

Different generations have different ways of measuring their subjection to the march of time. Imagine an ancient Greek first hearing the adage that "all roads lead to Rome" after putting his last drachma into Athenian real estate. Or a buggy-whip manufacturer inhaling his first lungful of carbon monoxide. Picture the prosperous businessman of twenty years ago, taking an overnight train into a big city and checking into his downtown hotel, realizing that both the train and the hotel were getting seedy at the edges, while his competitors were whisking across the country via jet. Put yourself in the place of a veteran New York Yankee fan, slowly realizing in the mid-1960s that *tempus* does indeed *fugit*.

And for me? It wasn't turning 30 that made me aware of time's winged chariot. It wasn't becoming a father, or going into debt, or watching President Nixon shake hands with Mao Tse-tung in Peking. I knew I was getting old when the Great Sneaker Revolution conquered America.

In case you've been hiding out on a South Pacific atoll the last five years or so, sneakers—at least, what we used to *call* sneakers—have become the hottest, fastest-growing fashionable footwear in America. We buy more than 220 million pairs a year; we spend more than a billion dollars a year on them. What's more, Sneaker Liberation has become a social fact; they have come out of the closet—and gym locker—and are striding boldly into the fashion spotlight.

When comedian Woody Allen escorted Betty Ford to a Martha Graham dance presentation last year, he showed up in a tuxedo and a pair of sneakers. Jackie Onassis has been photographed striding down Fifth Avenue in T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. Bianca Jagger has shown up at glittering parties with sneakers—designed by Valentino, to be

Jeff Greenfield, a writer and political consultant, has just finished a book on the Boston Celtics.

# THE PROLIFERATION OF SNEAKERS

Gym shoes have emerged from the locker room and into the homes of America — all gussied up

BY JEFF GREENFIELD



ILLUSTRATED BY NICK CARDI

sure, but sneakers nonetheless. John Sutcliffe, manager of Maxwell's Plum, one of the most fashionable late-night restaurants in Manhattan, laughs when he is asked whether sneakers are acceptable. "Acceptable? They're practically *required*."

And the look of the colorful, contemporary sneaker has even invaded the mass media. The flashy red Ford Torino with the white stripe featured on *Starsky & Hutch* looks exactly like a Puma or Adidas on four wheels.

The boom has revolutionized footwear. For years, quality shoe stores refused to stock sneakers, sending customers to sporting goods stores instead. Now, with the American footwear industry down two years in a row—for the first time since World War II—sneaker sales are growing by 15 to 25 percent a year. They account for more than half the total sales of many of the biggest sporting goods stores. Whole new retail enterprises have sprung up, selling nothing but athletic and casual footwear, places with names like Sneaker World, Athletes' Foot and Sneaker Circus. Says a Korvettes manager in a Chicago suburb, "Sneakers are so strong, we could bury them and our customers would still find them."

And, as Jimmy Durante used to say, "everybody wants ta get into da act." The Hush Puppy company, whose sales of casual shoes were badly hurt by the sneaker revolution, recently began marketing a line of athletic shoes. Traditional shoe companies are scrambling for a piece of the market, and the acknowledged giants of the field—Converse and Uniroyal in the mass market lines, Adidas, Puma, Nike, Tiger and others in the higher-priced lines—are growing as if recession were a surgical instead of economic term.

Now understand what this means to an over-30 like myself. As a kid, sneakers were a comfortably *infra dig* item, made of rubber, available in a choice of colors—black or white—and

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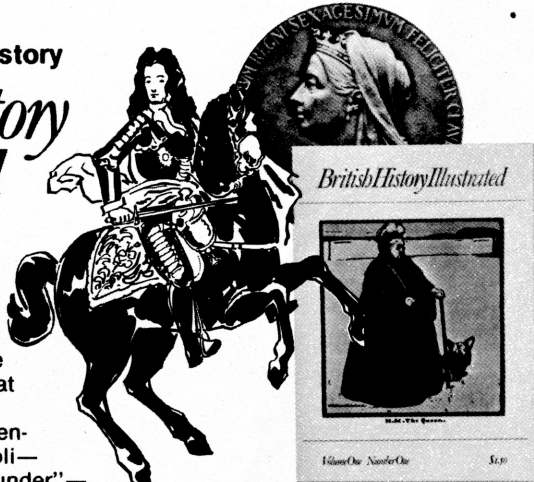
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### Sneakers continued

shunned by polite society. They were hidden in the dark corners of footlockers, duffel bags and closets, where they ripened into olfactory felonies. A child of the 1950s might have seen ads for P.F. Flyers and U.S. Keds, depicting towheaded youths in deeds of heroism made possible by sneaker-clad feet, but we knew better. Our parents' view of sneakers was roughly the same as their view of diving into the ocean just after a heavy lunch, or dating girls who wore stiletto heels. The sneaker was to the good leather shoe as the zoot suit was to a three-piece gray flannel. Only those beyond the pale of mainstream respectability walked around in such attire. Consider just two examples: in New York, so many purse-snatchers and other street criminals wore sneakers, out of economic necessity and the need for speedy escapes, that New York police to this day call sneakers "perpetrator boots." And across 3,000 miles and a socio-economic galaxy, the Far Right activists of Orange County, California, were characterized for all time as "little old ladies in tennis shoes."

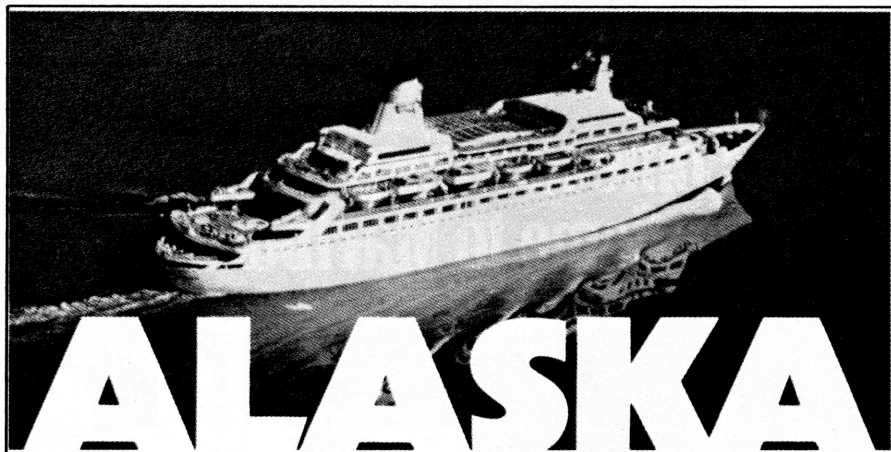
So what happened? Why does TV producer Garry Marshall (*Happy Days*) wear sneakers at work? Why are Hollywood stars seen in the grandstand during big tennis matches wearing these once-denigrated shoes? How did the sneaker world get turned head over rubber-soled heels?

It took a six-pack worth of cultural revolutions to make sneakers a fashionable necessity. First was the "kids' revolution of the 1960s; instead of teenagers waiting for the day when they could wear grown-up clothes, grown-ups began dressing like their children. And while the tide of the youth cult has receded, the clothing influence hasn't.

Second was the menswear revolution, when charcoal grays and browns gave way to an explosion of colors. When men saw athletes wearing red, blue, green and yellow athletic shoes as the color-TV boom spread, they became a fashionable item.

Next came the fitness cult, beginning with President Kennedy and his 50-mile hikes, an enterprise not suited to wing-tipped leather shoes. Prosperous middle-aged folk started to pay close attention to their cholesterol count and their stomach bulges, and began to hit the tennis courts, gym floors and jogging tracks in an effort to slim their middle and stabilize their cardiograms. That meant that suddenly a major new market had opened among people with money, and the willingness to spend it for the best. Lo and behold, a number of enterprising entrepreneurs appeared to fill this need for quality.

Key among them were two manufacturers of athletic footwear, Adidas and Puma. Both companies have been owned by the Dassler family—Adolf "Adi" Dassler and his brother and longtime arch-rival, the late Rudolph. B. make their shoes in a tiny Bavarian town called Herzogenaurach. For years the Adidas Company, premier athlete



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### Sneakers continued

footwear maker, had bitterly fought with Puma for the athletic market. Free shoes to world-class athletes was common, and in 1968, at the Mexico City Olympics, the Great Sneaker War turned hot. Adidas got exclusive rights in Olympic Village; the Puma company smuggled in 3,000 pairs of shoes and dropped large sums of money, as much as \$10,000, to "amateur" athletes who wore their shoes and carried their bags. This sneaker war made observers highly brand-conscious, and it was noted, for example, that when American runners John Carlos and Tommy Smith shocked the world with their "black power" demonstration at the winner's stand in 1968, both wore black socks and carried Puma shoes.

The war created a scandal, but it also made Americans acutely conscious of these high-priced, high-quality athletic shoes. "That scandal is what kicked off the boom," says a spokesman for Converse, whose All Star shoe is one of the biggest selling. In 1970, Adidas was turning out 25,000 pairs of shoes a day; now they make 125,000 and do nearly \$70 million worth of business in America a year. Puma, still a distant second, sells almost \$30 million worth of shoes. These firms do not make \$3 rubber sneakers. In fact, they don't make "sneakers" at all. Instead, they each make more than a hundred different kinds of tennis shoes, basketball shoes, all-purpose "athletic" shoes, practice shoes, "jogging" shoes, shoes for every sport, and "leisure" shoes that aren't supposed to be worn for sports at all, but just look athletic. Their shoes are made out of velour, suede, smooth leather, nylon and canvas, and sell for \$11 to \$60. And, along with competitors like Nike and Tiger, they are sharply defined by their symbols.

Adidas has the most famous: three diagonal stripes in contrasting colors (although, in America, they have lost their patent protection). Puma has a backswept, curved stripe. Nike has a floating "check mark"; the Onitsuka Tiger has a curved crosshatch. Uniroyal's PRO-Keds has a red and blue stripe at the side of the toe. Converse All Star has a star and a sideways V. Pony, an aggressive Canadian import, has what look like two V's. And the Uniroyal Jaguar, the \$32 leather job, has thin red and blue alternating stripes.

As fierce as the graphic competition is, the athletic competition is stronger. Adidas has Julius Erving and Artis Gilmore in basketball, Billie Jean King and Stan Smith in tennis; Puma has Walt Frazier (their bestselling basketball shoe is the "Clyde") and George McGiniss, Fran Tarkenton, Reggie Jackson and Jim "Catfish" Hunter. Nike has Phil Chenier; Tiger has just signed Dave Cowens; Pony has John Havlicek and Bob McAdoo. (A prominent sports attorney says that stars get about \$25,000 for their endorsements, with superstars

getting \$50,000.) Uniroyal's PRO-Keds has Lou Hudson, Nate Archibald, Bob Love and many others. Converse avoids big-name endorsements, relying on coaching clinics to keep their products in the minds of coaches.

All this has a clear effect on customers. Many kids in ghettos, for whom basketball is a year-round obsession, spend more for their sneakers than for the rest of their clothing combined.

At the other end of the scale, says an anonymous footwear maker, "there's a definite snob appeal. One company is going to be bringing out a shoe that sells for \$65. I'm sure that if some company brought out a tennis ball that sold for \$15, there'd be people who'd buy it."

A Puma marketer echoes this point. "People want to have that athletic look even if they're not athletes. It's an in thing. People don't wear sports shoes for just sports. They've become socially acceptable with dress." In fact, a recent Puma ad appeals to just this market: "They Don't Have To Be Athletes To Want Pumas."

So far, the Sneaker—oops, I mean the Athletic Footwear Revolution shows no signs of slackening. "It's no fad, it's no Hula-Hoop explosion," says Converse's president, Stephen Stone, who notes that sneakers are still a bargain. "We may be selling high-priced sneakers, but compared with shoes, we're selling low-priced footwear." The prices—for top-of-the-line products like the Adidas Cross Country SL-72 and the Puma Clyde—are hovering between \$25 and \$30, and Bancroft's Tretorn leather tennis shoes from Sweden are in the \$35 range. The physical fitness phenomenon has shown itself to be a long-distance runner, and as long as stress, tension and a rich, fat-filled diet are all parts of the American experience, the joggers and tennis buffs will be with us, and with them will be a steadily rising curve for the sneaker industry.

This has its costs: a family sending two children to camp can no longer buy their offspring two pairs of \$3 sneakers—instead, as one white-faced parent told me, each child got tennis shoes, basketball shoes and "athletic shoes," for a total of \$150. And the makers of conventional shoes will still face an increased threat. One store owner says, "We're cutting back in women's and kid's shoes to make room for more sneakers. It's the only really explosive area of the footwear business right now, and it's long-lasting."

In fact, as I worked on this piece, only one group of people seemed unwilling to swap dress shoes for casual. At the National Sporting Goods Association convention in Phoenix recently, booth after booth—more than 150 of them—featured amiable men and women hawking their casual wares. Even single one of them was dressed in formal brown or black shoes. It's good to know that some people have respect for tradition. ■