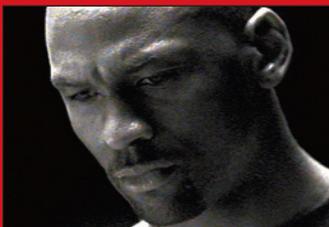


From the seemingly  
endless reinvention  
of the athletic shoe  
has flowed a torrent  
of inspiration,  
all aimed at putting  
one manufacturer's  
footwear in front  
of another.



# 7

## **SNEAKER WARS: GOING TOE-TO-TOE**

**JUST AS THE SUPER BOWL** was the battlefield for what people put in their bodies (the cola wars), it was also a combat zone for what they put *on* their bodies. Although Converse and L.A. Gear tried to elbow their way in, Nike and Reebok were the titans—the Coke and Pepsi—in this battle. Since its founding in 1972, Nike has been a master of marketing, synonymous with stylish, big-budget, celebrity-packed technical tours de force.

But in 1987, after a seven-year run as America’s top-selling athletic shoe, Nike was eclipsed by Reebok. It fought back with “Revolution,” a 90-second, documentary-style commercial. There were black-and-white close-ups of regular folks and Michael Jordan and John McEnroe at their best, slow-motion shots of their shoes lifting and landing—and there was the music.

Nike paid a price bigger than the \$500,000 for rights to the original Beatles “Revolution” recording. Capitol Records sued for \$15 million, charging that Nike wrongfully traded on the Beatles’ goodwill. And boomers resented Nike’s misappropriation of a sacred piece of 1960s culture. Stung, Nike dropped the ad and let it be.

In fact, it was “being” just fine. Sport shoe sales were booming. “It wasn’t like there were more feet, just that Nike and Reebok were covering feet more hours of



**“BO DIDDLEY BASEBALL”** Nike pitchman Bo Jackson knows about baseball—and other sports—but couldn’t match Bo Diddley at guitar playing.

the day,” said John Horan, publisher of *Sporting Goods Management News*.

Selling athletic shoes increasingly involved tapping the marquee value of star jocks. L.A. Gear lined up Karl Malone and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Reebok recruited basketball’s Dominique Wilkins and football’s Boomer Esiason. In 1985, Nike had signed Michael Jordan, then a twenty-one-year-old college junior (and ardent Adidas fan) just joining the Chicago Bulls to his own line of Air Jordan shoes—and a five-year, \$2.5 million contract.

Nike’s diadem grew to include, among others, Scottie Pippen, David Robinson, Alonzo Mourning, Deion Sanders, Jerry Rice, Ken Griffey Jr., Frank Thomas, Andre Agassi, and John McEnroe. In “The Barkley of Seville,” Charles Barkley appeared to sing an Italian opera, prance through a basketball cathedral, kill a referee who called him on a foul, and have his shoes seized as punishment.

In 1988, Nike’s “Just Do It” mantra against lethargy became the cornerstone of several blockbuster commercials, including the “Bo Knows” series, which ended on the 1990 pregame show.

As Bo Diddley and his band riff, athletes sound off about Bo Jackson, then Kansas City Royals’ outfielder and Los Angeles Raiders’ running back. “Bo knows baseball,” testifies Dodger Kurt Gibson. “Bo knows football,” adds Ram Jim Everett. “Bo knows basketball,” confirms Michael Jordan. John McEnroe looks dubious. “Bo knows tennis?” he puzzles. “Bo knows running,” marathoner Mary Decker weighed in, and body builders acknowledge he



**“THE CATAPULT”** L.A. Gear attempted to blast Nike out of viewers’ minds with Karl Malone touting the Catapult shoe.

knows weights. Bo has his limits, though: Wayne Gretzky denies his hockey prowess, and Bo's off-key hacking at the guitar proves he doesn't "know diddley!"

Nike had first used multiple images of Bo—furiously pedaling a bike searching for "that Tour de Force thing," in basketball gear, tennis togs, as a hockey, cricket, and soccer player, surfer, weightlifter, auto racer, golfer, caddy, and jockey. The Bos noticed each other and complimented each others' shoes: Sony Bono walked on—he thought it was a Bonos commercial.

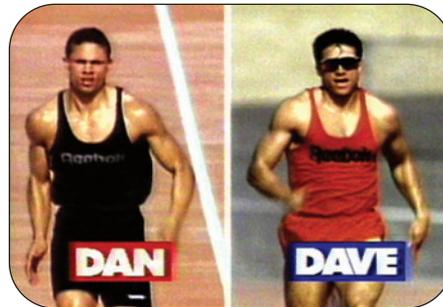
Wrestling with ideas for a sequel at a local bar, Wieden & Kennedy copywriter Jim Riswold heard lots of patrons' suggestions—Beau Brummell...Bo Derek...Bo Schembechler—before Riswold jotted "you don't know Diddley" on a cocktail napkin.

Within months, Nike was selling 80 percent of all cross-training shoes. The commercials played better than Bo did, however. Within a year they were benched, after helping Nike displace Reebok as number one. Other ads for Air Jordans costarred their director, Spike Lee. What makes you so great? Lee pesters Jordan. The "vicious dunks? extra-long shorts? short socks?" Finally, Lee decides, "It's got to be the shoes." In another ad, Douglas Kirkpatrick, a professor of astronautics, explains that Jordan "overcomes the acceleration of gravity by the application of his muscle power in the vertical plane, thus producing a low-altitude earth orbit."

Meanwhile, Reebok, named for an African gazelle, aimed to divest its image as a women's aerobic shoe company. In Super Bowl XXV (1991), it pumped up its new \$160 inflatable Pump footwear and tossed aside an Air Jordan shoe. Subsequently, Dennis Rodman, Boomer Esiason, golfer Greg Norman, tennis player Michael Chang, and decathlete Dave Johnson also jabbed at Air Jordans.

L.A. Gear also targeted Nike in Super Bowl XXV to promote its new Catapult shoes. Utah Jazz NBA star Karl Malone sneered: "Everything else is just hot air." CBS refused the ads as offensive. BBDO, which had just won L.A. Gear's business, agreed, and soon after resigned the account.

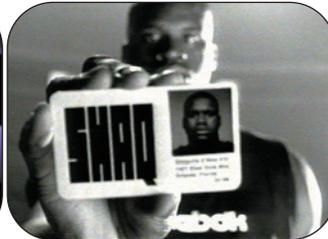
David Ropes, Reebok's vice president for worldwide advertising and a for-



**"DAN AND DAVE"** Reebok's ads featuring decathletes Dan O'Brien and Dave Johnson asked America, "Who is the world's greatest athlete?" and promised to answer that question in the upcoming Olympics in Barcelona.



**“LEGENDS”** Reebok’s Shaquille O’Neal, trying to impress hoops legends Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Bill Walton, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, is given a dustpan to clean up the court after he tears the hoop off the backboard.



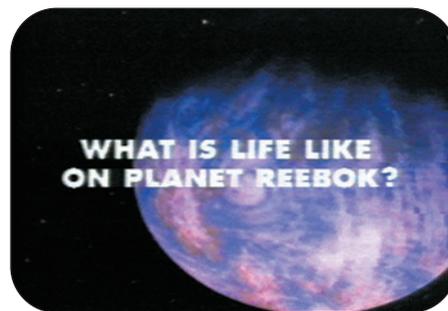
**“SHOOT PASS SLAM”** Reebok’s other Shaquille O’Neal spot, titled after a rap number from his debut album, was shot by twin brothers Allen and Albert Hughes, who directed the feature film *Menace II Society*.

mer Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam, likes risks. In XXVI (1992) he bet big that either Dan O’Brien or Dave Johnson, both relatively unknown athletes, would win the Olympic Decathlon and that Americans would grow to care about them—and their shoes.

How would Dan and Dave, who’d trained in virtual seclusion, fare when millions were looking over their shoulders? What if people weren’t interested? And what of sprains and hamstrings? But trailing Nike by six market share points in the \$5.8 billion sneaker market fortified Reebok’s willingness to gamble.

Dan and Dave were introduced by their first names and with snapshots of them growing up. Voice-overs told of their sporting accomplishments. As the campaign developed, people voted for one or the other: A pretty young woman identified as Dan’s ex-girlfriend broke a tie—by voting for Dave. (His real-life ex-girlfriend tried out for the part, but it went to a model instead. Everyone else cast was authentic.)

Reebok had two post-victory spots ready to wrap up the campaign showing the celebratory winner snoozing with a “Life is short. Sleep in” tweak. They never ran.



**“LIFE ON PLANET REEBOK”** On Planet Reebok life has “no limits, no pain, no cupcakes, no wimps, no lawyers, no mercy, no beauty pageants, no slogans, no fat, no excuses, no winners, and no losers.”



**“JORDAN’S DREAM”** Nike contemplated Michael Jordan’s retirement.

In June, O’Brien flubbed the pole vault and failed to qualify for an Olympic berth. Reebok ran substitute commercials, then a spot where Johnson consoles O’Brien. It galvanized the public. Dan and Dave didn’t do what Ropes had hoped, but they did raise Reebok’s profile. “Every paper in America had the story, and most had ‘Reebok’ in the headline,” he mused. That helped narrow the Nike-Reebok sales gap.

At the 1993 Super Bowl, Reebok bracketed its commercials around Nike’s super-hip Hare Jordan ads (see Chapter 4). Reebok’s artillery: Shaquille O’Neal, the 7-foot-1-inch NBA rookie sensation.

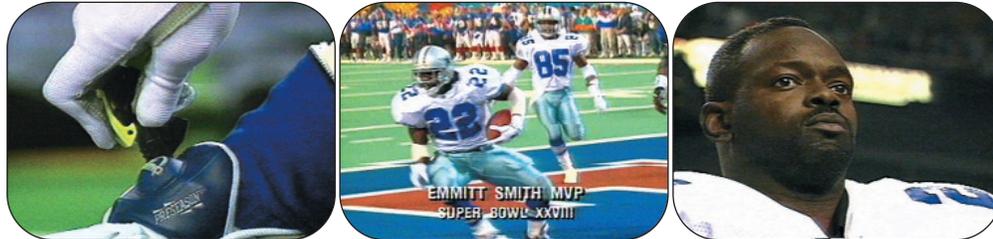
In one spot, Shaq tries to win the approval of legendary greats at the renowned Hall of Fame Centers Club. Shaq demonstrates he’s ready, but when he tries to hand over the shattered backboard, Wilt Chamberlain disdainfully pushes a broom at him and instructs Shaq to clean up the mess.

While Nike tried to hold on to the end of an era with Jordan, Reebok laid claim to a new one with a music video featuring Shaq rapping “Shoot Pass Slam” from his debut album.

In May 1993, Jordan had hinted that he’d retire. “What if my name wasn’t in lights?...What if there wasn’t a crowd around every corner? Can you imagine it? I can,” Jordan had said from a dark gym. In Super



**“GRANDMAMA”** Charlotte Hornet Larry Johnson plays Grandmama, in a matronly flowered dress, gray wig, pearl necklace, and Cons. “She” steps through a door in a tornado and finds herself welcomed to Three-Point Land by a tiny referee, a Munchkin in the original *Wizard of Oz*. She needs Converse’s new \$110 BackJams to get home.



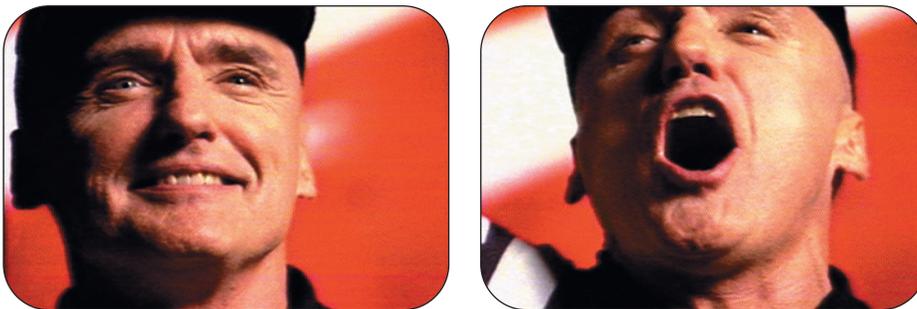
**“EMMITT SMITH—LIVE—SUPER BOWL”** Reebok had a back-up commercial in case the cameras or on-premises editing machines jammed on MVP Emmitt Smith’s Instapump ad.

Bowl XXVIII (1994), Nike reprised the concept. Grainy pseudo-documentaries explored whether or not he had faked his retirement.

Investigator Steve Martin quizzes people from Harold Miner and Marv Albert to Spike Lee about what really happened to Michael, who’s sighted playing semi-pro in silly getups.

**THE CONVERSE “BLACK CONS”** All-Stars were *the* basketball shoe in the 1960s. To make them so again, Converse raced to Super Bowl 1994, its first time here, with a minidrama take-off of *The Wizard of Oz*.

In that same game (XXVIII), Reebok made an insta-splash with an insta-ad for its Instapump. In the first half, a crew frantically videotaped players wearing Instapumps, edited it on premises, then ran a tape to the NBC Sports truck fifty yards away. As the last spot in the game, it was supposed to arrive with at least five minutes to spare. It got there with 2:50 left.



**“STATE OF THE GAME”** With the fanatic spot featuring Dennis Hopper, Nike delivered discomfort and edginess.



**“LIL PENNY MOVIE”** Little Penny Puppet, the puppet version of Orlando Magic guard Anfernee “Penny” Hardaway voiced by comedian Chris Rock, hosts a celebrity-studded Super Bowl party for Nike.

**WILSON FOOTBALLS** have been used in every Super Bowl, but XXIX (1995) was the first time it advertised here. Wilson toyed with biblical history and a cast of thousands to proclaim “The Right Equipment Makes the Difference.” The leather slingshot and stone David uses to slay Goliath bears the “W” imprint. Some considered it blasphemous and offensive; Wilson called it “straightforward product as hero advertising.”

Reebok sat out the Super Bowl in 1995, having broken new Shaq Attaq ads earlier. Nike might have been better off had it done likewise. Instead it spent \$3 million on a 90-second, one-time ad featuring Dennis Hopper as Stanley Craver, a deranged, obsessed football fanatic. Hopper had appeared in fourteen effective Nike spots since 1993. Now, wearing a decaying football official’s uniform, he sneaks into locker rooms and sniffs dirty sneakers (“I have smelled the shoes!”) and delivers a loopy, impassioned ballad to football interspersed with confessions about his milk

allergy and the soybean juice substitute that his mom gave him.

Nike briefly veered from celebrities for an emotional nod to Pee Wee football but soon returned to mock its own past ads.

In 1995, ad director Chris Zimmerman hinted that after a decade Nike would soon leave the game that had become so costly and hyped, “overshadowing the value that we are getting.” Nike made one more appearance in 1998. “Evolution of Skin” unveiled its F.I.T. apparel line, as comfortable as a second skin. Thereafter, Nike decided to focus on niche marketing rather than looking big and slick.

Reebok also passed on the game after this, although in 2002 it issued 2,000 pairs of special edition Super Bowl sneakers emblazoned with the logos of the Rams and Patriots.



**“EVOLUTION OF SKIN”** Nike ads featured striking black-and-white scenes of naked athletes who appear at the end in color, clad in Nike apparel. NBC insisted that nipples and genitalia be obscured.