

BATTLEFIELD

Two brothers. Two sports brands. Two frontal lines. The battle between Adidas and Puma is being carried out in a Fränkisch Province.

Text: Nike Breyer

The small market town of Herzogenaurach is at the end of the world, deep in a Fränkisch provincial backwater. And to date it houses the principal offices of two leading sports articles' manufacturers which have become a legend in consumer culture with their products.

Almost 80 years after the founding of the "Dassler brothers' shoe factory" in 1924 and over 50 years after the separation of the two brothers Rudolf and Adolf, the head offices of Adidas and Puma are still located in Herzogenaurach - which doesn't even have a station. Train travellers have to transfer to a bus in Erlangen. The railway company don't consider it worthwhile to run a station in "Trainer-Village."

Those who wish to go to Adidas get out in Ortseingang. From here it is five minutes walk to the head office, a jagged complex which dominates the surrounding agricultural landscape. Those who wish to go to Puma need go only a little further. The head office is at the opposite end of the town.

Not that this signifies enmity. Those times are over and with them, the situation reported at the time by a shocked journalist: "The sports outfit has turned into a question of political attitude: The "reds" are grouping themselves behind the three stripes and the "blacks" are behind the springing puma. There is no pub, no shop and no hotel that is not following this trend."

The reminder of these patriarchal structures of the former family business now appears to arouse almost nostalgic feelings. Today any search for the old enmity is entirely futile. Also there are no visible signs of pride in the work of the two prominent town men. If you take a glance at the feet of the people from Herzogenaurach you very rarely see either of the Dassler logos. Instead the young inhabitants prefer to wear No Name products from the supermarket around the corner.

The first Olympic athletes ran barefoot.

From ancient paintings we know that the ancient Egyptians bound reed sandals to their feet when they played ball games. At the first Olympic Games the athletes ran barefoot but the sandal was soon used as a running shoe. Wool or moss was stuffed into these make-shift shoes to act as a form of cushioning. In the Middle Ages a French monk called Saint Feutre invented the first springy insole from matted wool. A few centuries later the first sports shoes were developed.

In Germany it was Friedrich Ludwig "Gym Father" Jahn (1778 – 1851), who brought sport to the fore with his open air gym apparatus. At the end of the 19th century, the French scientist Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) discovered micro-organisms that caused illness and it was not only the milk that was immediately "pasteurized", but also the bodies of his contemporaries: From this time forth, regular physical exercise was understood to be a part of modern hygiene. Sport attained an ethical-moral taste.

The birth of the modern trainer.

Around 1900 the shape and form of the trainer changed. They were no longer thin and pointed like the street shoes of the average citizen, but had a rounded toe and asymmetric soles. From this time on we can begin to talk about the sports shoes that we know today.

Technical additions like spikes first came on to the scene in 1860. To create these, nails were punched through the shoe soles and a metal plate was put into the shoe to protect the foot. These shoes could weigh as much as one kilogram. A nightmare for today's athletes.

The plimsoll, a canvas shoe with vulcanized rubber soles, was invented by an English shoemaker in 1890. It was popular in America under the name gym shoe or sneaker. The upper-class tennis pioneer Robert Frelherr von Fichard from Straßburg devoted a chapter to tennis wear in his "Tennis Handbook" written in 1887. In this chapter he describes the appropriate shoes. These had a leather or material upper covering. The heelless India rubber soles had a cuboid or ribbed pattern to prevent slipping on the grass.

Physical training in chic sports clothing was very fashionable in the Wilhelm Reich. Countless gym clubs appeared and were rated and discussed in periodicals like "Deutsche Leibesucht", "Strength and Beauty" and "Body culture". This boom continued after the first World War and was the background for the founding of the Dassler shoe factory in Herzogenaurach.

Exchange with the sports personalities.

Adolf Dassler, the younger of the two brothers and a baker by trade, was the inventor and developer. In 1920 he made his first sports shoes in his mother's laundry which he converted into a workshop. In 1924 he and his brother founded the shoe factory together.

Almost 10 years later they were producing special shoes for 16 different sports. The focus point of production: shoes for football and athletics. Adi was responsible for the technical side and model development. Rudi took on the book-keeping and marketing.

From the very beginning the Dassler brothers fostered a close contact with sportsmen and women, with a view to continuously improving the technical side of their trainers. Their work with Sepp Herberger, the trainer of the German football team, is legendary. It began in 1948. In the same year a quarrel began between the two brothers which led to their separation. Both established themselves as self-employed. The new firms were called Adidas and Puma. From brotherly togetherness came a competitive battle.

Separately to success

Today both companies have contributed a thick chapter to the history of trainers. They have overcome economical crises, missed trends and stylistic low points and taken themselves to new heights. In the meantime, both family businesses have become corporations and dispatch their shoes from this remote corner of Germany to the ends of the Earth.

Both brands have drawn on a typical German philosophy: Alongside modern product attributes like style and performance, high class workmanship and anatomic suitability are of central importance. Adidas established a tradition in 1998 with the launch of the biomorph "Feet you Wear" concept. On the Adidas homepage it states "We're not a shoe company, we're a foot company". At Puma, everything is technology-based. Outside appearance and design strengthen the brands marketability. "Puma is the alternative sports brand, that successfully unites the creative influences from the world of sport, lifestyle and fashion," states a member of the kingdom of the big cat. What a great new province!

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Michael Michalski/Adidas AG

The new mass production line “mi adidas” follows a great German tradition: the endeavour to find an anatomically suitable fit. Since the Feet you Wear” concept, we haven’t heard any more of this idea.

That’s actually not true. Just this spring we launched two new technologies with “Sport Performance”: A-Cubed and Clima-Cool with 360 degree ventilation. Another thing that is particularly successful is the fact that in these shoes, you sweat up to 20 per cent less. It is important that the energy is given back when you tread. Adidas has already achieved that. We used to use foam but today it is “adiprene” or “adiprene plus”. At the end of the seventies there were technologies that inserted staves or screws into the heel in order to achieve different levels of cushioning. This is nothing new. But now the materials are better.

Since 1996 and the peak of the New School hype, Low Tech and Old School have now caught up once again.

No. Old School has always been hip. It’s just that all of a sudden, Old School became mainstream. There are people who have collected sneakers for years. There is a market there – just as there is for vintage jeans.

So these are the underground groups?

It’s also a bit overground, like jeans. Everybody nowadays knows what “big E” and “red salvage” are. But five years ago, nobody knew. It has to be said that people who buy “Heritage” products don’t buy them because they want to look like their fathers. They buy them because the design is timeless.

But there are some recognisable growing trends.

It really gets on my nerves when I hear words like trend and design. I can’t bear to hear them anymore. Go into Tschibo and get a blue coffee pot - something like that one there. And it’s called a “design piece”. And these crazy housewife programmes only talk about trend, trend, trend. Somehow that came up somewhere and it’s sold itself very well. When it comes down to it, only very few people know what “trend” is.

Okay, but the phenomenon is here to stay.

Basically there is everything all at once. That’s the great thing. That’s why I think H&M are fantastic. They’re making fashion a democracy. Since they have been around, the street picture as far as young people in Germany is concerned has changed for the better.

But quality consciousness is affecting peoples’ decisions.

Maybe. Perhaps people are now satisfied with less.

As creative director, where do you find your inspiration?

That changes with my age, position and with the project that I am working on. I’m a London fan because I lived and studied there for 6 years. I’m also a clubbing victim. For 15 years, I’ve gone to Ibiza every year because the best DJs in the world meet there and I know lots of people there who always keep me updated. It’s a small world of its own. I get a lot of inspiration from night clubs.

How important is Berlin?

I’m often in Berlin because I have a second flat there. It’s a world city but there’s nowhere like it in the world. Berlin is still a bit burnt out – and retains a bit of the spirit of the times when it still had the wall. I love going there.

Do you also collect art?

Photography, old things, vintage prints. I don’t have many contemporary things. But that’s like fashion. Over-hyped and then it’s the next new thing.

Who do you collect?

I collect F C Gundlach, so fashion photography from the 50s. Also classics like Horst P Horst, Norman Parkinson. And also sport photography from the 20s and 30s.

Leni Riefenstahl?

Yes, him too. I think his aesthetics are great because they have influenced people right up until today – you can see that when you look at the work of people like Herb Ritts or Bruce Weber. I also have prints from Umbo, who was in a Bauhaus and had a tragic life. One painting is called "eerie shade". It is photographed from an unusual perspective so that you are looking down at people from above. That is the scariest picture I have. This sort of aesthetic inspires me.

And do you use that in your career?

To a degree, yes. But I'm also absolutely addicted to music. Music inspires me perhaps even more than photography. If you have no idea about new music directions, you can have no idea about youth culture. This is one reason I dismiss these stories of trend scouts. For me the information they give you is second hand. A designer who doesn't know himself where and why something comes into existence is no designer, as far as I'm concerned. These scouts have no purpose for me.

Has Adidas currently got a home advantage in Germany?

Not as much as people believe. Our main competitor is not quietly snoozing in a corner and they know what they need to do in Germany to be really good and to crack the European market. They have already given us the Zunder. We're not just sitting on our chairs and saying "everything's great." We permanently need to update the brand, maintain our image and push forward.

At the Football World Cup, Germany was wearing Adidas strips when they won.

Last year it was France and they were also playing in Adidas strips. Turkey were third and also kitted out in Adidas. But it's not because of our football strips that a German will now go out and buy a pair of Adidas football boots. In the whole of Europe people know that we are the original football brand.

And will that be maintained?

Of course. I thought our profile as a brand was really good at this World Cup. For the first time, everybody loved the strips. It was a typical Adidas look, very modern, functional and contemporary. It's timeless. They'll still look fantastic when we look back at the pictures in 20 years time. That was very important to me. My job is fundamentally that of a conductor. The people here are the musicians in the team. And I make sure that they all play together and nobody plays too loud. And that the result is a great song.

Ralf Metzenmacher/PUMA AG

Ralf Metzenmacher, 38, studied product design in Aachen. In 1991 he became footwear designer at Puma. Since 1994 he has been responsible for accessories and since September 2001, Director of Footwear Europa and Accessories International.

How do the trendy shoe designs emerge from Herzogenaurach?

In the past we had professional trend consultants from outside the firm who had advised other firms like Philips or Sony. I have to say: they were inspirational and gave us courage to change things. For example this gaudy trend with gold and thick chains. At the time we saw that it was also possible to go in this sort of direction. It wasn't directly transferable to our products. But we were able to see that it is also possible to make gold shoes without feeling any sort of shame.

And you have been an expert on trend scouting for the company for the last two years.

Yes. We also send our designers to places that we believe they should see. We have a constant exchange between our offices in Munich, New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Hong Kong. Then before every season we hold our "design camps" which draw together designers from all categories and divisions. These meetings always take place in different places. Last time it was in the States, before that in Austria and earlier in Stratford, England.

Is that an art workshop?

It's a party, it's work, it's relaxation. We go rafting or on a camping trip. The president of the footwear and textile division leads the camp. But basically everybody is on a level.

Where do the inspirations for Puma shoe design come from?

In the beginning we used "mood-boards" with the designers. On these boards they can reflect on what they wish to implement this season. Cars are often designed in this way. Although I find that difficult because with cars the quality of line management is very different. You can't really translate one to the other. You can see something that works really well with a car but know immediately: in a shoe that just won't work. The film industry also offers fantastic inspiration.

From the fashions of the stars?

No. When I watch films I look at the background more than anything. The "Star Wars" films for example were all graphically pre-prepared. Each scene has previously been painted and it is from this scenery that the story develops. That's the aspect that I find interesting - where I can see something new. How do strange worlds look, how could they look? And what would the shoes look like that I would wear on a strange planet?

Can you give an example?

"Atlantic" by Walt Disney. That came out in Germany in February. At first I thought: cartoons. Oh no... no good. But then it was great. They combined the stories of Jules Verne and Atlantis together and thereby created something new. I looked at the film from this viewpoint: How would amphibious vehicles look? What does the submarine that they use to dive to Atlantis look like?

Did you also look at the shoes?

It's more about getting a general impression. We found the surface of a material particularly exciting. We thought about how the vehicle - in this case, something slightly reptilian - could be translated into a shoe. I'm not talking about any sort of replica, but a general translation.

A scaly structure?

Not really, more like the exoskeleton along dinosaurs' backs. That's how the Puma collection "New Collection" came about. And with this collection we came to understand that you can work in three dimensions with shoes, like a sculptor for example.

What about the classic spectacular films like "Jenseits von Afrika"?

They give a feeling and emotion but the setting is relatively restricted. I am more interested in the lighting and how they have transformed the story into a picture. How it is visualised. That is something that design constantly deals with.

Can you give an example?

Perhaps the first "Cellerator" shoe, the "Inhale". That came out three years ago. For us it was about blood, veins, muscles and skin.

So horrific?

(laughs) Well, we developed colour combinations which we had never tried before. That was an inevitable result. We wanted to reflect the anatomy of the foot. We then transferred this idea to all product areas: shoes, accessories and textiles.

Where did the inspiration come from?

(laughs) "Body worlds". Lots of our designers saw the exhibition with the bodies in formaldehyde. It's a bit of a tight rope walk because the idea can also come across as a little dubious.

Dubious?

It certainly was for your average Joe Bloggs. He was thinking "what's up with these people?" (laughs) Perverse. Necrophilia. In any case, this was the line that many people were taking. At first it was just an experiment, but we decided to implement it. In principal, it's no different to the visual arts. The artist has his inspiration and converts it into his own medium. It was particularly enjoyable work and at the end of the day, very well done.

"Body worlds" was very controversial in the media. What gave you the confidence that you could meet people's demands by taking this direction?

People today are very aware of their bodies. Everybody wants to be thin, to be muscular in the right places. Considered from this perspective, the exhibition had its own aesthetic. Although it's obviously very much on the edge. But our strategy proved to be the right one. These shoes were the most successful running product that Puma has ever had.

But it was a long journey to this success.

That's true. And you must always consider where you have come from and where you want to go. In the past, Puma was not a world wide brand. For a long time we had a different image in each different land. That was a problem because we didn't have enough influence on licensors or distributors and each one interpreted the product as they wished. And that led to the fact that the brand gave different "messages". In Malaysia they were different to Japan, in Germany different to Italy. With a company of our size, we have to bunch our strength together in order to gain standing.

Today Puma design has something graphic about it.

Exactly. Our customers opinions give us an excellent viewpoint. For a long time we were known as just a rummage table sale product.

Why?

Because we produced millions of PVC shoes. Today we want to manufacture environmentally friendly products. So then we ask ourselves: How can we do that? We can adopt better materials, more elaborate constructions. Nowadays the quality of the product is the benchmark and not whether it is 20% cheaper. And for that there is no marketing, it is something that is simply experienced by our customers.

When did Puma go from family business to AG?

1985. At that time Puma was in its heyday: it had its highest turnover and highest profits. And then the family disagreed. I don't know exactly. But it was a little like "Dallas". They had achieved everything. They were the kings of Herzogenaurach.

Sad. Why don't German families manage to become dynasties like those in France or Italy?

Nobody places any importance on it. Here the aim has been to bring the company into the top rank. Jochen Zeitz and the Gänzers do that superbly at board level. They place a great deal of importance on giving individuals chances and the possibility of a really good position.

How did it come to its current circumstances?

That's a great story. "Regency" is a film company from Hollywood. Its owner used to be a football player in Israel and always wanted to make films. At some point he went to Hollywood and founded an extremely successful film company. He produced films like "JFK" and "LA Confidential". The company earned him so much money that he then wanted to get involved with something completely different. Then he remembered: when he played in the Israeli team, he had worn Puma shoes. And then he began to think: What's up with Puma? Do they have brand potential? Can I do something with them? And then he phoned Jochen Zeitz. They met and immediately got on well. So that's how the current business conditions arose. In 1997 he started with 21 per cent of the shares and later extended that to 32. Today he has 40 per cent.

And how do you see the future of the company?

We're very optimistic. I can't see any reason why it can't continue as positively as it has up until now. We're like the Puma: alert and always ready to spring.

PUMA AND JIL SANDER

Since 1997, the fashion company has newly interpreted classic Puma models. The first model was a new edition of the football boot "King". The current model is exclusively on sale in all shops that promote Jil Sander's fashion.

PUMA – AT A GLANCE

1924 Founding of the Dassler brothers' shoe factory

1931 The Dassler brothers introduce the first tennis shoe

1936 Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in Dassler brothers' shoes.

1948 Founding of the Rodolf Dassler's Puma shoe factory. Introduction of the first Puma football boot "Atom".

1958 For the Football World Cup in Sweden, all Puma shoe models are marked with the Puma form. Players from Sweden and Brazil wear Puma shoes.

1962 At the Football World Cup Pele in Puma shoes is world champion and "player of the tournament".

1966 At the Football World Cup in England, the goalie king Eusebio wears the "King" football boots.

1968 Puma is the first manufacturer to offer sports shoes with Velcro fastenings.

1976 Puma introduces SPA technology. The higher sports heels support the Achilles tendon.

1982 Armin A Dassler invents the Puma "Duoflex" sole.

1984-87 Martina Navratilova wins Wimbledon in Puma shoes and clothing.

1985 Boris Becker wins Wimbledon with Puma shoes and tennis racket

1986 Conversion of Puma KG into an AG. Diego Maradona wins the World Cup title for Argentina in "King" (completed with the famous "Hand of God" goal).

1989 Launching of the cushioning system "Trinomic"

1991 Launching of the high-tech sport shoes with the Puma "Disc" system

1993 The beginning of the re-structuring of the company. At the World Athletics Championships in Stuttgart, Heike Drechsler, Marlene Ottey, Linford Christie and Colin Jackson (the fantastic Puma four) all win gold.

1996 Launching of the new cushioning technology "Cell"

1997 Puma brings the "Cellerator" to the market

2001 Puma launches the "Rudolf Dassler boots" collection in the style of the original Puma football boots from the 40s.