



In with the old

Adidas teamed up with musician Pharrell Williams for the Supershell collection, adding a modern flourish to the classic Superstar silhouette.

CREDIT: ADIDAS

According to a report on the US athletic footwear market from research organisation NPD Group, 2015 was the year of the retro shoe. This category was worth \$3.5 billion last year, meaning it claimed a 20% share of all athletic shoe sales in the country. What's more, while the US athletic footwear market grew by 8% year-on-year in 2015, sales of shoes that NPD classified as 'classic' increased 30%, much faster than any other category. The rise in popularity was not confined to men's shoes (+26%), with retro models increasingly popular with children (+29%) and women (+69%). Retro running and tennis shoes sold well, but reissued basketball sneakers were most popular.

Trendsetters

Sportswear manufacturer adidas values its line of heritage products highly; it has a separate division, Originals, which releases items inspired by the designs from the 1940s through to the 1980s. As well as footwear it features shirts, coats and bags. In 2015, a surge in the sales of Originals products was key to the company achieving revenue growth of 10%. During this period, footwear sales across all divisions jumped 19%, compared to a 5% rise in revenue from apparel. The most successful retro product in the Originals stable is the Stan Smith tennis shoe, which has retained a strong following since its initial release in the 1970s (when Stan Smith won two tennis Grand Slams). Arthur Hoeld, Originals general manager, describes the Stan Smith as the "backbone" of the division's success. During 2015, adidas sold 8 million pairs of classic Stan Smiths, prompting Herbert Hainer, who recently left his role as

It may seem a contradiction but retro shoes are in fashion; footwear brands are counting on the popularity of reissued models to boost their sales.



The Stan Smith has made its way from the court to the street, becoming one of adidas' best-selling shoes of all time.

CREDIT: ADIDAS

adidas CEO after 15 years, to label the model, as well as another of the company's classic shoes, the Superstar, as the "driving force of sneaker culture".

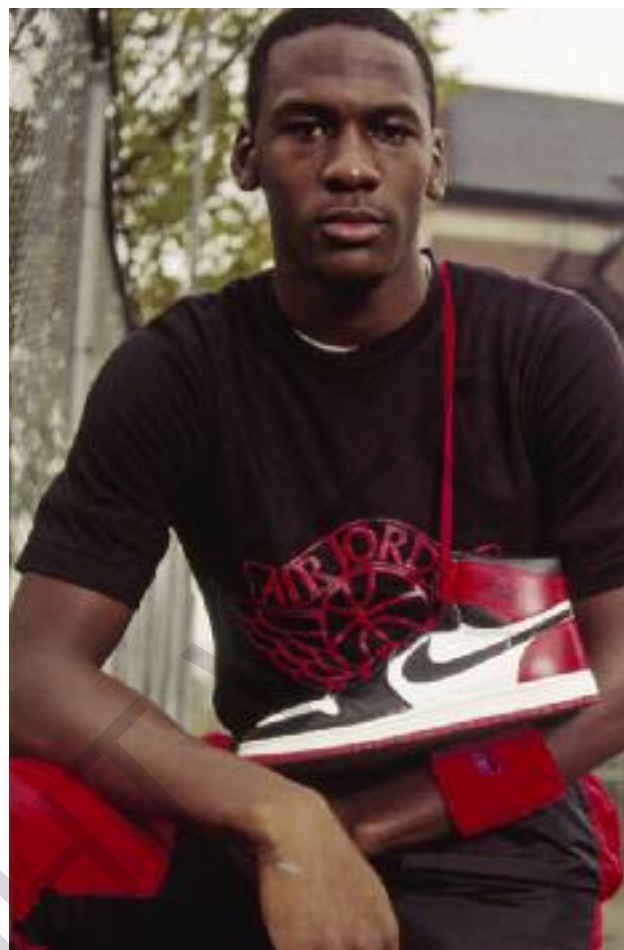
The Superstar, which dates back to the late 1960s, is one of a number of successful retro shoes that were first worn on the basketball court. The most famous of these is the Air Jordan from Nike. First conceived for, and endorsed by, US basketball legend Michael Jordan, it has been a crucial part of the brand's offering for more than 30 years. The Air Jordan remains incredibly popular, despite it being more than 20 years since the iconic athlete from whom they take their name finally retired from professional sport. Nike and adidas are now pressing ahead with plans to reissue iconic tennis and basketball shoes from the 1960s; they see retro models as an essential part of their business.

Dual appeal

The target market for reissued shoes is diverse, extending not just across the sexes, but also across the generations. Older consumers, who remember them from their initial release, are driven to buy by a sense of nostalgia. To younger people, classic shoes aren't classic at all; they see them with fresh eyes as if they were a new product. Retro has become a term used by the younger generation to simply describe a style of footwear.

"I find that in this technological age where everything is moving incredibly fast, it is comforting to be grounded in a timeless footwear design," Rian Pozzebon, head of footwear design at VF-owned brand Vans, tells *World Footwear*. With the world changing at an astounding pace, there is something comforting in a retro shoe.

Vans, which celebrates retro through its Classic, Authentic and Old Skool product lines, made an important contribution to the



Nike's Air Jordan range, designed for US basketball star Michael Jordan (pictured), has made a significant contribution to the brand's revenue for over 30 years.

CREDIT: NIKE



Vans has stayed true to its range of classic designs for over half a century. The brand continues to perform well without the need for major changes to its products.

CREDIT: VANS

revenue of VF in the first nine months of this year. At a time when VF's other marque footwear brand, Timberland, is suffering a dip in sales in the US, Vans recorded a 4% increase in sales in the second quarter and helped VF bank a small growth in revenue. This continued in the third quarter of the year as 7% growth for Vans helped VF limit its overall drop in revenue to 1%.

Jon Epstein, president at Fila North America, describes his company's heritage category, which includes apparel as well as shoes, as a "huge business driver". He says Fila feels it has the opportunity "to inspire a new generation of consumer" with its Vintage collection.

It is incumbent on footwear companies to continually update their reissued products in order to appeal to a younger generation. As consumers, this demographic is crucial, as they are more likely to replace their shoes every year as trends and styles evolve. Attracting them also gives brands a steady supply of new long-term customers. Collaborations with celebrities have long been a sure-fire way to attract the attention of younger consumers. Adidas turned to singer and record producer Pharrell Williams for a reboot of its Superstar sneaker. Mr Williams had an important role in the design of the Supercolor range, which retained the classic Superstar silhouette but was available in a choice of 50 colours; adidas said this represented a celebration of diversity. He also worked on the Supershell, another collection inspired by the Superstar, helping to design unique artwork which featured on the toecap



of the limited-edition model. It formed part of a project that saw the brand work with artists around the world to give a fresh look to a classic shoe.

Evolution

To keep their retro shoes relevant, brands need to go beyond aesthetic modifications. Nike, which says it sees “strong value in celebrating our heritage”, incorporates the latest innovative materials and technologies into reissued models. Its Flyknit material, made from recycled plastic bottles, was used in a recent update to the Air Jordan, as was the FlightSpeed cushioning system, which helps better distribute weight and offers increased energy return on contact with the ground.

Converse, a part of the Nike empire since 2003, has had great success with two retro sneakers – the Chuck Taylor and the All Star. The Chuck Taylor started life as a cutting-edge basketball shoe nearly a century ago and has remained a bestseller ever since. In 2015, Converse introduced the Chuck Taylor II, the first time the iconic product underwent any real design changes in its hundred-year history. The changes were designed to make the shoe more comfortable but they were met with a largely underwhelming response from the public, who preferred the original design.

Converse takes full advantage of the increased research and development resources at the disposal of parent company Nike. The Chuck Taylor II featured a lightweight insole and Nike’s Lunarlon sockliner foam cushioning technology, one of the changes designed to make it more comfortable. In June this year, Converse unveiled an updated version of the All Star sneaker; it stayed true to the classic design but incorporated state-of-the-art materials. The upper is made from Nike’s Hyperfuse fabric, which uses three fused layers of material to offer durable shoes with good breathability. The base layer is a supportive synthetic material, the middle consists of a mesh to make the shoe breathable, and the outer layer is made from thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) film for extra durability. It also has a TPU-fused overlaid toe cap, and neoprene split tongue and lining to make the shoe lighter.

Converse incorporates the latest technological advances from parent company Nike into its retro designs, including the All Star.

CREDIT: CONVERSE

Here to stay?

Bjørn Gulden, CEO of German sports group Puma, says “heritage sneakers are an important part” of the company’s plans. He cautions, however, that this may not be for long as “trends come and go”. Puma maintains a range of retro shoes via its Classic line, which includes the Classic Suede, first released in the later 1960s.

It is likely that the term ‘retro’, when used in relation to footwear, will always refer to classic designs from the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, Rian Pozzebon at Vans believes there are some modern sneaker models that could grow to be considered retro in the future, although he says “not all retro shoes are enduring”. There is a risk of classic designs losing their appeal if they are excessively reissued by brands. There are also lessons to be learned from the limited success of the Converse Chuck Taylor II. Although it is important for brands to ensure reissued products remain fresh, either by tweaking the design or incorporating new technologies, try to change too much and the product could lose the identity that made it a success in the past.

Puma’s Classic Suede.

CREDIT: PUMA

