor market and beyond, technical sandals were quickly shifting from water-oriented product to gear used for everyday outdoor and casual use. Teva continued to dominate the overall technical sandal market, but its widened distribution caused the brand to take a hit in outdoor specialty stores. Unable to compete with prices at big-box stores, specialty dealers began to bring in new, smaller brands.

“Our strength at specialty has diminished and we have given up some ground,” said Thatcher. “We created the opportunity for Chaco and perhaps some other brands as well.”

Located in rural Paonia, Colo., Chaco was incorporated in 1989, when owner Mark Paigen and four others began making sandals in a 2,000-square-foot commercial building. Through guerrilla marketing, Chaco built a strong following

Photo Courtesy of Teva; Dawn Kish photography. ©2004.



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Roman sandals



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Recreation of the first technical sandal offered



by Teva in 1984.

100 AD

1984

among core paddlers and outdoor enthusiasts. As Teva gave ground in the outdoor specialty market, Chaco filled that niche and grew steadily. The company now employs 100 people, cranking out 300,000 pairs of sandals a year for specialty shops. The brand is growing in Europe as well as Canada, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

"Chaco has grown almost entirely from word of mouth. To my knowledge we haven't really placed a paid ad," said Rich Weight, Chaco's director of sales. "We stuck to a consistent strategy of working with the best outdoor retailers in the country, and doing everything we could to support our product within those retailers."

He said that 1998 and 1999 proved pivotal for Chaco. "That's when that word of mouth and grassroots really grabbed hold and found its way into more mainstream markets. It allowed Chaco to see the steep growth we've seen over the last five or six years," said Weight.

As Chaco courted specialty dealers, the mid- and late-90s saw a heap of footwear companies launch performance sandals targeted to the wider sports market. Ac-

ording to Steere and other manufacturers, performance sandals grew so popular that the market became flooded and went into a significant slump. Nevertheless, new companies continued to wade in.

Bite Footwear—a \$15 million company that made its name in the golf world—entered the outdoor market in 1999 with a hiking sandal whose plastic toe guard turned heads. "When we came in, Chaco was at its prime in specialty shops," said Jason Meredith, sales manager for Bite. "Our strategy was to find a niche, and we first launched toward the hiking category." Having expanded beyond hiking models, Bite now offers 35 outdoor SKUs that generate about \$7 million in sales a year.

As small companies tested the waters, big brands were also undaunted by soft market conditions. Columbia Sportswear introduced a line of moderately priced water sandals five years ago, and its offering is now pretty well rounded. "We run the gamut (about eight SKUs) from an entry level \$29.95 water sandal to a very technical river sandal that's \$79.95," said Bill Berta, footwear general manager for Columbia Sportswear. "They have evolved with improvements in com-

ponents," he said, noting that some models sport hook-and-loop closures that strengthen when exposed to water.

Despite the sandal crash in the '90s, the technical sandal market is thriving once again. "In the last couple of years, we've seen sandals coming back—really high-end technical sandals and good sandal-shoe hybrids," said Steere.

According to Leisure Trends, units of performance sandals sold in outdoor specialty stores rose 25 percent from 2001 to 2003. During the same period, sales of these types of sandals declined noticeably, perhaps because those stores allotted more space to increasingly popular flip-flops and other casual styles. Yet, the growth in specialty stores is undeniable. And there are a couple of reasons for that growth. First, it seems we've decided to just loosen up a bit.

THE WORLD KICKS BACK

Manufacturers suggest that society is experiencing a sort of "casualization," and we're simply willing to show our toes in a wider range of environments. Maybe folks have felt a bit confined in their everyday shoes. "People wear sandals to work,

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1992



way into the technical sandal.

1997

whereas five to seven years ago, most folks wouldn't have thought about it," said Berta. "With the dress standards now, it's not seen as out of place."

In June, the MSN.com website specifically addressed sandals in a piece titled "Do's and Don'ts of Hot Weather Office Wear." In the story, Kate Lorenz wrote that office workers should "make sure your feet are presentable." OK, fair enough. Unfortunately, Lorenz still thinks that only women should wear sandals to work. "On the day you plan to expose your toes, apply a smooth moisturizer and a fresh coat of nail polish, before leaving the house," she wrote. "Men should wear a conservative slip-on shoe. Socks are optional."

This, of course, is troubling. What about guys with low-volume feet who can't wear slip-ons? Some poor guy is probably lost in the cosmetics department right now, searching for the appropriate nail polish.

Nevertheless, people today prefer sandals for more activities year-round. "Sandals are now definitely a year-round item, even in northern accounts," said Berta. "It may be due to people traveling and taking vacations all year long."

Merrell's Lavertue agreed that the products are now spanning all seasons. "More retailers are keeping sandals on the wall year-round," he said. "I know for a fact a lot of multi-store retailers used to back out of sandals by August, but are now keeping 'A' doors equipped year-round."

While growth may be due to casualization, the main reason people are strapping up is that today's sandals feel extremely comfortable. Now all types of sandals boast many of the design features found in athletic shoes.

A CUSHY RIDE

"There are a number of characteristics about our product that hard-core enthusiasts as well as average Joe and Jane find appealing," said Weight of Chaco. "In the past 10 years, the mainstream community has started to want the same features as the hard-core community." When companies discuss features of modern sandals, they could be describing any hiking shoe. "Chaco sandals have a footbed contour that controls pronation and supports the bone structure of the foot," said Weight.

Lavertue explained that Merrell sandals

have full nylon shanks to prevent the sandal from breaking down. The midsoles incorporate air cushioning, and the footbeds are "contoured" and "three-dimensional." This creates a sandal for "true all-day wear," said Lavertue.

Bite has even built its sandals to accept aftermarket footbeds. "We have aligned ourselves with Phil Oren and his Boot Fit System," said Meredith. "We've tried to take sandals very seriously. We take technology from some of the best hiking shoes and running shoes, even orthopedic footwear—and put it into sandals."

Bite's Orthosport footbed sandal, introduced last year, accepts over-the-counter or custom-made inserts. He admitted that the concept hasn't exactly caught fire, even at specialty shops, but he's hopeful. "It's a little bit of a foreign concept, so there's some education that needs to be done," said Meredith. "Even though Phil Oren is behind it, specialty outdoor retailers have not come onboard as much as we hoped. I don't know if they're quite ready for it in sandals. It's perceived as maybe a little too technical, but we think they'll figure it out. Adventure 16 and other top dealers have."

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Design and comfort now define today's technical sandals.

2004

Apparently, Teva thinks that Bite may be on the right track. Roger Stevens, Teva senior product line manager, said the company has noticed the added visibility of store-bought footbeds and has considered partnering with a footbed company. "That adds an extra element for the consumer," he said

This year, Teva will introduce new traction technologies and new rubber compounds for sandals. You'll also see new engineering designed to circulate air around the foot. It all adds up to a more comfortable piece of footwear for the customer. In fact, technology has improved so much that the whole sandal concept is evolving. Now we're witnessing the birth of sandal-shoe hybrids that take performance to new levels.

SANDAL SPIN-OFFS

If you want to gauge just how far the performance sandal market has come, consider the fact that a running sandal is no longer considered such an "out there" idea. "We've tried to legitimize it to the hardcore running customer," said Stevens, adding that "you will definitely see new (running sandal) stuff from us at the trade show." This summer Teva will roll out a new version of the Raptor II, which was introduced in 2001. The latest design will

include new concepts that make it sleeker and lighter, said Stevens. "And for spring 2006, you will see further evolution of that type of product."

One of the most intriguing stories of the past year has been the fast-paced growth of Keen and its closed-toe footwear. Last January, Keen did a soft launch and has already picked up business from large players such as REI, Galyan's (just purchased by Dick's), Cabela's and Nordstrom. "We've also seen very good sell-through at independent specialty dealers," said Scott McGuire, outdoor category manager for Keen. The original concept was to offer a sandal-shoe hybrid that offered greater protection while doing things such as rock-hopping while scouting a rapid. But Keen delivered a certain aesthetic and level of comfort that appeals to a broad market.

"Our demographic is all over the map, from 20-year-old river guides to 60 year olds going to Europe for travel," said McGuire. Keen shapes its own "metatomical" lasts, so contours in the footbed match those in the last. "When the shoe is assembled, you get consistent fit all the way around," he said. Its best sellers, the Newport and Newport H2,

contain nice details, including a little dip for the big toe, a slight bridge in the forefoot, and arch support that runs through the center of the foot. McGuire said that this type of arch support doesn't create hot spots for people with flat feet, and those with high arches find the support they need, as well.

As Keen works to create a closed-toe revolution, another company is backing away from traditional sandals and banking on another type of spin-off, the water shoe.

"We have made traditional technical sandals in the past, but did not make them for 2005," said Ian Yurdin, director of footwear for Salomon North America. "Salomon's current answer to the sandal market is the Tech-Amphib and Pro-Amphib. We're looking for product more diverse than simply an open-toe sandal." He said that Salomon has positioned these shoes around a technical water story. "They're for someone that wants a lightweight, breathable product that drains easily—a rafting guide or someone involved in a variety of water sports."

RIDING THE WAVE

Be it water shoes, closed-toe footwear or traditional performance sandals, all companies agreed that they are riding a wave of strong sales. "This prong of our sandal business is on fire, to the point where we were out of stock on a lot of sandals the first of April," said Berta of Columbia. "We just turned down a 10,000-pair fill-in order this week."

Weight said that Chaco is enjoying year-over-year double-digit growth for units and dollars as the category continues to grow. "We're still finding good outdoor specialty dealers to carry our products. We're seeing average dollars per store increase, and the dealers we have are growing," he said.

Go With the Flow, a core paddling shop in Roswell, Ga., attests to the growing popularity of sandals. "We started selling more sandal brands about three years ago," said David Schubert, president of Go With the Flow. "We started seeing college and high school kids coming to us for them. We sell about 12 different brands now, from flip-flops to technical sandals."

Just 20 years old, this new empire of performance sandals is still in its waking days. As we enjoy this new Golden Age, the empire shows no signs of weakening, as companies explore new frontiers in design and technology. "There's still a ways to go as far as getting to the full athleticism of what it could be," said Thatcher. "There's still a ways to go."

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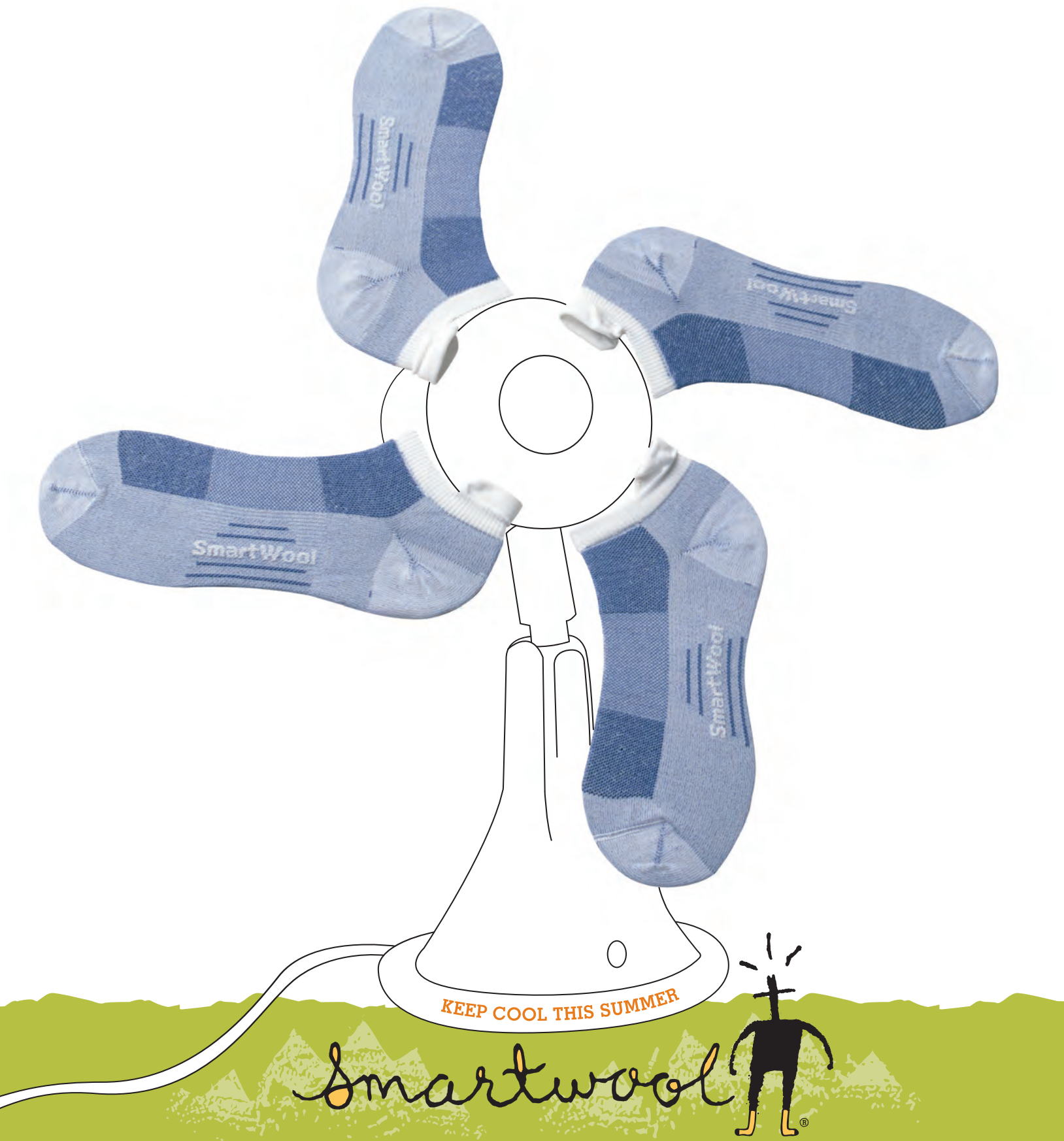
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