

TINKER TALES

AS TOLD TO RUSS BENGTSO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BOYKO

Lessons in the shower helped Nike's V.P. of Innovation design his first shoe.

Before Air Jordan III to XV, Jordan XX, the first Max products, Huarache and introducing us all to the concept of cross-training - before he became the best-known athletic-shoe designer in the world - Tinker Hatfield did some running. Way back when, he trained under legendary University of Oregon coach and Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman, and he ran alongside (okay, more likely behind) Nike muse Steve Prefontaine. Hatfield has plenty of stories about his days with Bowerman, and he tells them exceptionally well in his own words...

This is going to sound funny, but the very first thing that comes to mind was that Bill Bowerman was an absolute and utter practical joker. I don't know, he just played with people and it was hilarious. And for those who didn't get it, they would get really pissed off. But for some of us who did, or just appreciated his approach to kind of understanding each of his athletes, we thought he was brilliant.

I was really in his last recruiting class and really on his last team, but I stayed in contact with him because I was one of his wear-test people on the track team. And he'd love the fact that I could take a pair of his wacky shoe designs and go run around in them and then come back and not only just tell him what I thought, but I could sketch and visualize it for him. So he had me, even when I was in college, drawing outsole and midsole designs not so much from my own creative perspective, but just helping him realize some of his ideas. Some of my drawings went to some of his mold makers that were coming up with the early waffle designs and track spike designs.

Again, he was a practical joker, but he always did it for a reason, and I learned a lot from that about how you try and teach people lessons but do it in a funny or memorable kind of way. He wasn't just like a dry, professorial type. He would often take showers with the track team or go in the sauna; he was kind of old school, just one of the gang, but always had the upper hand on everybody. He would stand in the shower with 15, 20, 30 other guys, telling somebody a story; he'd be standing right there next to someone - he would do this maybe once or twice a year to some, unsuspecting younger athlete - and he'd piss on his leg. Of course, that wouldn't go over so well today, but back then you could get away with a lot. He'd be standing there telling the story to some young guy, all the while pissing on his leg in the shower and he wouldn't even realize it. Then he'd finally figure it out, look down and Bowerman'd say, 'You gotta pay attention!' It was his way to teach a lesson about, well, somebody may be talking in one ear, but you need to be paying attention to what's going on around you at the same time. I didn't get pissed on. Luckily, I avoided that.

Then there's another famous story that he did to people all the time. He spent time in Finland and New Zealand and brought back a lot of ideas on training from those places which were all about sort of physical fitness before there was a physical fitness boom. I think a lot of people would credit him with the beginnings of sort of the jogging, running and fitness boom that started here in the '60s. He even wrote a book. But he really believed in saunas, which he brought back from Finland, and he had a big sauna constructed in the locker room area of the University of Oregon. A lot of the track team guys would come back from runs or from workouts on a cold winter day or a wet spring day and go in the sauna. You don't just go in the sauna and call it good. You go in for so many minutes, you come out, take a shower, go back in; you kind of go back and forth and it's meant to increase your circulation and help remove lactic acid. He would sit in the sauna and hang his keys up in there. It would get up to 140, 150 degrees and the keys would get hot to the touch.

But, again, it was another sort of lesson. He would have some unsuspecting person, some young guy who, again, wasn't paying attention, and he'd say, 'I need something out of my locker in the coach's room. Take the keys and go get this thing for me'. And without thinking, the guy would grab the keys and go YEAAAAAAGH! cause the keys would be hot. Or he'd even take the keys, sitting next to someone, and slap them right on their thigh. Leave a welt, hot keys on your thigh. He would usually do that to someone he was upset with and say, 'Listen, you need to start working harder, get to class, blah blah blah. Now, while I have you here and have your attention, I want you to get this message'. Those were the kind of things he would do.

He was a brilliant coach, because he realized you can't treat everybody the same. Even though he was a military guy, he never thought that was a very smart way to run a military. So he was one of those early coaches who had a different strategy for each and every one of his athletes, who realized different people react differently to advice and coaching stimuli and all of that stuff. So there are a lot of really good reasons to have him represented here at

Nike, to remind all of us of his genius. And he ultimately, of course, became this innovator of product design.

Before I ever worked for Nike, and post-college, I had my degree and was working for an architectural firm, and I got laid off. Just economics, right? I was practising architecture on my own because I was registered by then, but I also, just to make ends meet, had gone back to Bill Bowerman and was working in his shoe lab. I had a seven-month-old daughter who was getting to the point where she was going to start moving around. I don't know if you remember, but almost all the toddler shoes back then were all rigid leather boards, and they'd kind of clomp around. The idea was their feet weren't strong enough to support them, so you had to kind of give them a little bit more of a base of support. Bowerman said that's all wrong. And he was right, he was dead right. I was listening to him talk about that one day and then he says, 'OK, it's your turn. We've been teaching you to make shoes, now you design your own shoe'. I'm going, Really? And he goes, 'Yeah. Design your own shoe, and make it. You got a week'.

So I start drawing and I'm going, What am I gonna do? Then I realize my daughter's probably gonna be walking in a few months. So I designed this shoe, and made it. That is not only the first shoe that I designed, but I actually made it. I stitched it, I glued it all together. And not only did she wear them, but all three of my daughters learned to walk in these shoes. It was a flexible shoe, and it had this big toe bumper because most kids, when they're learning to walk, they also crawl a lot and they drag their toes. And it was Velcro, so the mom could put them back on, or the dad. I did a lot of that. We found them a couple years ago in a box. That's a cool little piece of memorabilia. The kids' group has been in here several times to look at these shoes.

In the end, Bill Bowerman approved. He's going, 'Well, I guess you learned a little bit of what I've been talking about didn't ya, huh?' I guess I did. She learned how to walk at nine months. Not saying it was the shoes, but it may have helped a little bit.