

GETTING A SOLID FOOTING

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SHOESBy Alan J. Flusser Alan J. Flusser is a men's-wear designer and the author of "Making the Man," from which this excerpt was taken. It will be published this month by Simon & Schuster. Copyright c 1981 by Alan J. Flusser fashion authorities have long been in agreement that shoes can be the quickest giveaway to a man's style sense and social position. George Frazier, former columnist for Esquire

magazine and The Boston Globe, would often remark, "Wanna know if a guy is well dressed? Look down." Diana Vreeland, Frazier's counterpart in the women's fashion world, now head of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, concurs. Speaking of developing a wardrobe, she advises, "First, I'd put money into shoes. No variety, just something I could wear with everything. Marvelous shoes and boots. Whatever it is you wear, I think shoes are terribly important."

Shoes do tell much about the person wearing them. A man who buys fine leather shoes today shows he respects quality, that he has confidence in his taste and in his future. So don't let others judge you wrongly merely because you tried to save a few bucks on your shoes. It is true that buying a fine pair of shoes has become an expensive proposition. Top-quality leather skins are in sharp demand; labor costs have skyrocketed. But like other items of quality apparel, a well-made pair of shoes will give years of fine service if they are properly cared for. They must be a design, however, that remains stylish throughout the years.

Eric Lobb, the great-grandson of the legendary English bootmaker John Lobb, recently published a book about his work entitled "The Last Must Come First." The last is the wooden form around which a shoe is made; hence, also a reference to the shape of the shoe itself. Lobb's pun, which was directed at the art of custom shoemaking, is actually a good guide for buying ready-made shoes. Examine first the last, or the shape of the shoe.

The shape of a shoe should follow as closely as possible the actual shape of your own foot. The foot is not a particularly attractive feature of the anatomy, and a well-styled shoe will work to diminish its ungainliness by making it appear sleeker and smaller. Think of the way a glove fits the hand. There are no excess bulges or gaps. A shoe should be cut similarly; no bulbous toes or crevices in front, a smooth line of leather following closely along the instep down to the edge of the toe. A custom-made shoe is designed to follow the shape of the foot so closely that the outside line and sole is curved (like the foot), while the inside (instead of being symmetrical) follows an almost straight line. A last of this sort in a ready-made shoe is a sign of elegance and knowledge on the part of the manufacturer.

Traditionally, there have been two sources that have supplied the United States with its better-quality shoes - England and Italy. The Italian ready-to-wear men's shoe industry began as an offshoot of the women's industry. It brought with it an interest in lightness and softness, criteria that have always ruled the women's shoe market: The fine calfskin uppers are glued to the leather soles with no weltings and no inner soles to encumber the sleek look. They are made almost completely by hand with a craftsmanship and finesse that is unequaled elsewhere. The modern British men's shoe industry came into its own immediately following the end of World War I, those companies having lost their Army boot contracts turning to the commercial marketplace. The qualities of strength and durability which made their boots legendary during the war were now directed toward shoes for the consumer. Unlike people in Italy, where the climate is generally dry and warm (except in Milan), the English have always had to contend with the worst elements of rain and cold. Their shoes were thus constructed of heavier skin which was not glued to the sole but sewn with a leather welt. British manufacturers, moreover, inserted a second leather sole - a middle sole between the outer sole and the inner - to make the shoes even more durable.

All of this interest in protection and durability gives the British shoe and its American offspring a fuller, more solid look. And yet I must confess I do prefer it to the Italian shoe. Italian shoes have always seemed to me not quite masculine enough in their appearance. Paired with a nubby tweed suit or even a fine flannel, they seem almost dainty, without any of the solidity one might expect (or want) to support a man's foot. There is no doubt that the shoes in Italy are more creatively made, and yet the balance is just not right for the classic look we have been delineating.

Furthermore, Americans must contend with climatic conditions that rival England's. And Italian shoes, though they can look marvelous on a sunny day, literally fall to pieces in rain or snow. Within moments of walking on a damp street one can begin to feel moisture creeping into one's shoes. They are pleasant enough to stroll in, but definitely not advisable for use in long walks. They offer little support or protection, and only under rare circumstances will they last five years.

In selecting shoes for a durable, long-term wardrobe, shoes that are certain to be stylish for many years to come, I would seek first black or brown English-styled brogues with plain fronts or medallion toe caps. Either one is a good, all-purpose shoe, appropriate for business or less formal, after-5 activity. Make certain, however, that the sole is clipped close to the edge of the leather upper.

A brown or black tassel loafer of English design is another fine all-purpose shoe. The brown tassel looks particularly well with a sport jacket and trousers, but don't be unnecessarily cowed by the old dictum that says only black shoes should be worn with dark suits. For years now many Americans, particularly New Englanders, have been wearing high-polished brown shoes with dark suits. They can look marvelous together and it is now a combination that has become accepted almost everywhere, except perhaps in England, where the traditionalists still hold sway. There, for a more elegant look, the men match a dark suit with a pair of brown suede shoes. This, too, is a marvelous look.

In the summer, for a more colorful feeling there is nothing like a brown-and-white or black-and-white blucher. Unfortunately most of those being made today use a synthetic substitute for the white instead of the traditional buckskin. These I would shy away from, as I would from most two-tone shoes. The chance of finding a classy one is infinitesimally small.

THE FIT. Ever since the Government banned the use of X-ray machines, fitting a pair of shoes has become strictly a matter of feel. There are no real secrets in this regard. The size that is comfortable for you is the size to buy. However, most men's right foot is slightly different in size from the left one. If that is the case, always buy the shoe to fit the larger foot. Remember, though, that certain soft leathers, particularly in loafers, will stretch up to a half-size. A good fit should allow you to wiggle your toes while the heel fits snugly into the back of the shoe. There should be good support underneath the instep. **CARE.** The best way to care for a pair of leather shoes is to keep them polished and to give them ample rest. Polish protects the leather from water and from scuffing. Many men buy new shoes and are so eager to wear them that they forget to rub on a first coat of polish. Before they know it, they have put a scuff in the leather that is there for life, or they have

allowed the skin to dry out. A heavy douse of water on unprotected leather can weaken the strength of the delicate upper skin. A good coat of saddle soap or shoe polish can protect against all of these eventualities. (Saddle soap will clean leather and keep it supple. However, for a bright luster, you must use polish afterward.)

The sole must also work to lighten the effect of the shoe. A heavy welted sole or double soles on a shoe make the foot appear thick and inelegant. The double-soled shoes that many businessmen wear today, either in a heavy grain leather or with wingtip perforations, were marketed after World War II by manufacturers who based their design on Army issue.

These shoes seem really more appropriate for storming an enemy village than for strolling along a city street. Look for a shoe with a sole no thicker than one-quarter inch. The heels should be low and follow the line of the shoe. They should not be designed as lifts. Most importantly, both sole and heel should be clipped close to the edge of the shoe with no obvious welt around the outside. The sole's function is simply protection and support. It should not interfere with the shoe's shape or be overly visible.

The vamp, on the other hand, is what one sees most on a shoe. It is the piece of leather that covers the top of the foot. By keeping this piece of leather low on the instep, the front of the shoe will appear shorter, making the entire foot seem smaller. This deaccentuation of length gives the foot a sleeker look. Especially with tapered-bottom trousers, one wants to minimize the boatlike effect of any shoe. Naturally, the vamp should not be cut so low that the shoe can easily fall off. It can, however, come close to resembling a man's slipper.

In sum, a man should look to purchase only those shoes that have a small, well-shaped toe, thin, closely clipped soles and heels and a short vamp. These are the shoes that will give feet the most esthetically pleasing look.

Leather absorbs moisture. This is what allows it to stretch and why it is so important for shoes to be given time to rest. Never wear a pair of leather shoes for more than one day at a time. Leather breathes like cotton or wool. It needs at least day or two to dry out, to release trapped moisture and return to its original shape.

By alternating the shoes you wear, and placing them in shoe trees, there is no limit on the years they will last. Worn day after day, the skin becomes moldy and attenuated until finally the suppleness disappears and the leather begins to crack. Leather is a skin. Treat it with the respect and care you give your own.

DETAILS. More than any other factor, it is the skin used in constructing the upper part of the shoe that determines the price of the shoe. The real difference between a \$50 shoe and a \$150 shoe is in the quality of the leather. Shoes today are made from kidskin, calfskin, cowhide or suede. More exotic leathers, such as alligator and other reptiles, have been regulated strictly in the United States, though lizard and ostrich are still widely available.

The softer, more supple the leather, the higher the quality. Supple leather will last longer as it does not easily crack. Its lighter appearance makes a shoe more elegant. Such leather generally comes from smaller animals, kids and calves, which means there is less of it, hence its higher price. Before you purchase a high-priced shoe, feel the leather. Bend the shoe and watch how the leather moves. It should be soft and flexible and return quickly to its original shape.

SOLES AND LININGS. The surest marks of a fine quality shoe are leather soles and heels and leather linings within the shoe. It is said that a man exerts as much pressure on the soles of his feet when walking as does an elephant. Whether or not this is completely accurate, the pressure per square inch is nevertheless enormous. The sole provides a kind of shock absorber. Good leather does this better than almost any other suitable material. A leather heel provides further cushioning with just enough give to make walking pleasant. Rubber soles give as well but because they will not slide on pavement, friction is built up when you walk. Over a period of time this can make your feet hot and uncomfortable.

Inside the shoe, the extra layer of leather that covers the interior seams offers further protection from the cold and gives greater structural support to the shoe. It also increases the shoe's lifespan. Esthetically, a leather inner lining is a handsome detail that separates the fine quality shoe from the mass-market model.

THE WAIST. The waist is the narrow part of the last where the front and back of the shoes come together under the instep. Like the vamp, a small waist can be helpful in creating the appearance of a more elegant shoe. Instead of having a block look, a small-waisted shoe curves smoothly in and then out, giving a cleaner, more streamlined look.

VAMP DECORATIONS. Loafers with buckles or chains across the vamp have become increasingly popular since the Gucci loafer was first marketed in the United States 15 years ago. One should be careful, however, not to allow these gold or silver decorations to become so large or gaudy that they destroy the integration of a man's look by drawing immediate attention to his shoes. More effective as vamp decorations are the leather penny saddle or tassels. These work to break up the vamp, thus making it and the shoe look smaller and finer. And yet, because they are made of the same color leather as the shoe, they are not so obvious as to attract undue attention.

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