Sneaky Shoes

For us, the visualization of a time when no one wore athletic shoes is difficult, since almost everyone wears them today. The first shoe that resembled what we think of today as an athletic shoe was created in the 1830s in England. The canvas top was bonded to very stiff rubber on the bottom. Because it was supposed to be used for beach footwear, it was called a sand shoe.

The invention of the vulcanization of rubber—the addition of sulfur and other chemicals to natural rubber under high heat—made today’s shoes possible. After undergoing this process, rubber becomes stronger, harder, smoother, and less sticky. It can also be more easily bonded to fabric, such as canvas, an ideal combination for casual shoes.

Around 1892, the U.S. Rubber Company’s Goodyear division came up with comfortable rubber sneakers with canvas tops and called them Keds. By 1917, Keds and Converse All-Stars began mass production of shoes. In Germany, the brand Adidas was invented and production of handmade training shoes began in 1920. Their rubber soles were so quiet that you could sneak up on someone while wearing them, so people called them sneakers.

Today, these shoes are known as sport or athletic shoes, though people usually wear them more for their style than their contribution to athletic performance. It was Michael Jordan who took shoes to a new level of popularity in 1985. In his rookie year in the NBA, Jordan lent his name to the Air Jordan. The brand recognition was immediate, and sales were so tremendous that they were the inspiration for companies to create shoes for other star athletes. The marketing of the “sneaker” has never been the same!