



BY MARCUS WOOLF

▼ Can *soft shell*

shoes find
their footing?

▼ *soft*

sell

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my HOW THE TIME FLIES. IT'S HARD TO believe 10 years have passed since Cloudveil introduced its Serendipity jacket, proving so popular it helped launch the modern era of soft shell apparel. A decade later, clothing companies are using soft shell materials not only in jackets, but also in pants, hats and gloves. About two years ago, the soft shell concept took another step forward when it was incorporated into shoes. "Once soft shell became a common denominator and an accepted category in outerwear, it was obvious to bring this concept into footwear," said Jay Steere, Timberland's global category director for outdoor performance apparel.

While the idea was obvious to Steere, the future of soft shell footwear remains unclear. The earliest models, such as Timberland's Endurion Drift and Salomon's Fusion, have only been on the shelves a season or two, and retailers we interviewed aren't sure if customers will buy into these products. While more outdoor gear consumers are becoming familiar with soft shell technology, they may not realize its useful-

ness in shoes, or perceive there's a real need for it. Plus, this is not a well-defined technology that's easy to understand, like "waterproof" products. Footwear companies define "soft shell" in different ways—opening the door to consumer confusion.

TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

As far back as four years ago, GearTrends® devoted several pages to defining the term "soft shell." (See the GearTrends® Outdoor Winter 2003 article, "Soft Shell: A Hard Topic," at www.gearrends.com/magazines.) Though arguments over the term's definition have died down, there is still no consensus. While some believe a soft shell can be waterproof, others do not. In the midst of this debate, consumers have embraced soft shell apparel anyway, but it didn't happen quickly. A few seasons passed before consumers began to understand the concepts behind soft shells, and it may take some time with footwear as well.

Certainly, many people define a soft shell as a garment that is water-resistant, rather than waterproof, for greater breathability. Timberland's new Endurion Drift shoe (\$110) follows this school of

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thought. Designed primarily for trail running, it has an upper constructed of breathable, water-resistant Toray fabric.

GearTrends® asked Norm Gress, Timberland's director of design, why he chose to use a soft shell fabric rather than a waterproof fabric for the Endurion Drift. "With trail running shoes, when you look at the waterproof membranes available, a lot of runners find the heat build-up to be too much," he said. "A soft shell provides the water resistance to keep your foot comfortable and still protected on a fall day with light rain."

Like Timberland, Mion is launching a new shoe designed to be more breathable than waterproof. The Warm Canyon approach shoe (\$130) features the company's new, proprietary Mi-Tek fabric, which has an outer surface that resembles other woven soft shell fabrics and a fleece inner surface. While the Endurion targets trail runners, the Warm Canyon is designed for paddlers to wear during trips in colder temperatures. "There are people participating in the sports that we support much longer into the season," said Erik Burbank, Mion's footwear brand director.

So, why does Mion use a soft shell material rather than a waterproof fabric? "Not to disparage other products that provide all-season protection and are breathable, but we really want to maximize weather protection *and* breathability at the same time," said Burbank.

While representatives of Timberland and Mion contend that a waterproof fabric just won't allow a foot to breathe as well as a soft shell, experts from other companies say that a soft shell fabric can also be waterproof. Scott Tucker, general manager for Montrail, said that this year Montrail will debut the Cirrus trail runner and the Terrapace light hiker made with its new waterproof Velum soft shell fabric.

Tucker said designers chose a waterproof construction because consumers would simply be annoyed by a mere water-resistant product that allowed feet to get wet.

"When you're making a piece of apparel, you can get away with some things because you have an umbrella effect," said Tucker, describing how any garment sheds some water when a person is upright, so it need only be water-resistant in light precipitation. "But you can't get away with it in footwear," he said. "A shoe will flex next to the foot in puddles, so we decided you have to take this extra step in footwear and make sure it's waterproof. Otherwise you're going to feel the water really fast."

Tucker said he chose Velum over alter-



COLD TRUTH ABOUT WINTER BOOTS

CANADIAN BOOT COMPANIES TAKE TEMPERATURE RATINGS SERIOUSLY.

George Hanna, president of the Shoe Manufacturers Association of Canada, was fed up with the false claims. "You have this situation where a young mother goes into a discount store to buy cold-weather boots, and she sees a tag that says the boot is good for minus 100 degrees Celsius (minus 148 degrees Fahrenheit). Naturally, she's going to believe what she's reading." But, in fact, Hanna said, such boots had thin felt liners, and testing revealed they were good for only about minus 5 degrees Celsius (23 degrees Fahrenheit). "We were very concerned about that."

About three years ago, boot makers in Canada partnered with the government to set up an independent testing group, the Performance Testing Council, to certify temperature ratings for cold-weather boots. The testing utilizes a copper leg and boot, similar to the copper mannequin used to determine temperature ratings for sleeping bags. Hanna said that about 22 manufacturers participate in the program, and he said the ratings—included in marketing materials and hang-tags—have boosted consumer confidence and increased sales.

Over the last year, Kamik has begun to participate in the program, and the Performance Testing Council now certifies all of Kamik's cold-weather boots, including styles like the beefy Roughneck, rated to minus 110 Fahrenheit. "This way there's an outside source testing our products, and it gives our customers peace of mind," said Catherine Cook, Kamik's marketing director.

She said that all Kamik cold-weather boots have a tag indicating the temperature rating, and the company has developed programs to teach U.S., Canadian and European retailers about the Performance Testing Council. In another bit of savvy marketing, Kamik also put yellow, red or black liners in kids' boots to indicate their temperature rating.

As for U.S. boot companies, many of them also place temperature ratings on boots, but there is no central independent group that tests the majority of brands. Most U.S. boot makers conduct their own testing and partner with independent labs. For example, L.L. Bean sends its boots to Natick Labs (which works with the U.S. Army and Navy) in Natick, Mass.

natives, such as W.L. Gore's XCR laminate, because Velum stretches more, so the upper of the shoe flexes more as the foot moves. Basically, he said the soft shell trail runners and light hikers offer the

highest degree of flexibility and comfort possible in waterproof footwear.

Since W.L. Gore has championed the concept of waterproof soft shells, we asked the company whether it was interested in

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIMBERLAND / ALEX DARDINSKI

the new category of soft shell footwear.

"I've gotta tell you, I'm intrigued by this one," said Matt Schreiner, footwear product specialist for W.L. Gore. But he added that the benefit of soft shell footwear is not clear, so the category's future remains murky.

"In garments, it was real clear—increased range of motion, clothes that conform and move with you, softer hand. When I look at footwear, it's not as obvious," he said, noting that many of the materials already used in athletic shoes function pretty well. But what about the ability of soft shells to ward off weather and still allow feet to breathe well? According to Schreiner, many of the soft shell fabrics on the market don't actually allow as much airflow as companies contend.

There are other problems as well, said Schreiner. Many of the soft shell fabrics use a DWR treatment to repel water, and he said footwear can take such a beating that the DWR on the upper can wear out quickly. The shoe companies address this by placing injection-molded bumpers and strips of protective fabrics on high-abrasion areas. Naturally, the protective pieces reduce breathability.

Another challenge with soft shell footwear is that companies must build a framework or support system into the upper because the fabric itself lends little structure. For example, the Endurion Drift has web strips beneath the forefoot area so the upper can grab the foot. Schreiner pointed out that such structures further reduce the shoe's ability to breathe.

Beyond the manufacturing obstacles, there is also some concern that the market for these shoes may not be strong enough. "Before we invest R&D resources to develop a new technology...we want to understand the benefit and what problem it solves. If you're not doing that, you're return on investment is not assured," said Schreiner. And, so far, he doesn't know if soft shell footwear will return the investment.

"I think a lot of people are on the fence about it, because it requires more complexity in the manufacturing, and materials are more expensive," said Montrail's Tucker. "They're wondering if the consumer is really going to start demanding this."

But some manufacturers are marching ahead. Salomon rolled out the men's Fusion and women's Symbio light hikers (both \$120) for spring/summer 2006, and it's now adding two additional soft shell models. "Consumers are really starting to understand the concept (of soft shell mate-

rials) in footwear," said Addy Sage, Salomon's softgoods associate.

Right now, Salomon and other manufacturers primarily attract core outdoor enthusiasts with soft shell footwear, but the category must lure a wide consumer audience to really justify the cost.


"The future will be based on products that are versatile, serve the end use but appeal to a broad range of outdoor enthusiasts," said Burbank. He also said brands must show reasons to justify the retail prices—a good point considering the Mion shoe is \$130, and soft shells from other brands are all north of \$100. Manufacturers and retailers may face an uphill battle in selling these shoes to a broad range of consumers, but a couple of things could work to their advantage. First, there's a lot of buzz about soft shell apparel right now, so the hype could translate to footwear. Also, soft shell fabrics have a clean appearance that's trendy right now, so people may purchase the shoes for fashion reasons.

FASHION FIRST

"There's a lifestyle aspect to this," said Steere. "Clean designs that are not busy and simple construction are hot trends these days."

Schreiner said that companies are creating soft shell footwear to complement their apparel lines. "Part of what's happening is design-inspired. Head-to-toe companies can have soft shell garments and shoes they can merchandise together," he said.

As with soft shell jackets, styling will only get better over time. "We can improve on how it's done," said Tucker of Montrail. "The number of materials we can use are somewhat limited, so cosmetically it's not wide open. If we can get some material development and manufacturing techniques more refined, we'll have more options. But the potential is there."

Julie Wolfe, owner of Michigan-based Moosejaw Mountaineering, said she's carrying Salomon's Fusion shoe in her stores this fall, but she's not sure how well it will sell. "At first, it might sell just based on its looks," she said. "We'll have to wait and see." Wolfe is waiting to see whether a broader range of footwear companies will really support the category. "It could be like the soft shell jackets," said Wolfe. "At first there were just a few here and there, and then it blew up. So, we'll see if that happens with the footwear." 

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