

**STREET
STYLE**

NIKE

A VISUAL HISTORY OF THE ICONIC BRAND

GERALD
FLORES





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FSC DUMMY

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STREET STYLE

NIKE

A VISUAL HISTORY OF THE ICONIC BRAND



For everyone who wants to turn
their passion into their career.

- GF

GERALD **FLORES**

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ABOVE: A pair of Air Jordan 1s in a red, black and white colourway.



More Than Sneakers

When it comes to brands that have transcended above the category of sportswear and into the realm of iconic footwear, Nike is in rare air.

A company that started with American track coach Bill Bowerman pouring rubber into his wife's waffle iron in search of a way to reinvent the running shoe is now a global symbol that's synonymous with world-class athletes, streetwear and everything in between.

However, there was a time when Nike was just a challenger in a game that was dominated by established players like Converse, Adidas and Puma. It would take grit, determination and a little bit of luck for the company to bounce back from its past failures and become the stalwart that it is today.

Nike won its place at the top of Sneaker Mount Olympus by continuing to push the pace of innovation. They pioneered a way to design sportswear by looking through the lens of an athlete, but for everyone, resulting in game-changing technology that enhanced sports performance and influenced the fashion landscape.

As the company grew, so did its reputation in the streets. Products Nike initially designed for use in sport evolved into style staples with sneakers like the Air Force 1 and Cortez becoming household names in streetwear.

Nike is an inspiration for athletes, pro and amateur alike, but also for fashion houses that have very little to do with sports. Think labels like Dior, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co. and more. All have lent their aesthetic to Nike through product collaboration, helping transform Nike's sportswear into status symbols, and solidifying the Beaverton, Oregon-based company as a bona fide style brand.

Nike's marketing efforts are equally innovative. The Swoosh logo and iconic 'Just Do It' slogan have become shorthand for the brand's ethos, resonating globally. They invented a form of sneaker storytelling through punchy taglines, strategic partnerships and generationally memorable advertisements that have contributed to its cultural impact.



ABOVE: American track & fielder Michael Johnson's iconic gold Nike track spikes worn while setting a world record during the 1996 Olympics.

As a brand that transcends the boundaries of sportswear and shoes, Nike has shaped the athletic industry, impacted popular culture, and set new standards that solidified its position as a leader across the globe.

The story of Nike is so much more than just a story about the shoes we put on our feet. The company's decades of success have also shaped athletes' stories and career trajectories, and the culture of sports. It's an American success story driven by an ethos that declares 'There is no finish line'.

PREVIOUS: American track and fielder Michael Johnson's iconic gold Nike track spikes worn while setting a world record during the 1996 Olympics.

RIGHT: Nike's worldwide headquarters, located in Beaverton, Oregon, spreads across 286 acres and more than 75 buildings.





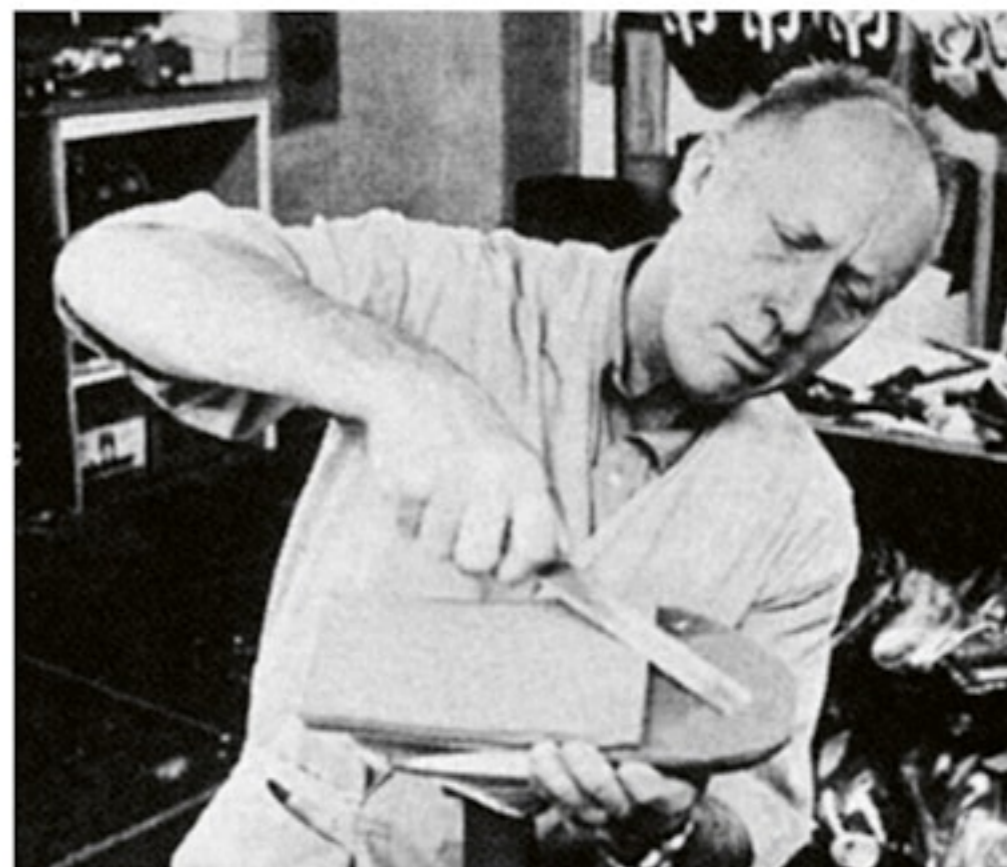
The Coach and the Athlete: The Founders of Nike

The seeds of Nike were planted at Hayward Field in Eugene, Oregon in the United States of America. Bill Bowerman became track and field coach at the University of Oregon in 1948. During his tenure at the school, Bowerman won four National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) championships, coached 28 Olympians and became the U of O's most successful coach.

However, Bowerman wasn't just obsessed with seeing his athletes excel at the sport, but also with what they wore on their feet. When he wasn't coaching, he was tinkering with shoe designs in his office that was tucked under the bleachers of Hayward Field.

There was a time when University of Oregon runner Kenny Moore broke his foot while running. Bowerman did an autopsy on Moore's shoe and discovered that a lack of arch support caused the stress fracture, so the coach cobbled together an improved track shoe with a cushioned inner sole for the runner to recover in.

Studying everything from anatomy to material composition, Bowerman constantly looked to innovate what the current track shoe looked like, as well as how to make them lighter and more efficient for his athletes. He experimented with making the uppers out of materials, like snake and fish skin and repositioning the spikes to tailor them to the feet of whoever was wearing them.



ABOVE: Famed University of Oregon track coach and Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman at his workbench.

'Bill Bowerman, my former track coach at the University of Oregon and cofounder of the company that became Nike, had always customised off-the-shelf shoes for his runners,' Nike co-founder Phil Knight told *Harvard Business Review* in 1992.

The coach took his ideas to existing shoe manufacturers, but not many heard him out. Bowerman's background in coaching gave him a specific perspective in shoe design and it took one of his former athletes to help him bring his innovations to the masses.



TOP and OPPOSITE: Nike co-founder Phil Knight over the years at Nike's World Headquarters.

ABOVE: Phil Knight pictured in Washington DC in 1997.

Phil Knight, a former U of O middle distance runner, had a unique relationship with Bowerman. Bowerman had previously been his coach, but the entrepreneur also saw Bowerman as a father figure, mentor, teacher, and eventually, a business partner.

While Bowerman could certainly be categorised as an inventor, he hated the term and preferred to see himself more as a problem solver. This approach of listening to the athlete and prioritising the bond between athlete and coach would lay the philosophical foundation on which Nike would be built.

Not only did the duo give the athlete a voice, they also broadened the idea of what it meant to be an athlete. Olympians and championship athletes were their muses, but the products they created were designed to be utilised by anyone chasing their own personal greatness.



'If you have a body, you are an athlete,' was one of Bowerman's most popular maxims, and it would shape Nike in the coming decades. With those words, the founders would set a North Star for who their consumer would be and create a rallying cry that anyone with a body could participate in.

What Bowerman brought to the table in terms of approach to product design, Knight complemented with vision, marketing and finance. The entrepreneur saw a business opportunity in importing high-quality running shoes from Japan when most US sneaker companies were importing from Europe.



Knight put this theory to the test by taking a trip to Japan in 1962, on the hunt for quality athletic shoes that he could sell in the United States. He found what he was looking for in Onitsuka Tiger and soon after, Knight and Bowerman would start a company called Blue Ribbon Sports - the precursor to Nike.

The founders' bet on footwear paid off early on. Blue Ribbon Sports brought Onitsuka Tiger stateside and made the

Japanese brand formidable in the American market with runners.

Seeking to grow even more aggressively, Knight reinvested the earnings from distributing Onitsuka Tiger to get even more product and to open up more stores in the US, while Bowerman designed brand new shoes for the Japanese company to produce.

Blue Ribbon Sports sales were rewarding, but they also came with a high amount of risk. The rapid speed of growth put a strain on the company's overheads that included hiring more staff, increasing facilities and investing in more inventory. Onitsuka Tiger was slow with deliveries of product, which also put Blue Ribbon Sports in a difficult position.

On top of that, Onitsuka Tiger's reticence in producing Blue Ribbon Sports' new designs, or even considering Knight and Bowerman's suggestions, brought tension into the partnership. Things grew sour between both companies when Knight discovered that Onitsuka Tiger sought to explore other distribution options in the US and had gone back on their agreement to make Blue Ribbon Sports the exclusive marketer of its products.

This betrayal would ignite a fire in Knight to do things his own way, by starting a brand-new company.

OPPOSITE: An original Blue Ribbon Sports shoe bag that highlighted the American company as the exclusive distributor of Onitsuka Tiger products in the United States.



1971: Nike is Born

Origin of the Name

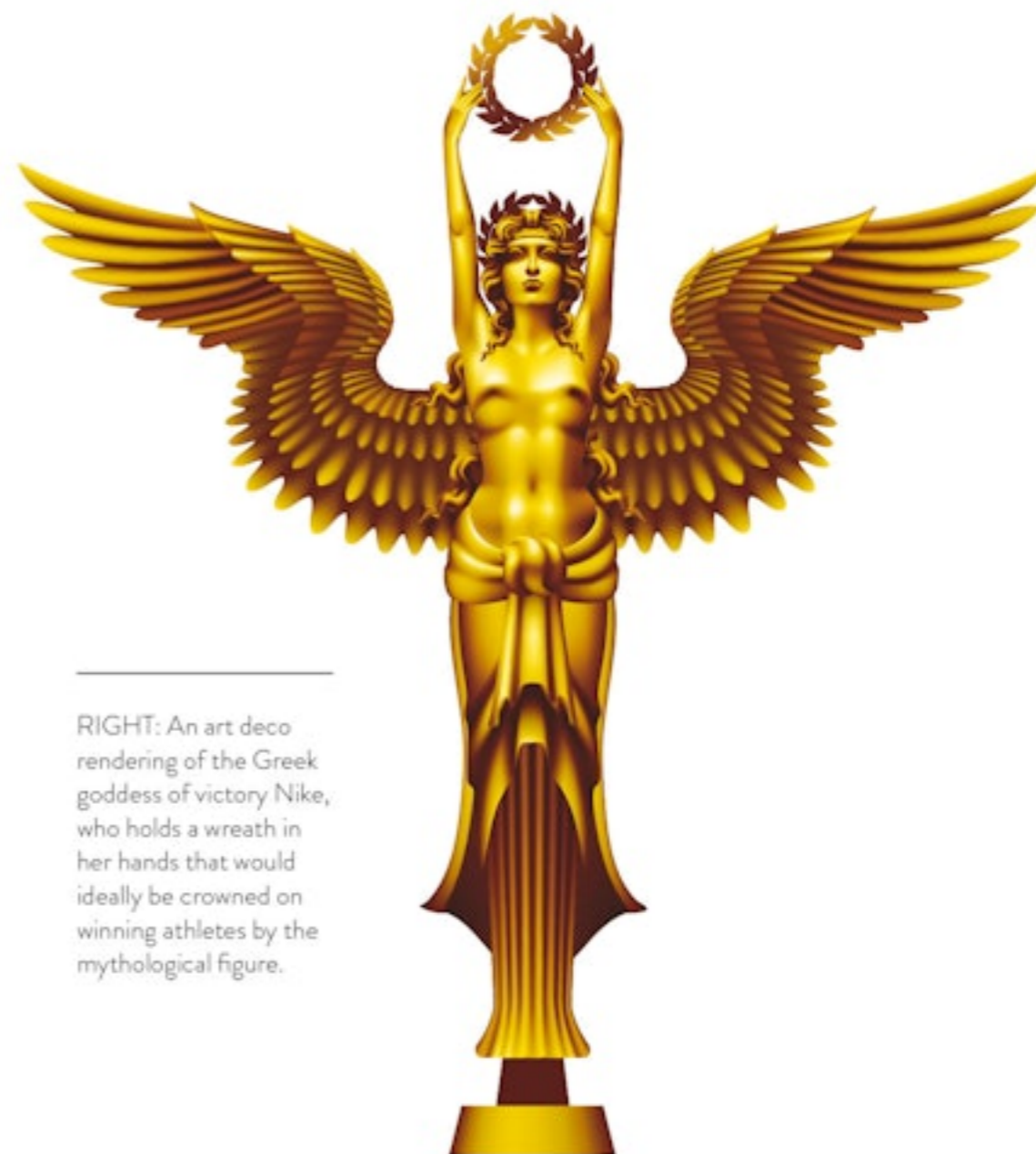
After the relationship between Blue Ribbon Sports and Onitsuka Tiger fell apart, Knight and Bowerman looked to start a new chapter.

Still reeling from an ugly business divorce, the founders used their pain as a point of motivation. Knight gathered the team together with the ambition of starting a new brand, based in Oregon, and built on the ideals that he and Bowerman believed in. They just needed a name for it.

Knight originally wanted to call the upstart company 'Dimension Six' because he was a fan of the musical band The 5th Dimension. It didn't stick.

Another suggestion was inspired by the animal kingdom. Puma was a hugely popular sneaker brand at the time and as a response to that competitor being named after a predatory cat, a Blue Ribbon Sports employee suggested naming the new company after a predatory bird: 'Peregrine'. It didn't stick.

Jeff Johnson, a star Blue Ribbon Sports salesman who would go on to become the company's first full-time employee, found a spark of inspiration in an in-flight magazine article that broke down why brand names like Kleenex and Xerox were so memorable. The article suggested that words under two syllables that also have an unusual letter like a Z, X, or K tend to have more recall among consumers.



RIGHT: An art deco rendering of the Greek goddess of victory Nike, who holds a wreath in her hands that would ideally be crowned on winning athletes by the mythological figure.

The result was Nike, a moniker that even Knight wasn't a fan of at first, but agreed to because it was the best of the options available. The name Nike had an organic connection with the brand's values, since it was also the name of the winged Greek goddess of victory.

Origin of the Logo

Nike's identity would come to life in its brand marking.

Some may see it as a tick. Others may refer to it as a checkmark. But to those who are truly aware, it's a Swoosh.

Knight was looking for a mark, or 'stripe', that would sit nicely on the side of a shoe and give the feeling of movement. With a very tight production deadline for a logo and a conservative budget, Nike's founder couldn't go to a big-name creative agency for the design, but rather a graphic design student named Carolyn Davidson at Portland State University where Knight was teaching.



OPPOSITE: Designer Virgil Abloh showing off the big-belly Swoosh on the Nike Blazer he collaborated on as part of his 'Ten' collection.

ABOVE: Dennis Rodman wearing the Nike Air Darwin, which featured a backwards Swoosh mark, in 1994.



'Well, I don't love it,' Knight was heard saying upon the first review. 'But it will grow on me.'

The Swoosh definitely grew on Knight as the shape also bore a resemblance to the wings on the Greek goddess that Nike was named after. It would go on to become one of the most well-known logos in the world.

While Davidson was initially paid just \$35 for her design, Knight saw her as one of the original minds behind the brand and wanted to acknowledge this. In 1983, the founder rewarded Davidson with 500 shares of Nike, as well as a golden ring



with a Swoosh-shaped diamond, which is possibly the biggest remuneration for any logo design in history.

The marking is such a part of Nike culture that every new athlete that signs with the brand is tasked to draw their own version of the Swoosh. There have been different evolutions of the Swoosh and you can see the various iterations if you look through Nike's back-catalogue of products. Designer and Nike collaborator Virgil Abloh nodded to Davidson's original Swoosh design on the cover of his book *Something's Off* and the marking has been reversed on signature product for eccentric players, like Dennis Rodman's Air Darwin sneaker. But the essence of the Swoosh remains in its simplicity, its elegance and the way it represents movement.

OPPOSITE: Giannis Antetokounmpo's first signature sneaker implemented its performance features in the midsole in the shape of a reverse Nike Swoosh.

ABOVE: A lightning bolt effect on the Nike Swoosh printed on a pair of track spikes.

Nike's First Breakthrough Technology

By the early 1970s, with a refreshed name and a sleek logo, Nike was a fledgling company trying to find its feet in the industry. To be relevant, it had to differentiate itself from its competitors by bringing something new to the market in terms of innovation.

The company's first major breakthrough came by way of a waffle iron. Barbara Bowerman's waffle iron, to be specific. It was into this kitchen appliance, which was a wedding gift, that her husband poured a liquid urethane compound with the goal of creating a brand-new tread on the bottom of running shoes. The pattern that emerged resembled something like an inside-out waffle, with the box-like studs creating traction on the shoe.



OPPOSITE: A prototype of the Nike Waffle, which featured Bill Bowerman's early design of tread for the shoe.

LEFT: A close look at the iconic Nike Waffle tread, as seen on the Nike Daybreak sneaker.

While the waffle iron was damaged beyond repair, it had served a very important purpose and Nike's first proprietary technology would be created.

The innovation wasn't born out of the desire for a new gimmick, but out of an athletic necessity. The University of Oregon had recently replaced its cinder track with an artificial surface, and the coach was looking to create a new tread that would grip the ground without using spikes.

The result was the Nike Waffle sole: an outsole technology that would make the shoe more flexible to the foot and provide traction on any running surface. Nike's US patent application described the design as 'an athletic shoe suitable for use on artificial turf [...] the sole has short multi-sided polygon shaped studs [...] which provide gripping edges that give greatly improved traction,' and was granted in 1974.

The Waffle sole would be first used on the Nike Waffle Trainer, an early Nike silhouette that Bowerman and Knight would showcase and sell at track meets across the West Coast of the US. Even though it was invented in the early 1970s, the sole is still a relevant part of the brand's story - it was used as a base for subsequent sneaker models in the following years and is still used now.



1970s: Nike's First Steps

Nike would face its biggest challenges during the 1970s. In this decade the brand had to stand on its own as a new company, and not just as a distributor for Onitsuka Tiger.

There were some ups, like the debut of the first Nike-branded running shoes during the 1972 Olympic Trials, which became instantly popular on the market.

There were also some downs. In addition to heavy competition from established brands on the market, the US federal government said Nike owed \$25 million in unpaid tariffs - an amount that could have potentially bankrupted the company.

With its back against the wall, a Nike executive named Rob Strasser put together a company memo that outlined the fight the new company was facing on all fronts. The exec was familiar with getting gritty in legal disputes himself as he also represented Nike as a lawyer in its lawsuit against Onitsuka Tiger.

The ten maxims that Strasser laid out were posted throughout the office and would go on to become Nike's guiding principles.

They included:

- *Our business is change.*
- *We're on offense. All the time.*
- *Perfect results count - not a perfect process. Break the rules.*
- *This is as much about battle as about business.*
- *Assume nothing. Make sure people keep their promises. Push yourselves. Push others.*
- *If we do the right things, we'll make money damn near automatic.*

A condensed version of the ten principles that were drafted from Strasser's original 1977 memo is still used at Nike today.

LEFT: One of the more recent additions to Nike's global headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. A trail with a gate that says 'Be True', a slogan used in the company's LGBTQIA+ initiatives.



The Cortez

Arguably one of the most significant silhouettes in Nike's history, and perhaps sneaker history overall, is the Cortez. The name of the sneaker alone signifies the brand's irreverence towards its competitors.

Concepted by Bowerman with Onitsuka Tiger for the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, the sneaker's original name was The Aztec - a nod to the Mesoamericans who inhabited the host country of the games.

However, competitor Adidas had a track shoe called the Azteca Gold and threatened to sue Blue Ribbon Sports and Onitsuka Tiger if Aztec was used. Bowerman's solution: rename the sneaker after the historical figure who conquered the Aztecs, Hernán Cortés, whereupon the Tiger Cortez was born.



ABOVE: The original red, white and blue colourway of the Nike Cortez remains a popular choice for sneaker fans. It was also featured in the film *Forrest Gump*.

OPPOSITE: Farrah Fawcett riding a skateboard in the Nike Cortez in the 1970s.





The shoe became so popular that it caused supply chain issues because the manufacturer in Japan couldn't meet the demand. As a money maker for Blue Ribbon Sports and Onitsuka Tiger, both companies battled legally for ownership of the Cortez design during their split. Blue Ribbon Sports won the rights, and in 1972, the Nike Cortez was the first running sneaker launched under the Nike brand with a Swoosh adorning its side. Onitsuka Tiger retained rights to the silhouette and continue to produce their own version of the sneaker, named the Corsair.

To this day the Cortez is seen by many as the quintessential expression of Nike's design philosophy with its simple and clean look, exuding a casual elegance. It was also Nike's first product to be truly embraced culturally outside of sports.

The Nike Cortez isn't just important to fashion and style, but it also had a deep influence on sneaker culture. Its minimalist design and low-profile silhouette made it a staple in wardrobes across generations. It's been adopted by various subcultures, from the West Coast hip-hop scene to the Chicano community in the United States, making the sneaker a symbol of identity and affiliation.

LEFT: Los Angeles rapper Eazy-E posing for a photoshoot in the Nike Cortez, a sneaker that remains a part of West Coast hip-hop fashion.



LEFT: Kendrick Lamar partners a classic white pair of Nike Cortez with a black outfit at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2017.

OPPOSITE: Nike's Cortez collaboration with Los Angeles-based boutique Union that released in two colourways (smoke grey shown here) and featured woven textiles on the upper and a rubberized toe.



Fifty years after its debut, different creators have added their personal touch to the Cortez. Rapper Kendrick Lamar dropped a collection of limited edition pairs to mark the debut of his album *DAMN*. Los Angeles-based boutique Union also collaborated on the silhouette in 2022.

With its authenticity and heritage, the Cortez stands as a foundational piece in the evolution of sneakers and is interwoven with the rise of Nike as a cultural force. It encapsulates the spirit of simple design, cultural resonance and versatility. The silhouette continues to leave an indelible mark on the ever-evolving landscape of fashion, with Nike releasing variations, collabs and new iterations of the Cortez through the years.

The Waffle Trainer and Racer

With its foundation hot off Bowerman's waffle iron, the Nike Waffle Trainer represented a lot of firsts for the company when it was originally released in 1974.

For one, it debuted Nike's first proprietary technology, the Waffle Outsole, to the world. Unlike the Cortez, which existed previously as an Onitsuka Tiger shoe, the Waffle Trainer was truly the first original Nike design that was available commercially (early prototypes called 'The Moon Shoe' were only available to Bowerman's athletes).

Originally manufactured in Japan and priced between \$21.95 and \$24.95, the Waffle Trainer went on to be the best-selling shoe in the United States at a time when the company leaned into innovation to stay ahead.

Soon after, a more premium version of the Waffle Trainer called the Waffle Racer was released. It was slightly more expensive, retailing at \$30 in 1977, and had a wider base and lighter ethylene vinyl acetate (EVA) midsole.

The sneaker's unconventional design not only delivered performance for runners, but also laid the foundation for Nike's early aesthetic. Characterised by the grid-like outsole pattern resembling a waffle, the Waffle Trainer also entered the realms of street fashion.

Variations of the Waffle outsole would make its way into other Nike designs over the years; Nike continued to evolve the Waffle Racer, introducing various colourways and collaborations that kept the sneaker relevant in an ever-changing fashion landscape.



ABOVE: The Nike Waffle Trainer in grey and off-white featured Bowerman's waffle design on the sole.

Fashion labels like Comme des Garçons and Off-White have remixed the original Waffle Racer, while other designers have reworked Nike's original Waffle styles from the 1970s into totally new silhouettes.

There was the Sacai x Nike LDWaffle that melded both aesthetics of the Racer and the Nike LDV into one silhouette in 2019, and the Vaporwaffle in 2020 that used updated Nike tech atop the original Waffle sole.

From collaborations with influential designers to limited-edition releases, the Waffle Racer remains a canvas for creativity, consistently pushing the boundaries of sneaker design.

The Tailwind

The next breakthrough innovation for Nike wouldn't come from the breakfast table, but rather from a NASA aerospace engineer named Frank Rudy. The engineer's research found a way to encapsulate gas into a rubber membrane. Rudy believed that putting these air-filled capsules within the shoe would not only decrease the heavy toll that running had on the body, but also change the sneaker industry.

It certainly changed the trajectory of Nike by giving the company an innovation platform called Nike Air. 'Air' became a cornerstone of the brand's product design and marketing for decades to come, with nitrogen-filled air bags first seen in the Nike Air Tailwind in 1978 during the lead-up to the Honolulu Marathon. The shoes were carried at six stores and sold out immediately.



The Air Tailwind received wider availability in 1979 with a heavy marketing push to position it as the most advanced running sneaker of the era. 'The shoe with air', read one print ad. Another: 'Runners with rigid feet or those who require well-cushioned shoes prefer the Tailwind.'



OPPOSITE: The 1994 version of the Nike Tailwind, which featured visible Air units.

ABOVE: The most modern expression of the Nike Tailwind from 2013 which featured Air Max cushioning and a modified version of Bowerman's original Waffle sole technology.

The introduction of Air cushioning was more than just a technological leap; it was an evolution for Nike. The tech that started in the Nike Tailwind made its way into other running silos and eventually into other sports categories like basketball.

Air would be a platform for Nike to stand on, or float on, giving it a sharp point of distinction in the marketplace and on the streets.

In addition, the Tailwind would grow into its own popular silo in streetwear. As the brand grew older, the Tailwind also evolved to have new technology, updated designs and credibility in streetwear.

Boutiques such as Sneakersnstuff and Supreme released rare collections of the Tailwind IV. Rapper Skepta collaborated with Nike and the Tailwind V in 2021. Special makeups of the original Nike Tailwinds were also released in celebration of the Netflix show *Stranger Things*.



Steve Prefontaine: The Soul of Nike

Track phenom Steve Prefontaine was recruited to the University of Oregon to run for Bill Bowerman. He set eight collegiate records and won seven NCAA titles at the school. At one point in his career, 'Pre' held every American distance running record from 2,000 metres to 10,000 metres.

But Prefontaine won more than gold medals and trophies. He also won the hearts and minds of casual athletes everywhere with his spirit and personality that not only helped popularise the running boom in the 1970s, but also put Nike on the map.

In 1974 Prefontaine was the first runner that Nike signed, and his influence jumpstarted the brand as a reputable player in the running shoe industry. His rebellious and boisterous spirit embodied Nike's ethos, from the way he challenged the Amateur Athletic Union, the governing body for track and field and other sports, for not allowing athletes to accept endorsements, to the way Pre laid it all out on the line during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich with a gutsy, all-out performance in the 5,000 metres race.

With his shaggy hair, distinct moustache and flair on the track, many sports experts credit Prefontaine for making running look cool in the 1970s. Pre's attitude towards style, sport and excellence was infectious and his impact on Nike is reflective

OPPOSITE: Steve Prefontaine running at the University of Oregon in his custom Nike track spikes in the university's signature green and yellow colours.



of the symbiotic relationship between an athlete and the brand. Prefontaine's refusal to conform to traditional running norms and his relentless pursuit of excellence aligned seamlessly with the brand's mantra of pushing boundaries. Phil Knight later called him the 'soul of Nike'. Prefontaine became a living embodiment of Nike's commitment to sports and breaking barriers, laying the foundation for the company's future endeavours. The influence also extended beyond his competitive running career. In addition to being paid to wear Nike shoes, Pre was also named the company's National Director of Public Affairs and frequently wrote letters and sent products to up-and-coming runners.

Pre also used sport to serve those who couldn't run as freely. He would often drive to Oregon State Penitentiary where he spent time running and talking with inmates and founded a prison run club.

He tragically died in a car accident in 1975 at the age of 24, but Pre left a lasting mark on shaping Nike's identity. Nike used the loss of their muse as inspiration to be the blueprint for its commitment to athletes. To this day, Nike employees and runners pay tribute to the athlete by visiting a monument in Eugene, Oregon called 'Pre's Rock'.

Nike would go on to sign other endorsement deals with athletes in subsequent years, but none would have a more lasting impact in shaping the brand's messaging than Prefontaine. In 1977, Nike dropped an advert with the tagline 'There is no finish line', which encapsulates the brand's, and Pre's, philosophy, emphasising the enduring spirit of athletes like him.

Steve Prefontaine's impact on Nike goes beyond advertisements made or sneakers sold. His spirit became the blueprint for Nike's rise to prominence and his influence remains part of the Swoosh DNA. While Pre's legacy in running continues to inspire athletes, his partnership with Nike symbolises not just an endorsement, but a shared journey of challenging the status quo and pushing the limits.

LEFT: Steve Prefontaine's custom Nike track shoes designed by Bill Bowerman, on display at Pre's alma mater in Eugene, Oregon. The athlete was very candid about giving feedback to the designer and this was the first pair he approved.

**Responding to Pre's demands,
Bowerman designed a racing shoe
with a revolutionary, one-piece upper.**

**Lightweight and without any irritating toe seams,
this was the first Nike shoe Pre deemed
worthy enough to wear.**





Learning To Fly: Nike in the 1980s

Nike began to emerge as an industry leader and household name as it entered its second decade as a brand, becoming a publicly traded company in 1980. Revenue grew from \$28.7 million in 1973 to \$867 million by the end of 1983, but the company started to struggle by 1984, reporting its first quarterly loss ever.

With its back against the wall, Nike took some big gambles that would make the company a major player in the industry and change the world of marketing.

Betting on Michael Jordan

It was the endorsement deal that changed the trajectory of Nike.

The impact of Michael Jordan signing a deal to wear the Swoosh transformed the brand into the powerhouse it is today and the impact reverberated internationally throughout marketing, sports and pop culture.

To understand the gravity of what this deal meant for Nike and the industry, one must understand the conditions of National Basketball Association's (NBA) endorsed sportswear in 1984. Due to NBA regulations on sneakers, the colours had to be at

least 51-per cent all white or all black, with an accent colour that matched the team's colour. The antiquated rules resulted in predominantly bland offerings for the consumer to wear on the street.

Back in 1984, Jordan was poised to become the next big star in the NBA, but there weren't a lot of other brands or marketing experts that could foresee it. Adidas, Converse and some independent sneaker brands would all make a bid at the future Chicago Bull, but all of them were looking to follow that same formula of putting the player in a generic all-white or all-black team shoe. They weren't able to match what Nike was willing to offer.

RIGHT and
OVERLEAF: A
rookie Michael
Jordan in 1984
wearing his first
signature sneaker
as a member of
the Chicago Bulls.





Nike's terms included \$500,000 in cash for five years, an endorsement figure that was unprecedented in that era. The highest sneaker endorsement before 1984 was New Balance's deal with the Los Angeles Lakers James Worthy for \$150,000 a year for eight years. Other perks offered to Jordan included stock options and a custom-built shoe for the basketballer to play in.

There were some stipulations, however. Nike wrote a clause in the initial contract that required Jordan to accomplish one of three things - win NBA Rookie of the Year, to become an All-Star, or to average 20 points per game within his first three years. If Jordan didn't, Nike reserved the right to end the deal two years early.

By the time Jordan's first year in the NBA ended, he averaged 28 points per game after playing every game of the season. Not only did he win Rookie of the Year honours during the 1984-85 season, but the rising star became the darling of the League with his acrobatic style of play that made the name of his signature Nike shoe apropos: Air Jordan.

Nike made over \$100 million in revenue thanks to the sale of Air Jordans by the end of that first year - a new industry standard for how brands would market, design and storytell through signature products was set.

Air Jordan 1

The Air Jordan 1, or as it was simply known back then, the Air Jordan, broke the rules of sneaker engagement in the NBA. Eschewing the League standards on colour, the sneakers were presented in a bold palette of all black and red, which was banned by the NBA.

With Jordan being prohibited to officially wear the sneaker on court or face the fine of \$1,000 per game, Nike took advantage in a brilliant stroke of marketing genius and embraced the nonconformist nature of the shoe.

'The NBA threw them out of the game,' the narrator of an original Air Jordan 1 commercial announces in a voiceover. 'Fortunately, the NBA can't stop you from wearing them.'



OPPOSITE: The original Air Jordan in its 'banned' black and red colourway which represented a counter-culture theme for Nike and became a staple colourway for the Air Jordan line in years to come.

LEFT: The Travis Scott x Air Jordan 1 spotted courtside during NBA games, worn by the rapper himself.

The rebellious vibe of the advertisement helped create the first instance of sneaker hype. Late night talk shows discussed the Air Jordan 1. It was spotted on the feet of rappers on their album covers. Kids cut school and flocked to their local sneaker stores to get a pair of Air Jordan 1s before they sold out.



During the 1980s, Michael Jordan emerged as the new face of Nike's basketball category. His line of signature sneakers, Air Jordans, transcended the sport and became statement pieces in day-to-day fashion, especially among hip-hop enthusiasts.

The widespread appeal of Air Force Ones and Air Jordans established the groundwork for a symbiotic relationship between Nike and hip-hop culture, where the brand's products became integral elements of urban fashion and self-expression.

As the fusion of hip-hop and sneaker culture continued to take shape, Nike sneakers became increasingly visible on the feet of rappers. In a notable instance in 1988, DJ E-Z Rock appeared on the cover of his album with Rob Base, *It Takes Two*, sporting a custom pair of Air Force 1s crafted by the renowned Harlem designer Daniel 'Dapper Dan' Day.

These Air Force 1s featured modified Swooshes adorned with the Louis Vuitton monogram, showcasing the DIY ethos inherent in hip-hop fashion. This blend of luxury and streetwear elements epitomised the evolving relationship between hip-hop culture and sneaker brands like Nike.

PREVIOUS: American rapper, songwriter, record producer and actor LL Cool J performing in an original pair of the Air Jordan in Boston, Massachusetts. He opted to wear the shoes unlaced in the 1980s.

OPPOSITE: Rob Base (also known as Robert Ginyard) wearing the Nike Air Force 3 for a photo shoot in New York City in January 1989.

1990s and Early 2000s

Nike's influence in hip-hop reached new heights during the 1990s, as it began to permeate mainstream media. In 1990, rapper-turned-actor Will Smith and his collaborator DJ Jazzy Jeff wore their favourite Nikes and Air Jordans on the hit sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, bringing sneaker culture into millions of households across the world. Additionally, rappers started making appearances in Nike's marketing campaigns. In 1993, Digital Underground's Shock G, also known as Humpty Hump, shared the screen with basketball icons Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley to promote their respective signature shoes, the Air Jordan 9 and the Air Force Max CB 2. This intersection of hip-hop and sports in Nike's advertising underscored the brand's growing influence and cultural relevance during that era.

As the Air Force 1's popularity waned in the early 2000s, an injection of energy came from an unexpected source. Nelly, as popular as any artist at the time, released the single 'Air Force Ones' from his album *Nellyville* in 2002. Featuring fellow St. Lunatics rappers Kyjuan, Ali and Murphy Lee, the song effectively served as a promotional platform for Nike, with the rappers expressing their admiration for various iterations of the iconic sneaker. The track became a certified hit, climbing to #3 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart and propelling the Air Force 1 to newfound mainstream acclaim.

This resurgence led to a 'golden era' of Air Force 1 releases, as the sneaker reestablished its status as a cultural icon. During this period, numerous hip-hop artists transitioned from being Nike enthusiasts to collaborating directly with the brand.

Notable figures such as Fat Joe, Roc-a-Fella Records, Questlove, DJ Premier, DJ Clark Kent and Eminem lent their personalised touch to the Air Force 1, creating unique and sought-after iterations of the sneaker.

Arguably the apex of Nike's relationship with hip-hop took place in 2007, when it celebrated the 25th Anniversary of the Air Force 1. The brand rolled out a campaign featuring modern stars such as LeBron James, Kobe Bryant and Chris Paul to recreate the model's iconic 1980s print ad. A commercial for the campaign featured the Just Blaze-produced 'Second Coming' by Juelz Santana as its backing track. Concurrently, the brand assembled a hip-hop dream team of Rakim, Kanye West, Nas and KRS-One to record the song and music video 'Classic (Better Than I've Ever Been)': an ode to the Air Force 1.





PREVIOUS: The classic white-on-white Air Force 1 that became a staple of hip-hop streetwear in the early 2000s.

OPPOSITE: DJ Clark Kent showing off his Nike collection in New York City in 2007. Kent is known as one of hip-hop's most prominent sneaker collectors.



Air Yeezy

In 2009, Nike forged a partnership with Kanye West that would transform the sneaker industry forever. After receiving several exclusive variations of existing models from the brand, the multifaceted entertainer released his own Nike signature sneaker, the Air Yeezy. Available in three colourways, the Air Yeezy was a lifestyle high-top infused with elements from Nike's archive. With West's popularity surging, each of the three colourways sold out instantly, becoming highly coveted collectors' items on the second-hand market. Building on this success, West introduced the Air Yeezy 2 between 2012 and 2014, including the highly sought-after 'Red October' colourway. Despite West and Nike parting ways shortly afterward, their collaboration set a new standard for entertainer-sneaker partnerships, pushing the boundaries of creativity and demand in the industry.



OPPOSITE: The 'Red October' colourway of the Air Yeezy 2, which is perhaps the most valuable sneaker that Kanye West designed for Nike.

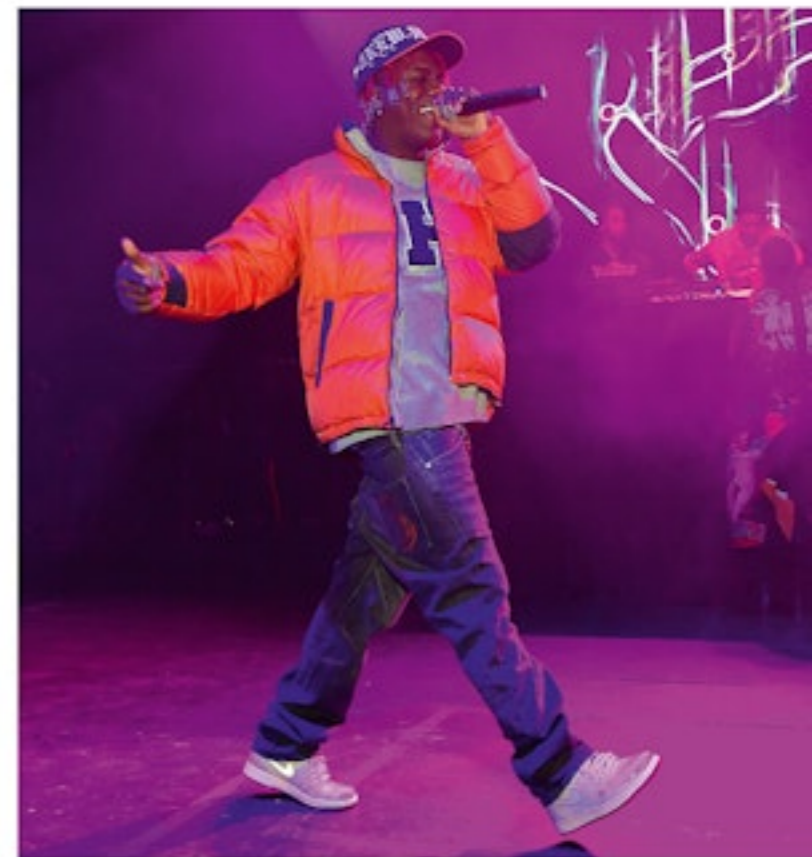
ABOVE: Kanye West performing in his signature Nike Air Yeezy sneaker in 2008.

Recent Collaborations

Nike's dealings with West created a path for more endorsement deals with entertainers, most notably rappers Drake and Travis Scott. Drake partnered with Nike in 2013, while Scott joined the company in 2017. Together with Nike and Jordan Brand, they released numerous collaborations before eventually launching signature products. In late 2020, Drake introduced his Nike label, NOCTA, while Scott's Jordan Jumpman Jack debuted in early 2024. Both artists' footwear collections garnered significant attention, proving to be highly popular among consumers and driving demand in both retail and secondary markets.

OPPOSITE: Special Air Jordans made specifically for Eminem, which he wore during his half-time performance at the Super Bowl LVI, on display at the 'Hip-Hop America: The Mixtape Edition' at GRAMMY Museum LA.

RIGHT: Lil Yachty performing in the limited-edition Concepts x Nike Dunk.



From athlete endorsements to iconic collaborations and appearances in marketing campaigns, hip-hop played a pivotal role in shaping Nike's identity and resonating with a diverse and youthful audience. This fusion of sports, music and urban culture has not only elevated Nike's status as a global powerhouse, but also cemented its place as a symbol of creativity, authenticity and innovation in the world of fashion and footwear.



Nike Serves in Tennis

In 1972, Nike began its foray into tennis by signing Romanian player Ilie Năstase. The company paid Năstase, its first official athlete endorser, \$10,000 to wear its products on the court for a series of events. Though the partnership didn't last long, it provided the spark necessary for Nike to gain footing in the sport.

Throughout the 1970s, Nike added to its expanding footwear catalogue, introducing a tennis category. Models such as the Wimbledon (later renamed the Nike Tennis Classic), Racquette and Match Point were among the brand's pioneering tennis silhouettes.



Particularly game-changing was the Wimbledon, originally released in white and blue with Swoosh branding boldly displayed along the sides, which differentiated it from other white leather shoes of the era.



In this more current era, the Nike Tennis Classic is seen more as a staple everyday style of sneaker, in the vein of the Adidas Stan Smith. Its simplicity has made it a canvas for streetwear collaboration such as fashion label Comme Des Garçons' monochromatic renditions of the sneaker from 2023 or French boutique Colette's luxurious take on the original colourway from 2014.

While the Nike Tennis Classic may not be one of the brand's most hyped silhouettes, it's a part of Nike history as the sneaker that eventually found its way onto the feet of Nike's first tennis superstar.

OPPOSITE: A retro version of the Nike Tennis Classic being worn as a casual shoe. The silhouette has evolved into a classic white option in street style.

ABOVE: Nike showcasing the past, present and future of its tennis roster on display during NY Fashion Week in 2015, which also coincided with the US Open.

John McEnroe

John McEnroe, a brash but talented player from Queens, New York, was discovered by Nike co-founder Phil Knight during a scouting trip in 1977. A year later, McEnroe officially signed with the brand, wearing the Wimbledon shoe and Nike apparel on the court. He went on to play in the Meadow shoe before switching to the groundbreaking Challenge Court Mid shoe in 1984. The mid-cut model helped reshape Nike's tennis business, leading to a surge in sales as the company, as a whole, picked up momentum.

That same year, McEnroe was given his own signature model, the Mac Attack. A reflection of his fiery personality, the shoe deviated from the safe white-based colourways that aligned with tennis's traditional attire. The Mac Attack launched in a statement-making light silver and black scheme befitting

the rebellious star. In 1987, he played in Nike's Air Trainer 1 cross-trainer, giving validity to the claim that it was a sneaker engineered for multiple sports. McEnroe went on to become one of the most accomplished players in the sport's history, winning seven Grand Slam titles before retiring in 1992.



Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras

As McEnroe's career was winding down, a new Nike tennis superstar emerged with the signing of Andre Agassi in 1988. At just 18 years old, Agassi brought a fresh energy to the court. With his rockstar-style big hair, earrings and gold chains, Agassi captivated audiences and brought a new level of flair to the sport. Nike adeptly captured Agassi's vibrant personality by outfitting him in boldly-coloured apparel, denim shorts and a groundbreaking line of sneakers designed by Tinker Hatfield and known as Air Tech Challenge. Together, Agassi and Nike redefined tennis fashion and footwear, while also helping the sport cross over into pop culture.

OPPOSITE: McEnroe wears the Nike Wimbledon GTS trainer in the Wimbledon final against Björn Borg in 1981.

RIGHT: Andre Agassi showcases a backhand swing during a game in the Nike Tech Challenge and 1990s Nike apparel.



Agassi's transcendent style was matched by his game. Like McEnroe, Agassi was known for playing with extra fire and it translated into success. His breakthrough moment came at Wimbledon in 1992, where he claimed his first of eight Grand Slam titles. Agassi's dominance extended over the years, culminating in his final major triumph at the Australian Open in 2003. However, persistent back injuries eventually led to his retirement from professional tennis in 2006, marking the end of an era for one of the sport's most iconic figures.

In 1994, Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi's primary rival, also joined Nike. As the top-ranked player at the time of his signing, Sampras was known for his reserved and methodical demeanour, contrasting with Agassi's more flamboyant style. From 1990 to 2002, Sampras won a then-record 14 Grand Slam titles, including four victories in finals against Agassi. Their rivalry was famously depicted in the 1995 Nike commercial 'Street Tennis', showcasing their battles on the streets of New York City. One of Sampras's notable moments with Nike occurred in 1996 when he wore the Hatfield-designed Air Oscillate, a shoe that remains closely associated with the legend.

RIGHT: Pete Sampras in the Nike Air Oscillate, which was designed by Tinker Hatfield after the designer was inspired by playing pickup basketball with the tennis player.



Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal

During the Agassi vs. Sampras era, Nike quietly signed a 13-year-old Swiss tennis prodigy named Roger Federer in 1994. After turning pro in 1998, Federer began piecing together one of the most dominant runs ever seen in tennis. Over his 24-year career, he won 20 Grand Slam championships, 18 while wearing Nike Vapor shoes, a tennis line that evolved in large part due to his performance-based feedback. As the line progressed, Federer collaborated closely with designers, providing insights and recommendations to ensure the shoes met the evolving demands of the modern game.



In 2012, Federer worked with Hatfield to release what many consider his most influential shoe, the Zoom Vapor 9. The model was also part of a first-of-its-kind collaboration with Jordan Brand, resulting in the Zoom Vapor AJ 3, which married elements from the Zoom Vapor 9 and Air Jordan 3. The unprecedented Jordan co-sign solidified Federer's legacy as a sneaker icon.



At the turn of the millennium, Nike added another generational superstar to its tennis roster. Rafael Nadal joined the brand in 2000. The 14-year-old Spaniard wasted no time, turning pro just a year later. Renowned for his exceptional athleticism, relentless endurance and crushing forehand, Nadal established a dominant presence in the game and became a formidable adversary to Federer. Primarily wearing personalised sneakers from Nike's Ballistec and Cage series, Nadal lifted 22 Grand Slam titles, including 14 at the French Open, where he earned the reputation as the 'King of Clay'.

Nike celebrated Nadal's achievements with special products as well. The brand released limited-edition sneakers to mark his French Open titles, including a pair that incorporated pieces and textures of all of Nadal's championship shoes on the upper.

OPPOSITE: Roger Federer wearing a Nike Zoom Vapor 9 tennis sneaker, made to look like the original Air Jordan 3. He debuted the sneaker during the 2014 US Open with Michael Jordan in attendance.

ABOVE: Rafael Nadal's 'What The?' Nike sneakers that paid tribute to each of the shoes he wore to win a French Open title.

Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka

With six Grand Slam titles under her belt, 21-year-old Serena Williams signed a landmark endorsement deal with Nike in December 2003. Williams hadn't only emerged as the face of women's tennis, but the face of the sport overall. Williams' unmatched power and athleticism led to 23 Grand Slam victories, the most in the Open Era. She also won four Olympic gold medals, including three in doubles with her sister Venus.

Williams' impact extended far beyond her dominance on the court; she revolutionised tennis fashion and transcended the boundaries between athletic wear and high fashion. With Nike-branded denim skirts, bodysuits, and even thigh-high sneaker boots, she challenged traditional notions of tennis apparel and became a trendsetter in her own right. Leading Nike's Mirabella and Flare sneaker lines, Williams wore special colourways tailored for each event, showcasing her unique style. Additionally, her footwear repertoire included sought-after collaborations with iconic brands such as Jordan Brand and Virgil Abloh's Off-White, cementing Williams among Nike's greatest influencers.

From Williams, the baton was passed to Japanese-Haitian sensation Naomi Osaka. Inspired by Venus and Serena Williams, Osaka began training to play tennis when she was eight years old. She started her professional career just before turning 15 in 2013. Bursting onto the scene with her powerful baseline game and composed demeanour, Osaka captured the tennis world's attention by winning her first Grand Slam title at the 2018 US Open, defeating Serena Williams in a memorable final. She won the event again in 2020 and was also victorious at the Australian Open in 2019 and 2021.

BELOW: Serena Williams wearing a specially made catsuit by Nike during the 2018 French Open. The player's outfit was inspired by a superhero costume.





Osaka was the perfect star to come along as sneakerhead culture was surging. She often stepped out in the latest hyped releases and shared photos of her shoes on Instagram. It didn't take long for Osaka to eventually receive a line of signature apparel, sneaker collaborations, and her own model, the Air Zoom GP Turbo.

Nike's over-fifty-year-reign as the premier brand in tennis can be attributed to its commitment to innovation and strategic athlete signings. With a keen eye for young players boasting both marketable personas and exceptional talent, Nike has consistently ensured its visibility on tennis's grandest stages. By continually pushing the boundaries of design and performance, Nike has become firmly established as the go-to brand for athletes seeking cutting-edge apparel and footwear.

OPPOSITE and BELOW: Serena Williams of USA wears a special Nike jacket – with French text reading 'Champion, Championne', 'Queen, Reine', 'Goddess, Deesse' and 'Mother, Mere' during the 2019 French Open.





Collector Culture and the Nike Dunk

It started out as a basketball shoe. Then it became a skate shoe. Now, it's a streetwear icon.

The Nike Dunk is a storied part of the company's history and has remained a relevant part of the culture for different generations. The silhouette first debuted in 1985 as a college team shoe and was created by Peter Moore, the same designer behind the Air Jordan 1 and Air Force 1.

Prior to being called the Nike Dunk, the sneaker was referred to as the 'College Color High' because of its distinctive and bold colour blocking that was meant to match the school colours of NCAA university basketball teams. This colour play was celebrated in the sneakers' original adverts that were emblazoned with the tagline 'Be True to Your School'.

What started out as a team basketball shoe in the 1980s evolved into something entirely different in the late 1990s and 2000s. The Nike Dunk was reintroduced in its original basketball form, but also as a skate shoe dubbed the Nike Dunk SB. The SB version featured subtle updates like a padded tongue and updated cushioning to make it more viable for skateboarding.

BELOW: A Nike Dunk from 2005 that was a collaboration with streetwear brand Diamond Supply Co., with colours inspired by luxury jewellery house Tiffany & Co. Nike would go on to officially collaborate with Tiffany & Co. in 2023.





However, non-skateboarders gave the Dunk a cult following. Thanks to cleverly themed colour blocking, limited availability, and strategic collaborations the Nike Dunk SB became popular among many sneaker collectors. One of the most memorable include the 'Pigeon' Nike Dunk SB designed by Jeff Staple that caused a riot on the streets of New York City when it was released. There was also the 'Paris' Dunk in 2003 that was limited to only 200 units and featured unique artwork on each pair, selling for over \$25,000 on the resale market. And perhaps the rarest sneaker of all time, with only 24 pairs known to be in existence: the Street artist Futura's 'For Love or Money' sneakers.

LEFT: A yellow version of Nike Dunk SB, a collaboration with legendary rock band Grateful Dead. The shaggy sneakers released to mark the fifty-year anniversary of the band's album *American Beauty* and came in three colourways.

BELOW: A boy, aged 12, at Los Angeles sneaker store Cool Kicks inspecting a pair of the highly valuable Nike Dunks which the retailer has on sale via consignment.





The collector bubble of the Nike Dunk burst in around 2010, but it saw a resurgence in the 2020s. Nike reinvigorated the skate version of the sneaker, undertaking collabs with artists like Travis Scott and even unexpected partners like Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream and soft drink brand Jarritos. General release versions of the sneaker also saw new popularity like the black and white 'Panda' colourway of the shoe that became widely ubiquitous in streetwear.

ABOVE: Artist Futura's rare 'FLOM' Nike Dunk High SB on display at Sotheby's. There are only 24 pairs of these sneakers in existence and are valued at over \$60,000.

OPPOSITE: The 'Panda' Nike Dunk in black and white being paired with jeans and a blazer during the Cannes Film Festival in 2023 by Instagram influencer Emilia.





Nike's New King: LeBron James

In 2002, 17-year-old LeBron James was garnering attention as basketball's next superstar. The St Vincent-St Mary High School junior graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, played in primetime on ESPN, and even had his games made available to purchase on pay-per-view - all before his senior season. James was nicknamed 'The Chosen One', with many believing that he would eventually go down as the greatest basketball player who ever lived. The hoop world was buying the hype and so too were potential endorsement partners.

Following James' senior season, sneaker companies lined up for a chance to acquire the services of the high school phenom. Among his suitors were Nike, Adidas and Reebok, all brands that he had worn while playing in high school. For Nike, acquiring James would fortify its basketball category as Michael Jordan bowed out as an active player. Rival brands

Adidas and Reebok hoped that James would be the transformative piece they each needed to seriously challenge Nike for the top spot in the footwear industry. Each company developed a pitch to sway James and potentially shift the balance of power in their direction.



Reebok were the first to pitch to James in May 2003, just weeks away from the NBA draft lottery. Reebok made an offer of \$100 million over seven years with a \$10 million advance incentive, blowing away the amateur athlete record of \$40 million given to Tiger Woods by Nike in 1996. James was committed to hearing the other pitches, and left Reebok unsigned.

Later that week James met with Adidas, ultimately declining their offer of \$70 million with performance-based incentives pushing the deal to \$100 million.

A week later, James and his team took a private jet to Nike Headquarters in Oregon. In CEO Phil Knight's conference room, which was not only stocked with James' favourite cereal, the basketball star was presented with a range of LeBron-branded Nike gear and accessories. Informed by the company's successful effort to sign Michael Jordan in 1984,

OPPOSITE: A young LeBron James featured in his first Nike campaign for his debut signature collection, the Nike's Air Zoom Generation and his 'King' clothing line, in 2003.



ABOVE: To build excitement for the 2024 Paris Olympics, Nike built a LeBron James statue in front of the Palais Brongniart in France, as well as statues of other athletes who represent the brand.



LEFT: LeBron James lacing up his signature sneakers during the 2013 NBA Finals. The player also won the NBA MVP award in that year.

OPPOSITE: LeBron James wore an 'Equality' version of his signature sneakers during a game in December 2017 as a way to make a demonstration for equal rights in America. These shoes are now on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Nike didn't just make James an offer - he was presented with a prototype of what would be his first signature sneaker, the Air Zoom Generation.

However, Nike initially offered James \$70 million with a \$5 million signing bonus. In his heart, James wanted to sign with Nike, but didn't want to dismiss Reebok's substantially larger offer and left without a deal.

Reebok increased their offer to \$115 million, and Nike counter-offered with \$90 million, still enough to be the richest sneaker deal at that time. James, who envisioned himself as a Nike athlete, accepted Nike's proposal.

Ultimately, the partnership paid off for both Nike and James, who managed to live up to and even surpass the unprecedented expectations that were placed on him as a high school athlete. Released in November 2003, the Air Zoom Generation was the first shoe in what would become Nike's second-longest running signature line, behind Air Jordan.

While the LeBron line has always been a technical performance basketball shoe first, it's also had its moments in streetwear. Perhaps the peak of the Nike LeBron partnership off the court was in the early 2010s with models like the 'South Beach' LeBron 8 that had a colour pop that resembled *Miami Vice*, which is still highly coveted among sneaker fans. A premium lifestyle version of James' first signature sneaker in vachetta tan leather also released in 2017.

In 2015, James signed a lifetime deal with Nike for approximately \$1 billion, the largest of its kind in company history. The LeBron James Innovation Center, which is the company's hub for sports performance research, was opened at Nike Headquarters in 2021.





Product Innovations

Though its roster of athletes, past and present, serves as a who's who of sports over the last 40 years, Nike's success can primarily be attributed to its commitment to innovation. At the turn of the millennium, the company continued to push the boundaries of product development across various fronts in the athletic industry. Through a continuous focus on meeting the evolving needs of athletes and consumers, Nike continued to lead the way in athletic technology, shaping the future of sportswear.

Nike Shox

Long before Nike's Shox technology hit the market, the concept was explored by Bruce Kilgore, the legendary designer behind the Air Force 1, in 1984. He had the idea of putting mechanical cushioning in a pair of running shoes, a concept derived from observing the way indoor track sprinters 'bounced' after impacting the surface of the track. Kilgore's initial prototype wasn't a wearable sneaker, but rather a spring-based contraption that would remain in development for longer than a decade.

After years of research and development, Nike reached a breakthrough in 1997 with the creation of Shox. The solution involved the implementation of twin plates combined with foam columns, which formed the foundation of the groundbreaking cushioning system. The experienced



ABOVE: Japanese label Comme des Garçons collaborated with Nike Shox TL, a popular Shox style from the early 2000s and was distinct for full-length Shox columns along the soles.

RIGHT: The Nike Shox in a Neymar Jr. colourway being worn outside during Paris Fashion Week in 2019.





ABOVE: Tennis star Serena Williams shows off her Nike Shox Boots from her Serena Nike collection from 2004.

design trio of Aaron Cooper, Greg Thompson and Brian Farris officially brought the technology, which was being touted by Nike as its most significant advancement since the introduction of Air to retail in 2000.

Shox was ushered into the market with the release of the Shox R4, a futuristic running shoe with the new technology loaded into the heel. Mainstream recognition was achieved when Vince Carter wore the first Shox basketball shoe, the BB4, in the 2000 Summer Olympics. During a game against France, Carter famously jumped over 2.18-metre-tall centre Frédéric Weis for what many consider the greatest in-game dunk of all-time. The leap gave credibility to the brand's promise that Shox provided performance-based bounce in the face of sceptics who doubted its effectiveness.

Shox eventually crossed over into Nike's other performance categories, including sneakers for Ken Griffey Jr. and Serena

Williams. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld also adopted Shox as his preferred footwear option, donning different models dating back to the R4. Seinfeld's endorsement of Nike Shox contributed to its visibility and popularity among a broader audience.

Though it remains one of footwear's most polarising technologies because of its unique look, Shox has left an enduring impact on the industry. It's a perfect representation of Nike's bold and forward-thinking approach to innovation.



ABOVE: US sprinters (left to right) Maurice Greene and Marion Jones with Arsenal's Thierry Henry, wearing the first Nike Shox running shoes.

Nike Presto and Free

While some Nike designers were imagining what could be added to footwear to enhance performance, others were pondering the concept of addition by subtraction. As the Sydney Olympics were approaching in 2000, the company introduced the Alpha Project initiative, which aimed to push the boundaries of footwear design and innovation. One of the designers involved in Alpha Project was Tobie Hatfield, the younger brother of Tinker Hatfield. Hatfield aimed to create a

shoe that he said would be comparable to the fit and feel of a comfortable t-shirt for the foot.

The result was the Nike Air Presto, or simply the Nike Presto, a perfect fusion of minimalism and modern technology.

The Presto featured a stretchy neoprene upper that hugged the foot, providing a snug and adaptive fit. One of the unique aspects of the Presto was its unconventional sizing system. Instead of traditional shoe sizes, the Presto was offered in sizes ranging from XXS to XXXL, with each intended to fit a wide range of foot sizes. This approach was intended to emphasise the shoe's adaptive and flexible fit. In addition to its stretchy mesh upper, the Presto featured other innovative design elements, such as the moulded midfoot cage for added support and stability, as well as a Phylon foam midsole for lightweight cushioning.

Following its release, the Nike Presto quickly gained popularity not only for its performance capabilities, but also for its bold and eye-catching design. It was one of the first shoes to feature digitally printed graphic designs in place of

traditionally-coloured panels. Due

to its comfort and distinct appearance, the Presto became a favourite among sneaker enthusiasts and collectors, as well as athletes and casual wearers.



LEFT: The original Nike Presto silhouette in a blue colourway.

In 2004, Tobie Hatfield led a design team that developed Nike Free, a line of running shoes based on the concept of barefoot running. The idea was born after designers noticed Stanford University track athletes training barefoot on the school's golf course, helping them develop stronger feet and lower legs compared to those who trained in traditional shoes. Designers approached the project with the goal of creating a shoe that provided natural movement and flexibility while still offering the same level of protection and support.

The first Free model to be released was the Free 5.0. Featuring a low-profile midsole with deep flex grooves and a minimalistic upper, the lightweight running shoe allowed for a more natural foot motion. The numbering system, running from 0 to 10, was established to determine the level of cushioning and support provided by the shoe, with lower numbers indicating a more minimalistic design.

RIGHT: Nike Free sneakers have strategically-placed flex grooves on the outsole in order to mimic the natural motion of the foot.

Free quickly gained popularity among runners and fitness enthusiasts for its lightweight feel, flexible design and natural ride. It also garnered attention from the fashion industry, with Nike Free shoes becoming a staple in athleisure wear and casual footwear. New models from the line continued to be released over the next two decades, establishing it as one of Nike's premier modern performance footwear lines.





Nike Flyknit

As the footwear industry skewed toward lightweight performance technology, Nike eyed the 2012 Summer Olympics as the launch point for one of its most groundbreaking technologies, Flyknit. Instead of using multiple pieces of material stitched together, Flyknit employed a single-piece knit upper precisely engineered to provide support, flexibility, and breathability where needed. The seamless construction not only reduced waste, but also enhanced the overall comfort and fit of the shoes.

In addition to the materials the shoes were made with, Flyknit changed how they were manufactured. Nike utilised advanced computerised knitting technology to create complex patterns and structures within the fabric. This allowed for precise control over the fit, support and breathability of the shoe, resulting in a customised and adaptive experience for wearers.

The releases of the Flyknit Racer and Flyknit Trainer in 2012 quickly earned the new technology widespread fanfare. Athletes and sneaker enthusiasts alike praised Flyknit models for their combination of performance, comfort and sleek design. The success of Flyknit paved the way for its integration into other models, including Air Jordans and signature shoes for Kobe Bryant, LeBron James and Kevin Durant. By incorporating Flyknit into these high-profile releases, Nike demonstrated the versatility and adaptability of the technology across different sports and performance needs.

Flyknit established groundbreaking benchmarks for both performance and sustainability in the athletic footwear sector. Its triumph prompted widespread emulation throughout the industry, ushering in a new era where knit technology became synonymous with high-performance footwear. Today, Flyknit remains a cornerstone of Nike's innovation portfolio, retaining its status as one of the company's most vital and profitable advancements since Air.

OPPOSITE: A Flyknit sneaker that showcases how the material can weave together multiple colours together on a single upper.

RIGHT: An original Nike Flyknit sneaker from the technology's debut in 2012.



Sustainability

Nike's efforts in sustainability date back to the early 1990s, when the company established its Reuse-A-Shoe program, which repurposed old shoes into recycled 'Grind' material for use as things like playgrounds or sports equipment. This approach marked the beginning of a long-term commitment to drastically reducing its carbon footprint.

Nike launched Considered in 2005, an initiative that called for the company's reduction of the environmental impact of its products and manufacturing processes. Considered was based on three main principles: designing for sustainability, recycling and sustainable innovation. The program resulted in the creation of a range of sustainable products, including shoes, apparel and accessories. While Considered products were initially introduced as a separate line, many of the sustainability principles and practices have since been integrated into Nike's broader product offerings. Perhaps the most noteworthy sneaker made with Considered principles was the Air Jordan XX3 in 2008.



LEFT: Nike's packaging calls out the company's initiatives to make products more eco-friendly.

RIGHT: An Air Jordan 1 made with Nike's Flyleather, an upper that replaces traditional leather with a more sustainable option that's made of recycled leather scraps and fibres.



In 2006, Nike underwent a significant overhaul of its groundbreaking Air technology in response to the environmental concerns surrounding the use of sulphur hexafluoride as the inflation gas for the airbag technology. Engineers responded by introducing a new unit inflated with nitrogen and implementing thermoforming technology, debuting with the Air Max 360. This transition aligned Nike closer to its sustainability goals and elevated Air Max to become one of Nike's flagship environmentally conscious franchises.

Nike's sustainability efforts continue with recycled innovations such as Flyleather, the Space Hippiie and ISPA series, Next Nature footwear and Forward material.

Flyleather, for instance, is a sustainable material made from recycled leather fibres, reducing waste and environmental impact. The Space Hippiie and ISPA series feature shoes made from recycled materials, showcasing Nike's commitment to circularity and eco-friendly practices. Additionally, Next Nature footwear incorporates sustainable materials and design elements inspired by nature.



There Is No Finish Line

It's hard to synthesise Nike's history and impact on street style within the pages of a book. The company's humble beginnings selling running shoes out of the back of a Volkswagen at track meets is now a global empire with reach in Europe, Asia and even digital realms like the Metaverse.

What makes Nike what it is today is more than its product innovations or memorable marketing; it is the ideas that the company was founded on. Sneakers and style trends will always evolve over time, but ideas live forever.

Ideas are what the consumers buy into. The ethos that 'if you have a body, you are an athlete' alludes that sports aren't solely relegated to athletics. Anything can be a 'sport'.

A creative endeavour can be a sport. Closing a business deal can be a sport. Anything can be a sport when approached with the will to achieve like an athlete.

What bolsters Nike's messaging are the actual championship athletes that Nike sponsors. From Michael Jordan to Serena Williams, the brand's roster of endorsers are icons in their own right.

To borrow a quote from Nike pitchman Mars Blackmon: 'Is it the shoes?'

That's for the consumer to decide and they've been voting with their money to make Nike the top sportswear brand and one of the most successful companies in the world.

BELOW: Runners wear the Nike Vaporfly during a qualifier of the Tokyo Olympics marathon in September 2019. A customised version of the shoe was banned following claims that they provided an unfair advantage to athletes.





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