



Courtesy of ZOOT

High Zoot

Zoot Sports has unleashed a running shoe designed just for triathletes

By T.J. Murphy

At the Interbike industry trade show last year, Carlson, marketing director for California-based Zoot Sports, had a chat with elite triathlete Ironman champion Heather Gollnick. The subject was socks. Carlson asked Gollnick why she wore socks during a race. Gollnick replied that there was only one reason: to prevent blisters. Considering all the money, experience and science poured into running-shoe research, why does it seem that so few companies have asked this key question?

In fact, running-shoe companies have addressed the blister question (or have tried to) with certain models over the years, and there are a number of runners and triathletes who race, if not train, sockless. One current example is the Nike Free 5.0, a shoe Nike says simulates the feel and action of barefoot running and by virtue is often worn without socks. Certain factors seem to come into play for athletes who successfully go without socks: The shoe must fit right, the inside of the shoe must have few seams and the runner/triathlete must have spent some time getting physically accustomed to the shoe.

Zoot Sports is getting into the running-shoe market this spring with a product line that, among other things, is meant to fulfill the needs of triathletes who don't want to wear socks. Hitting the shelves in March, Zoot calls it the Ultra Collection. That Zoot has designed its introduction into the running-shoe market to be worn sockless is an indication of its overall intent: Make shoes specific to the needs of triathletes.

If you've felt frustrated that major running-shoe companies are far more interested in the mainstream market's appetite for running shoes (a \$3.5 billion annual market) and are not paying attention to multisport, Zoot's expansion into running shoes should be a welcome sign. And in contrast to many of the larger shoe companies, which appear to be neglecting multisport, Zoot's first step was to talk to triathletes.

According to Zoot's Aaron Azevedo, a 17-year industry veteran (formerly with Saucony and Hind) and leader of Zoot's running-shoe team, the beginning of the Ultra Collection began

when it put together a summit composed of triathletes, runners and ultra-runners and asked: What is it about running shoes that drives you crazy? What's missing? What doesn't work?

"We wanted the horror stories about what they were using," Azevedo says. "Our goal was to have athletes be involved throughout the entire process."

Azevedo says that after a series of such focus groups, prototypes were created to solve four core problems. "We fine-tuned our thinking after a focus group composed mostly of triathletes. It was intense. The problems we decided Zoot needed to solve are what we call the four key differentiators."

The differentiators, as Azevedo referred to them, consist of the following:

Speed of entry: The need to get in and out of T2 as quickly as possible

Sockless wear: Triathletes don't want to take the time to put on socks

Water retention: Studies have shown that traditional running shoes can gain an additional 30 percent of weight during a race

Biomechanics: Athletes run differently after racing on a bike

During the prototype stage, Zoot experimented with technologies to solve these problems. Azevedo says that, for example, they played endlessly with the lacing system. They also looked hard at the way cushioning was doled out, with typical running shoes manufactured with the bulk of cushioning under the heel.

"Every company has a big squishy thing in the heel," Azevedo says. "But this is done with no thought that good runners are not slow [i.e. heavy heel strikers]." Instead, Azevedo says Zoot designed its shoes for mid-foot strikers, with a shank of carbon fiber to help generate a strong push-off.

The 2007 Hawaii Ironman was the stage for the Ultra Collection's soft launch. Some 350 athletes tested the shoes during the week, and Carlson says she had cases of triathletes, despite the newness of the product, who elected to use the shoe in the race. In Kona, Carlson says Zoot received feedback suggesting that its shoe design and production process was a success. Triathletes particularly liked the sockless design and the fact they could pour water over their heads and the shoe would permit the water to drain through instead of saturating and weighing down the shoe. ▲

Zoot's shoes will be available for the ultimate focus group—the