

FORCE OF NATURE

BY CRAIG 'BIG C' MANNIX
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BOYKO

How Tracy Teague pushed evolution one step further with the AF25.

First off, what's up with the all-black Toronto shoe?

On the coast-to-coast pack? It's not just an all-black shoe, it's a waterproof boot leather. What we wanted to do was represent each city where there's an NBA team. But we also wanted to really upgrade the materials on the Air Force 25. So each one of them is an upgrade over where we were with in-line versions and even the Supreme version. So we're using boot leathers on every level. You got kind of a chocolate brown, the khaki, a sail color, a buck and then the black, waterproof boot leather one. Like the Geo Domes. I think we actually did a Geo Dome, it's called the Himalaya.

What made you redesign the Air Force 25 as a technical shoe when some folks might have thought you didn't need to do anything?

We saw the 25th anniversary of the Air Force 1 as a significant moment. The way the Air Force 1 has evolved, its exploded into a cultural phenomenon. But what we want to do is refocus people on the fact that, in 1982, the Air Force 1 was the state-of-the-art performance product that really kind of put Nike on the map of designing, developing and bringing to the game of basketball a technical product. It was the first basketball shoe with air cushioning, the most supportive, the most comfortable. What we wanted to do was say, 'Let's not redesign an Air Force 1'. That was not the intent. The intent was to look at those three key elements from a DNA standpoint that Bruce [Kilgore] put into the original Air Force 1 and bring those up to date. And then, even from an aesthetic side, really understanding that through this anniversary launch these two were gonna sit side by side. I think we've termed this The Second Coming and, again, it wasn't like we were redesigning the Air Force 1. What we're saying is those original insights in 1982 are absolutely relevant today.

How does a fearless player like Rasheed feel about the new shoe?

Well, you know, Rasheed is an interesting cat. He's the one guy that has, over the course of time, been kind of the bridge. He's the guy that continues to wear the original shoe. I think the thing from Rasheed's standpoint - and it'd be great to actually hear, because this is just all my opinion - is it has been great seeing the attention brought to the idea of Force. He takes a lot of pride in being the guy that still continues to wear. On the performance side we're like, How can you continue to do that? I mean,

not that the Air Force 1 isn't a great shoe, but it's like driving around in a 1982 car. If I had the choice, I'd want to drive one from today. We're going to bring the Air Force 25 in a high top, so we will run for Rasheed. Ultimately, it's gonna be up to him. From a performance standpoint, I guarantee ya they'll solve his needs. Then it'll get down to taste and his persona. I think there's a lot of Rasheed wrapped up in that original Air Force 1.

What's the response from the players since December?

Phenomenal. One of the things we wanted to do was make it a playable product for a guy like Steve Nash and a guy like Jermaine O'Neal. That's a broad spectrum of playing styles. The way we approached it, that basic DNA that goes into a product, things that Steve needs and Jermaine needs. By bringing those things together, we created a package.

What's the difference in balling between a LeBron IV, a Kobe Zoom and an AF25?

It's a little bit like flavours of ice cream, if you will. The Kobe shoe is made a little bit lower to the ground, utilizes a little bit more of the Free technology. So it really epitomizes Kobe's game. The bullet-proof nature of the LeBron IV totally epitomizes LeBron's game. He's a beast: 6'9, almost 6'10; 260 pounds. So Ken Link, when he designed the LeBron IV, really had to try to almost protect LeBron from himself. That's what we do with those signature products. For the Air Force 25, The Second Coming ad shows the breadth of players that represent Nike Basketball. We said, from a performance standpoint, we need almost a flagship model that really kind of spans across from a Steve Nash to a Jermaine O'Neal to an Amare Stoudemire.

Why no Dirk? Why no Vince? Vince is the big surprise, and I'm sure you've heard that from a lot of people.

Yeah, we did. Talk to the sports marketing guys and get the inside scoop. I think, quite frankly, there was some scheduling issues with Vince. Obviously Vince is one of the best players to play the game and we've immortalized Vince on the Legacy Pack.

Now everybody's looking for power forwards and centers that have jump shots, that can move, that can put the ball on the floor.

Amare terms himself a point-center. I mean, you know. Come on, its crazy!

Red Auerbach's rolling in his grave. And, arguably, Pippen was, they say, the first point-forward.

Exactly. Where's it going to go? But then you look at the athleticism of some of these guys. A guy like LeBron? I mean, it's just crazy what he can do. And quite frankly, that adds a ton of challenge for us, and especially for Ken Link, who's designing LeBron's product. How do you contain a guy like that? Just literally, just the forces these guys put on our product is absolutely insane. So how do you contain 'em?

20 years from now will Ken be sitting at Tinker's desk when he's retired?

He may very well be. That's the beauty of working at Nike. Bruce Kilgore, the original Air Force 1 designer, is still there. I collaborated with him on the design. Tinker, Sandy Bodecker and Mark Parker, Nike's CEO who started out in Product Development and did some design himself. There's a history of guys that helped build the foundation. They're still right up in the mix infusing new product with this evolution.

And the next shoe you'd like to put a new, evolving spin on?

That's a hard question. Again, this wasn't intended to redesign Air Force 1. I know Tinker has taken a crack at redesigning an Air Raid or the original Trainer One. We're striving to keep moving things forward. What's coming next? For us, the game of basketball is changing, so how do we keep bringing fresh things to help move the game forward? I've got a great team working not only on the footwear side, but on the apparel side. You're gonna see some stuff in March Madness that redefines basketball uniforms. They're calling it The System of Dress, and it's gonna be outstanding. You'll see that roll in a team. So to answer your question, I don't really have one that I'd try to pick off. I'm just trying to bring the next thing.

