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industrial design fashion ergonomics

Break in one pair of Bones and you could use them forever.

Soled Separately

These new shoes come in two parts—one for style and one for structure.

From skimpy Manolo Blahniks to plush Nikes, shoes are the most fetishized fashion accessory—even the casual collector has a taxonomic variety in the closet. But what if function could be separated from style, and a shoe's exterior skin could be changed on demand? Not long after asking himself this question, Mark Klein, an entrepreneur with a high-tech background, pulled together a team of designers to make such a shoe a reality.

"I had a friend who was a shoe freak, and looking down at his feet one day it just dawned on me that this guy's got eight pairs of the same shoe in different colors," Klein says. He had also noticed a trend toward customization across different industries, from sunglasses with interchangeable lenses to Tivo systems that allow television viewers to control their programming. Sensing an opportunity, he conceived Skins Footwear, a shoe system with two interchangeable parts: an interior structural Bone that provides orthopedic support and a floppy exterior Skin with an integrated sole that can be changed in a matter of seconds.

At the time, Klein was living in Israel (he's now based in New York), where he recruited Kobi Levy, a young design professor at the Bezalel Academy of Art & Design, to explore the concept. Working with mold makers and manufacturers, Levy came up

With this system you would rarely need to adjust to a new pair of shoes: simply slip the orthopedic Bones into any new Skin you like.

with initial prototypes for a Bone consisting of a multi-density thermoplastic polyurethane shell and cushioned foot beds that could slip easily into different Skins. Break in one pair of Bones and you could use them nearly forever, replacing the Skins each time the soles wore out while retaining the exact same fit and feel. But even though Klein and Levy had the functional part figured out, they weren't happy with how the product looked.

Enter New York designer Dror Benshetrit. "We wanted him to stylize the Bone for us," reports Klein, who says he was drawn to Benshetrit's "minimalist" portfolio. "[Levy and I] had developed the Bone to be as anatomically correct as possible, and in doing so we had sort of put aside the aesthetic part." Benshetrit set out to create a simple yet iconic shape that he believed could stand the test of time. "It's very dangerous introducing something innovative to the market," he says. "People might think it's too difficult or weird. So it was really important for me to develop something that was intuitive and logical." Finally Klein called on the fashion expertise of high-end shoe designers Silvano Banfi and Frank Zambrelli (who have previously worked for companies such as Gucci, Bally, and Coach) to oversee a consistent look across the range of Skins.

The company's first collection, manufactured in Italy, is arriving in stores in March, with nine Skin patterns for men and eight for women (each available in numerous colors), starting at \$160 a pair. The Bones will retail for \$50. "It's a product that just seems to make a lot of sense," Klein says. "When people look at it, I want them to scratch their heads and wonder why no one had thought of it before." —Tim McKeough

