

FOOTWEAR PLUS

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ATHLETIC PREVIEW: FALL 2013

Worth the Weight



Adidas

Most athletic shoes hitting the market next fall aren't quite as minimal as recent seasons, but the added features—and a few grams here and there—address specific comfort and performance needs. By Judy Leand



OVER THE PAST couple of years, minimal footwear and its less-is-more mantras regarding weight, components and cushioning swept the athletic market. The craze profoundly affected the business strategies of vendors and retailers who had successfully pushed bulky Air, Gel, Abzorb cushioning technologies for decades. Perhaps old habits die hard as changes are afoot again as the minimal design aesthetic bulks up—a bit—for Fall '13. The results are a lot of sleek shoes with added comfort features, protection and more weight. But what's a few extra grams between friends, especially when the overall athletic market continues to be robust from a sales perspective.

"Athletic footwear continues to drive the sporting goods industry as a whole, and we're seeing the most growth in running and basketball, the two largest markets," confirms VJ Mayor, director of marketing and communications for the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. He cites a move by large vendors to offer customized products and the push toward more technical advances in construction as significant trends to watch for this year. On the heels of Nike Free's wildly successful color palette, industry experts say the use of bright colors will be prevalent too. For example, Skora's Form running shoe features a blue camouflage pattern dyed into the leather. "We want to tell a different story and share a new view of what running shoes should look like," says David Sypniewski, founder and CEO.

So without further ado, here's a breakdown of the key technical developments and design trends in the athletic footwear category for fall.

Brooks



Ecco BIOM

RUNNING: Road Rage

The gist is that lightweight still rules the roost, but brands are moving away from the purely minimal, instead offering more cushioning and protection.

"Minimal is not slowing down, but it is shaking out. Lightweight cushioning is now key," says Sypniewski. "The pendulum is swinging back to what runners really want: less technology, less B.S. and less control of the foot." He adds, "The bulk of the market is redefining the footwear and redesigning it holistically by finding a balance between ground feel and flexibility."

Ted Fitzpatrick, product manager of Reebok Running, concurs. "The minimal footwear segment is reaching maturity in specialty stores and will soon plateau at the mall," he says. "Lightweight and minimal won't go away, but layering additional function and solutions will win over consumers." Fitzpatrick also contends that going forward, "growth will come from new solutions addressing the core, everyday runner as well as emerging running segments."

At Saneony, Pat O'Malley, senior vice president of global product, believes that extreme minimalism is slowing down, but "minimal for the masses" is

growing. "There's an evolution of existing technology, such as engineering in the heel to forefoot differential. We're looking at runners' gaits and are engineering shoes to work with their forms," he explains. "Constructions will feature more seamless designs, fewer overlays and less stitching, which will help make the shoes lighter and more comfortable." Aesthetically, bright hues will still be part of the equation, but O'Malley believes the days of "throwing lots of obnoxious colors together are over."

Speaking of new, Tony Post, former CEO of Vibram FiveFingers, will unveil his new venture, Topo Athletic, at this month's Outdoor Retailer show. The Newton, MA-based brand aims to offer functional, lightweight benefits in a modern design aesthetic. "It's not a FiveFingers or a minimalist concept," he says. "It's an interesting new concept built around a couple of key values." A big one being innate amplification, which takes the body's natural biomechanics and supports and amplifies that with the shoes. "Our footwear isn't going to change the way you run or train, but it really is going to amplify your natural biomechanics," Post adds.



Skechers



Topo Athletic



Skora

TRAINING: Let's Dance

The fitness training market is more diverse than ever, encompassing activities ranging from weight training, CrossFit workouts, outdoor cross-training to a boom in dance and studio exercise. For these and other sport performance-based regimens, lightweight footwear that also provides cushioning and stability is key. Aesthetically, bright colors and bold patterns are expected to be strong, along with sleek, athletic silhouettes.

One of the newest brands on the market is ZEMgear (Zone of Endless Motion), which made its debut in 2010 with a collection of barefoot shoes. "ZEMs are built on a barefoot last platform and allow your foot to move as nature intended," says Christina Bracken, ZEM's co-founder and president. "We offer both split-ninja toes and round-toe patterns; great foot flexibility and agility come with the separation of your forward propulsion digit and the four balancing toes. The round-toe styles have a wider toe box to ensure complete foot freedom and the room to splay your toes in a natural way."

Both Reebok and New Balance are targeting fitness dance. Classes have been popping up in gyms the world over, signifying a need for performance dance footwear. "Reebok launched its dance collection for Spring '13 and will continue to expand it this fall," says Leanne Hanan, product manager, Reebok Studio. The Reebok Dance URLead 2.0 model, based in the company's iconic Freestyle heritage, combines lifestyle fashion with performance benefits such as breathable and lightweight mesh upper inserts, 3D PulseFrame construction for seamless support and a Turn Zone to enhance turns and spins. New Balance's 867 model weighs a mere 6.5 ounces and includes a no-sew seamless upper and a pivot point outsole for smooth, multi-directional movement.



Reebok



ZEMgear



New Balance

SEATING: Wear a Cup

Looking ahead to Fall '13, skate shoe vendors are rolling out new technologies that improve fit, comfort, durability and, for technical users, enhance board feel and grip. Regarding construction, vulcanized models are still hugely popular, but cup sole styles are making a comeback. Across the board, bold colors, along with a mixture of materials that add visual and



textural interest (and also serve performance) are prominent.

"The skate market is growing and shifting from casual, simple, commodity-driven profile shoes to more of a performance-oriented footwear offering with technology," says Pierre-Andre Senizergues, owner and CEO of Etnies. "We're also noticing that skate is impacting a lot of what is happening with street trends."

Along those lines, skate footwear has been an intrinsic part of American youth culture. However, the generation that brought skateboarding and other action sports to the masses is now buying homes and raising families. This means that vendors have an opportunity to appeal to a slightly older demographic that is loyal to the brands it grew up wearing, not to mention has an affinity for heritage and retro-inspired styles. As Senizergues notes, "We're seeing a demand for '90s skate influence incorporated with the technology of today and a demand for comfort." For example, Etnies' STI Evolution Foam midsoles in its Murana, Aventa and High Rise models are durable, abrasion-resistant and provide high-impact rebound quality. And because STI Evolution foam is made using a special molding process rather than being die-cut from a sheet, less waste is created.

Over at Vans, Chris Overholser, senior marketing manager, reports "continued interest in simple, classic silhouettes with solid and tonal colors, often with more intricate detailing through the use of leather and textiles, stitching and hardware such as metal eyelets." On the performance side, Vans is incorporating innovations that improve

comfort, lightness and durability. For example, hidden technology such as Duracap rubber reinforcement is inserted under high-wear areas in select styles, such as the Christian Hosoi Sk8-Hi Notchback Pro. The company is also introducing two distinct UltraCush sockliners that utilize proprietary materials to create light, extremely absorbent footbeds. And the brand's new WaffleCup construction mimics the responsiveness of a vulcanized shoe while providing the stability of a cup sole. In addition, Vans continues to align with iconic hardgoods companies, such as board builder Alien Workshop, to create unique shoe collections for this fall. "Programs such as these help drive excitement in board shops," Overholser says.

New to the skate scene this fall is New Balance and its Numeric brand. Like the folks at Etnies and Vans, New Balance Numeric Brand Manager Sebastian Palmer is aware of the rising popularity of the cup sole construction. "We are taking a dual approach of lightweight technical performance through our two-cup sole models, and stylish low profiles in our two vulcanized offerings," Palmer says. He also points out that "discreet technical aspects" are returning to the category and, to that end, the brand is introducing Revlite, a proprietary material that provides support and cushioning while maintaining board feel—the premise being highly durable uppers on lightweight, thin cup soles. Palmer notes that New Balance Numeric's vulcanized shoes are light and low to the ground and include performance insoles and classic heritage details such as asymmetric toe patterns and contrasting panel details.

BASKETBALL: Slam Dunk

Hoops footwear is on a growth trajectory in both the performance and retro/casual markets—particularly since the category is becoming a year-round business. Key trends include lightweight technologies, strong color stories and, in the casual realm, retro and heritage styles.

"We're coming off of our second consecutive year of double-digit growth in basketball and anticipate continued growth for 2013," remarks Lawrence Norman, vice president of global basketball at Adidas. "Lightweight remains a key performance characteristic, along with bold colors and materials that link back to authentic stories."

At Reebok, the mood is also upbeat. "Retailers are recording historical highs for their overall basketball business," says Greg Korbas, product manager, Reebok Basketball. "Retro is the hottest thing in the market right now, and everyone is trying to get in on it." Noting that 80 percent of kids wear these off the court, Korbas says you can't offer enough color options these days. "Neons have made their way onto NBA courts as the league is allowing brands to get a little more aggressive with on-court product, thus they are becoming much more expected colors to see at retail," he says. "Low-cut basketball sneakers are also becoming more widely accepted by consumers."



A key performance model for Fall '13 is the Pumpspective Omni that blends a retro look with modern construction. The Answer I and Shaqosis are the two main retro releases for the brand.

CASUAL: Melting Pot

Puma



New Balance



Ahnu



Aetrex



Diadora



Etnies



This category includes an enormous mix of styles, silhouettes and colors, with the common denominator being a lifestyle vibe combined with performance (read: comfort) attributes.

From a color perspective almost anything goes, as exemplified by the Puma FTR Trinomic Slipstream SK that has a high-collared basketball silhouette along with techy fabrics and bold snake and animal prints. In contrast, New Balance's Rugby collection takes its design inspiration from Ivy League club sports (think classic rugby shirts), while its High Roller collection exudes a distinctly opulent and luxe urban attitude that moves away from flashy color pops.

Meanwhile, Golden Viking Sports, a division of INA International and the licensee of Diadora in North America, is introducing a casual collection this fall. "Key trends include cleaner and sleeker silhouettes, and lightweight and comfort are critical," notes Mark Wachter, national sales manager.

For Aetrex, the object is to provide a hybrid of extreme comfort and everyday performance, and the result is the new men's Modpod Active. Floating pods keep the shoes light and disperse shock individually, while four-way stretch uppers and breathable memory foam footbeds provide customized comfort. A patented lockdown heel strap allows for individualized stability. Vans' LXVI line targets consumers who are looking for athletic comfort and the laidback lifestyle the brand embodies. "This consumer [wants] the modern look provided by synthetic materials and new constructions, such as our RapidWeld stitchless construction [featured in the Stat model]," Overholser says.

For female consumers seeking après studio footwear, Ahnu is expanding its yoga lifestyle line that features simple designs, easy on/off functionality, and feminine materials and colors. "The technology in this area is really quite subtle," says Jacqueline Van Dine, brand manager. "The goal isn't to make something that can go to the top of Mount Everest, it's to create more comfortable and supportive shoes that look and feel fantastic." >78



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