

Bunnies Jr made a breakthrough at iconic retailer Harrods last year.
CREDIT: VAN GASTEL SHOES



Young footwear professional Hilde ter Steege's first full-time jobs in the industry have been in Surabaya in Indonesia, initially going for a two-month trial in 2010, but now in her fifth year there. Since 2012, she has worked for Dutch children's brand Van Gastel Shoes, interpreting design requests and checking samples before they reach Europe. The fact that she has remained in Indonesia suggests that this idea is working well.

On the ground in Asia

Hilde ter Steege is a young Dutch person who grew up with a passion for shoes, a desire to learn everything she could about the industry and an ambition to build a footwear career for herself. For the last few years, she has been product manager at one of her native country's most famous footwear companies, Van Gastel Shoes, a position that, ironically, means she now lives in the shoe-producing hotbed that is Indonesia. She is very happy there.

Van Gastel Shoes is synonymous in the Netherlands with high-quality, well fitting, hard-wearing shoes for children. Its history goes back to 1842 when a footwear entrepreneur named Pieter Wijdemans founded a factory in the shoemaking town of Kaatsheuvel, in the south of the country. His son, Johannes, took over in the 1880s and introduced steam power. He ran the business until 1921, when he handed over the reins to his daughter Caroline and her husband Josephus van Gastel.

The company is still in the hands of the van Gastel family, with Marcel van Gastel at the head, and continues to run from Kaatsheuvel, but, as has happened with many European footwear companies, its production set-up began to change at the end of the twentieth century with Van Gastel Shoes finding its first outsource manufacturing partners. By 2004, more of the group's footwear was being made in Asia, where it has partners in China and Indonesia, than in Europe, where the partners it works with are now in Portugal. It still pays close attention to its lasts and its choice of materials so that its products continue to fit well and offer parents good value for money. "Children today want fashion too," Ms ter Steege says. "Boys, too, with sporty looks and bright colours. So we try to combine everything. We have simple designs, but they are more special and the leathers are more alive than you would see from a lot of more traditional shoe companies."

Under a variety of brands (Bunnies Jr, for children up to 5 years old, Twins, for girls up to 13, Trackstyle, for boys up to 13, and Braqueez, for boys and girls up to 13) it now sells its shoes in important export markets, especially Germany, the UK and Belgium, as well as in the Netherlands. Each has its own specialist market: for example, there are special widths (narrow and broad) in the Twins and Trackstyle ranges, while Bunnies Jr focuses on soft materials for crawling babies and first shoes for new walkers (although plans are in place to expand the age-range to eight from spring-summer 2015).

Material girl

Part of Hilde ter Steege's job is to source the materials her design colleagues have stipulated. "We are a team," she explains, "and the designers give me a lot of direction. They



Fashionable shoes from the Braqueez range.

CREDIT: VAN GASTEL SHOES

give me colours, they give me materials, they make their designs, they come with their swatches, and I just have to make sure that what they want combines well with what is available. We stick to 1.2 millimetres to 1.4 millimetres as our standard thickness. We do use thinner, trend leathers for some items."

In 2013, Van Gastel Shoes made an important breakthrough when it managed to interest iconic London department store Harrods to put Bunnies Jr shoes into its children's footwear range. Harrods liked the design and the fashion elements of the Bunnies Jr collection (for spring-summer 2014), which is

currently on sale in the store. The shoes are on sale in plenty of other outlets too, of course, and optimism for growth in 2014 is high.

Passion for the product

Hilde ter Steege's path to Surabaya began when she studied footwear at the TMO Fashion Business School in Doorn in the Netherlands. She was always set on footwear. "Even when you are a child, you either like shoes or you don't," she says. "I like shopping, of course, and I can take a long time choosing clothes, but with shoes it's different for me and it always has been. I know exactly what I want and know immediately which shoes are the right ones. It's a passion, and I've had it for a long time."

She went to Doorn straight from school, but not before completing 100 hours' work experience in her chosen field, which is something the course organisers insist on for all candidates on the three-and-a-half-year course. She gained this experience by working in a shoe store near her home at weekends and in school holidays. Some of the people who completed the bachelor's degree course with her dreamed of owning their own shoe stores, but Ms ter Steege says it was in shoe production where she saw everything she had learned come together. "How you make a shoe, how you make leather and whether the leather comes from cows or sheep or goats; all these things are of interest to me," she says. "How do all the small details combine to make a finished shoe? I thought it was very interesting and I wanted to learn more and more about it. You do more with your brain in production. You have to solve problems there all the time. So many things can go wrong there."

How to build a line

Part of the course was an internship in the final year. Never having travelled outside her home country before that point, Ms ter Steege decided that the best way to secure a good internship was to travel to Milan, visit Micam, see which brand's she liked best and just ask for a position. "The people at one women's fashion shoe brand said they might have something for me and, after quite a few calls to them over the autumn, they took me on. It was exciting and I was soon working as an assistant line builder, making requests to suppliers' factories, specifying details, and then checking that the details were correct when the samples came. And I think I built that role up into a proper job, with all the details properly organised and so on."

She says the brand showed its appreciation by allowing her to go on a shopping trip to London with the line builder to see the shoes there. "I would probably rather have gone to the production unit in Portugal," she says of what would be many young women's dream business trip.

She took all this experience back to class and completed the course a few months later, writing her thesis on how best to construct service level agreements between retailers and manufacturers. This was in 2010. Before she was much older, she was on a flight to Indonesia, equipped with a guidebook her parents had given her as a present, to start the job she still does today.

Fewer rejections and less reworking of samples are among the benefits of having your own people on the ground in Asia.

CREDIT: VAN GASTEL SHOES

The value of spotting problems early

She accepts that CAD systems, virtual samples and communications technology have made it easier for design and production teams to stay on the same page as one another, but it is her contention that it is still very important even for footwear brands that outsource the making of all their shoes, to have their own eyes and ears at production sites, which is the role that took her to Asia. "If you don't have someone there to explain what we, as Europeans, want, you don't always get what you want," she says. "You have to have someone to explain, someone to make things better there, on site." She volunteered to be that person and her employer allowed her to go for two months to see if the idea worked. Fewer rejections and less reworking of samples was one of the first things the company noticed. In some instances, she has even stopped "in the line", just before production of a shoe began, incorrect interpretations of what the design team wanted. This is still translating into important savings in money and time.

Her years at the TMO Fashion Business School taught Hilde ter Steege a lot about shoe production, but she says that watching it happen in real time, at full speed, in big volumes has also been a good learning experience. She says that if she had the chance to go back to talk to a new intake of footwear students at Doorn today, she would seek to encourage them to build a career in the shoe industry, the way she has done. But there are also one or two points that she believes would be worth straightening out. She explains: "You shouldn't think that having a job and living and working overseas is always fun. It's really hard, hard work and you have to give a lot to the job and be very passionate about it, or you wouldn't be able to do it. It can be lonely too and you can spend hours and hours in traffic. If you're not passionate, you won't be able to do it. Apart from that, the best thing I could tell them would be that it's better to make a wrong decision than to make no decision. If you hold back and don't decide what to do, production will stop, samples will stop and nothing can get through. If you prepare well and think about things in the right way, most of the decisions you make will be the right ones anyway." 

