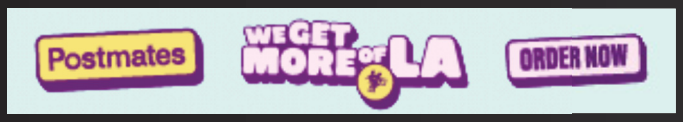

SNEAKERS

The Designer Behind the Nike Benassi Slide Is Changing Slip-On Footwear

Andreas Harlow spent over 20 years at Nike. Now he's working at Kizik and hoping to bring some of the magic there.

BY MATT WELTY

MARCH 10, 2025

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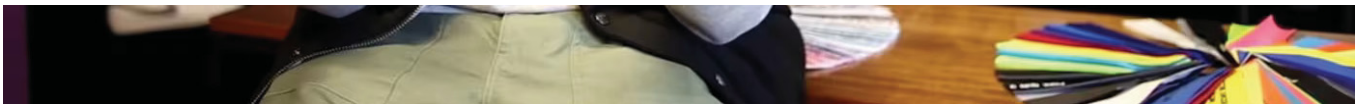

Andreas Harlow during his tenure at Nike. Via YouTube

Few people are deserving of the title shoe dog. Andreas Harlow is one of them. His career started back in New Zealand in the '90s, and then his fortunes took a turn when his friends convinced him to come out to Portland to explore an opportunity to work at Nike in 2002. He'd go on to spend over 20 years working across the org, touching all facets of the business.

Harlow's seen it all. He was there for the early days of Nike Sportswear, designed the Nike Benassi slide, worked on Nike Considered, Nike Presto, and even helped on the Nike Air Yeezy 2. He was the global product leader for the NikeID customization program and also worked on basketball, performance footwear, and running. And in 2020 he worked his way up to VP of footwear design at Jordan Brand, working directly with Michael Jordan himself.

"I think still there's a nervousness every time [you meet with him], but a good one, one that just makes sure you're sharp and on your game," Harlow says of Jordan.

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After leaving Nike in 2024 and sitting out a few months to satisfy a non-compete agreement, Harlow was announced as the SVP of product design at Kizik, a brand that specializes in hands-free, slip-on footwear.

The story of Kizik is interesting because even if you haven't heard of the brand yet, you know of its technology. That's because Nike licensed one of Kizik's main innovations for the Nike FlyEase line of sneakers.

This new challenge—building Kizik into a force in the industry—has Harlow excited. Working with a brand that doesn't have a steeped history and lofty expectations from the consumers to stay true to the past is almost like a blank canvas.

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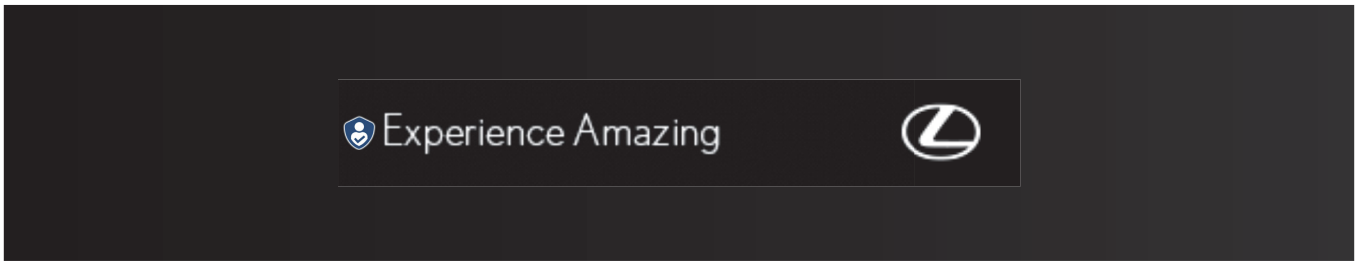

“It feels like there are more creative opportunities because, yeah, you're doing a lot of stuff from a blank sheet of paper. And in a lot of ways it's sort of the opposite of what we had going on at Jordan and Nike,” says Harlow. “And then when you go to a smaller organization, you can span multiple channels. Your impact and input can be really broad. And it's, I think, a blessing and a curse. For now, for me at least, it seems more of a bigger opportunity than a headache.”

Harlow says pretty soon, you’ll start to see the stuff he’s worked on for Kizik hit the market. For now, we spoke to him to take a trip down memory lane and get a look at the career of someone who’s dedicated their life to leather and rubber.

How did you get in at Nike at first?

I had a bit of experience with some other brands and done a bit of freelance footwear design work as well. And it was brands like Birkenstock, Burton Snowboards, Etnies, which is Sole Technology, and then Hi-Tek hiking boots and Magnum service boots.

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And then, yeah, as luck would have it, friends of friends just contacted me and were saying, "Maybe next time you come out to Portland, come up and visit us and chat about it." And so we did that, and one thing kind of led to another, and I joined Nike. It wasn't called this back then, but I joined the Nike Sportswear team and was a founding member of that. So, that was sort of my entry into Nike, which was awesome.

Do you remember the first shoe you did there under Sportswear?
Yeah. I was initially hired to work on Prestos, believe it or not. And the original Presto had already been designed by that point by Bob Mervar and the team there, and so our job was to create a whole product line of Presto. I think people were seeing it as sort of a category. So, yeah, there was a bunch of Presto products. There was a training shoe, running shoe, trail running. Those were the first ones, and then I did a bunch of Nike boots around that time as well, which was awesome. And then all the Sportswear stuff and hybrids and what have you.

Was it crazy at that time working on such a wide variety of product, because usually, it feels like maybe a designer works on a singular domain within footwear, like just running shoes or just training shoes?
Well, it was kind of mind-blowing in some ways because, yeah, we were used to being much more focused, although I had experienced designing different kinds of products, but it was always for brands that sort of did one or two things. So, yeah, it was pretty awesome. And, looking back at it, in many ways, it was a pretty unique opportunity. At that time, Sportswear wasn't really a well-known category or thing. Nike was still very focused on sport categories, and then they would have lifestyle components of those categories, so this was grouping all of that together. And, yeah, from a design perspective, it's just an amazing opportunity to just work on this plethora of different types of product and get educated on them both in the cultural sense and also in the technical design sense.

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THE NIKE BENASSI SLIDE. VIA EBAY

We spent a lot of time going out to different places and trying to understand those communities and then how to build products for them. And, knowing that lifestyle was a real opportunity, whether it was from Air Force 1s or Max 1s or doing color and material and all those kinds of products, yeah, all the way through to creating these new ones. That was a fun time. Yeah, it felt like a hundred miles an hour all the time.

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What was it like then being at the earliest stage of a brand marketing to what you'd call sneakerheads?

I would say it was really a mixed bag. I remember thinking back in that time that there was a pretty large group of people in the industry. and at Nike at that time, that didn't really want to admit to doing this, or really maybe didn't really believe in it. I think the prevailing thought was that, "Hey, you create products for sport, and then they get adopted by culture." And I think that's totally right, but at some point it did take a group of us to say, "Hey, maybe if we want to be really good at this, we should sort of focus on it and not just hope for the best, but go out and try to understand that sneakerhead community." As an example, try and understand what they really want and value and love, and then we can go and do that in a really smart and focused way.

So it was a real mixed bag, I think, of the two cultures colliding, and that there was some people who would even come by my desk and our area, and they're like, "Hey, you guys really shouldn't be doing that." But then when the sales numbers came through, those very same people were quite quick to say, "Well, we'll take

that money. It's good, and it's great. Look, we've got some best sellers on our hands, and people are super excited about the product." So one by one, I think those opinions changed, but it probably took about maybe five years, something like that.

What would you say is your proudest achievement design wise, as far as a singular shoe goes during that period?

There's a couple that pop up. So we worked on a project called Nike Considered for a while, and I was really involved in initiating that and then designing the first couple of seasons with the team. And that was all about trying to push the boundaries of creating more sustainable footwear product, or environmentally sustainable. So that to me was a personal favorite. I don't think it ever gained cult status like some of the other Nike Sportswear products, but it did move the needle in terms of changing environmentally sustainable design at Nike. And then we actually shared a lot of that information with the industry pretty freely. So that one felt like a big sort of personal win, and just something that felt right, was great in terms of design as well. So that was huge. So Nike Considered product would be one.

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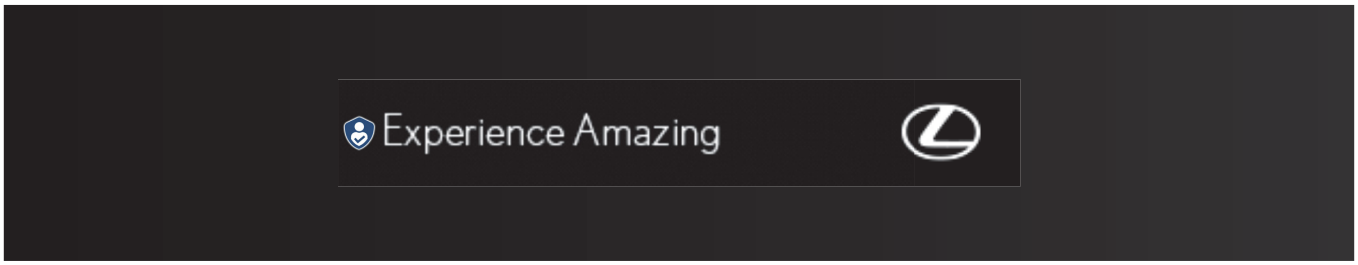

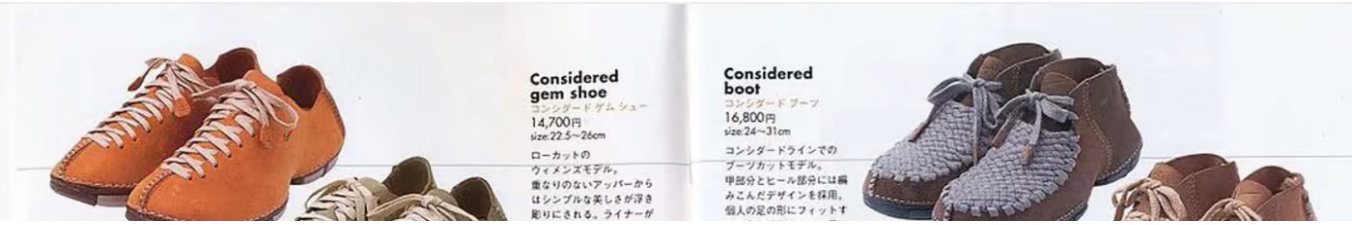

NIKE'S CONSIDERED COLLECTION. VIA SOME STUDIES

Maybe at the other end of the spectrum, the product I designed that's probably sold the most, and it's still actually a bestseller, would be the Nike Benassi slide, which went on to be a big seller, still is, and have its own kind of cult status in a sort of an offline way. And there are two opposite ends of the spectrum.

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And then maybe a third part of that triangle is—this goes back a way—but we designed some of the first Nike hybrids, which were one sneaker matched up with another sneaker. And at the time, that was pretty novel. I think you'd see a lot of that going on in the music industry, but in sneakers it wasn't really done. So that was pretty cool as well. And that was just, I guess creatively more about exercising and developing the ability to, I guess, use taste to put things together and try and create something new out of two existing things, two or more.

What was it like going from Nike to Jordan Brand and being there?

Jordan Brand's really interesting because while it's part of Nike and uses a lot of Nike processes and resources, it really has its own culture, and rightly so. I think the move over there really, it felt a lot more like family. The environment there is sort of more tight-knit, it's a smaller organization, it feels a little bit more like family. There's just a different vibe there.

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And then of course you have Michael, who's the figurehead at the top of that, which, his persona and attitude and purpose and sort of point of view on the world just pervades the whole brand, which is incredible. And it's an amazing brand to sort of design within, because it comes with all this energy and history and all that. So that was probably the biggest change, just the day-to-day culture of the two branches. It feels a bit different.

Do you remember your first meeting with Michael about product?
Yeah, actually it was over Covid, so over lockdown. So we were all in Zoom land. And yeah, I do, I distinctly remember it. Yeah, it was amazing. And then I met with him prior to that and through Nike and of the events he's come and done on campus. But that was a big one where we were just getting right down into it and we were talking about the nitty gritty of product, shape, material, color, all that. And yeah, he's super sharp on all that and very charismatic and very clear with his point of view. So it's amazing having someone like that, both leading the brand and then also right down into, invested in all the details of the product.

Was there a nervous sense of, you're showing this to Michael Jordan, and then you're waiting for his feedback because it's going to be more than just a random guy who works at Nike who has a role?
I'll be totally honest. Yeah, totally. Every time, yeah. And partly because he is so versed in everything that we do, knows the history. I mean, he created a lot of the history. And then he totally gets product, and he's worked with the best over the years, whether it's Tinker or any of the others or development crew.

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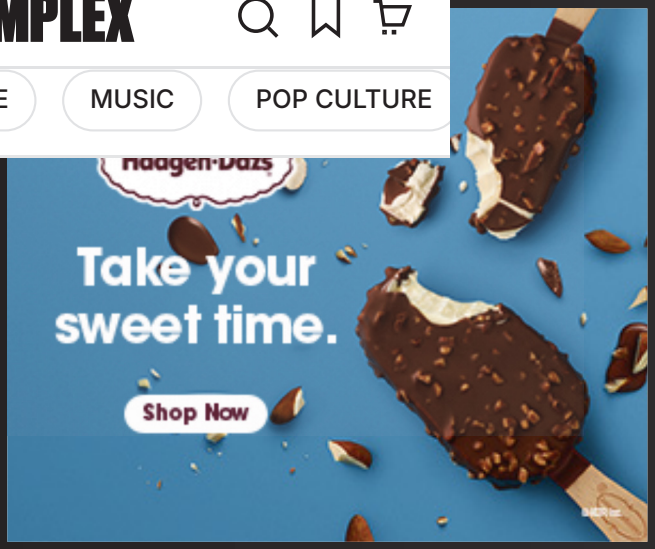
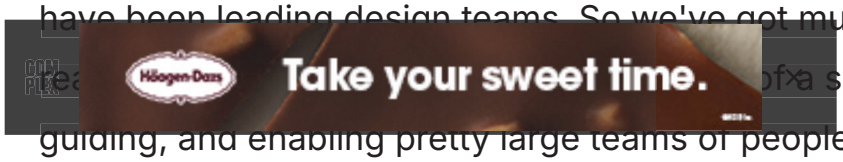


So yeah, I'll be honest, totally, I think still there's a nervousness every time, but a good one, one that just makes sure you're sharp and on your game. But yeah, you always do worry. You don't want to disappoint, you don't want to go wrong.

I found him to be very sharp and on it and actually really encouraging with pushing the boundaries creatively and making sure we're pushing them in the right direction. He's always got a strong point of view on that, which is the most you could hope for in any collaborator and leader in that sense.

And what do you think your biggest standout product was at your time at Jordan Brand as far as something you designed?

I'll maybe back it up a little bit. So my role at Jordan, and most of the roles at Nike, have been leading design teams. So we've got multiple people on this. So it's not really about a shoe, it's more around leading, guiding, and enabling pretty large teams of people to do all this stuff. And so there'll be product design experts, there'll be color material experts. We have people that work on brand and story. So my job's sort of in the middle of all that.



Trying to think of singling out a specific project. Oh boy—there's so many at Jordan, because we do both sides of the coin. There's obviously a big lifestyle and retro business, and then the performance business on the other side of that. The ones that honestly just stand out to me, and this is probably coming from a product design perspective, I think would be the last couple of Tatum shoes and the last couple of Luka shoes.

So those have been great, and those two athletes have been just amazing to work with. And then Michael's been really involved as well, which has just kept propelling the thing forward. And it's to the point where he is obviously involved in signing those athletes, but then also he's weighing in on the product and making sure it maps to the brand. So yeah, I think the last couple of Tatums and Lukas have been really great.

And then the one, actually one that's just recent, that's probably, yeah, I mean it's still in the media right now, is the partnership with Nigel Sylvester, just that ended up really amazing. It started off just being a bit of a conversation about, "Hey, we're thinking about, we might go in this direction a little bit towards bike life." And we went out and met with a bunch of folks and tried to understand that part of the lifestyle as well as with his performance in a way too. And then he just switched onto it immediately. So that was incredible. And then he just weighed in on the storytelling and tweaks to the product and how to refine it and make it just, I think, perfect both in terms of performance as well as style. And so that one was, it just turned out amazing when all the things, everything sort of lines up really nicely.

How'd you make the transition to Kizik, and how's that been?

I've been familiar with Kizik for quite a while because we first connected with them while I was at Nike and we're engaged in licensing some of the Kizik patterns. So I was familiar with the innovation, the pattern work, and even some of the

construction and design ethos behind it.

That was awesome. And what I recognized at that point was the Kizik Hands Free Labs team had solved a very real problem, and provided a very real consumer benefit to product. So the job at Nike was trying to figure out how to get that into multiple products in the right way.

So then later on when I started talking with the Kizik guys a bit more often, a bit more seriously about what they had going on over there, it just seemed like a great opportunity to jump in on a company that really holds a lot of valuable IP, but was sort of in the early stages of turning all that IP into a legitimate brand with a more expansive product line. So that was really the foundation for joining them, jumping in at that early moment, and hopefully bringing some of my leadership and creative experience from a couple of decades in the footwear industry, actually, it's close to three now. And get in at the ground level. And we're not exactly a startup, but I think in many ways it's sort of a startup business. So yeah, I think that's the excitement really, that sets the foundation there.

Is it freeing in some sense that when you're at Nike, you're working with all these icons of footwear design, like you say, recreating Presto, Air Force One, Air Max, and there's a lot of pressure, Air Jordan, to make those products. But when you're at a brand that isn't steeped in history, you can do what you want a little bit more.

Yeah, beautifully said. Yeah. I think that's definitely part of the excitement of jumping in and joining a smaller brand. Yeah, I guess it feels like there are more creative opportunities because yeah, you're doing a lot of stuff from a blank sheet of paper. And in a lot of ways it's sort of the opposite of what we had going on at Jordan and Nike. Those are very, they're big businesses, they're very well organized. There are a lot of precedents. So your job is just try and with focus,

drive that stuff forward and into new places, but it very much is in channels. And then when you go to a smaller organization, you can span multiple channels. Your impact and input can be really broad. And it's, I think, a blessing and a curse. For now, for me at least it seems more of a bigger opportunity than a headache. So that's the thing that really motivates me.

And then the other one is taking this IP and bringing it to as many people in as many different product types as possible. I get fired up on that. And the thing that motivates me as a designer is somehow making the world just a little bit better place and a little bit more fulfilling for people and customers and consumers. And if you can do that with using an invention, turning an invention into a brand, I mean, that's a dream come true.

The last thing I want to ask you is just, so what can people expect from your work at Kizik moving forward, or look forward to?

So the goal is to bring creative direction and experience to the Kizik brand. Build out that product line using all that experience, attracting talent, etc. And then it's in very simple terms, it's sort of what I said before, and that is bringing this innovation and benefit to a new audience and to as many people in as many product types as possible. And I really believe, and it's the thing that I think motivates a lot of us, is I really believe it's a benefit to people that maybe a lot of people haven't considered, but we're solving a very real problem. And I think you could argue that putting shoes on and off a bit easier, or in this case very easily, actually probably brings a bigger performance gain to most people's lives than a lot of the performance product I've worked on over the years. So I'm super excited about that.

Pretty soon I think you'll see some of that stuff start to hit. I can't talk about it right now, but out in the market. And yeah, we're going to start in the places we know and we're good at, and then we are trying to push out into some more performance zones as well as getting a bit more targeted on the lifestyle and casual stuff. And then you'll see us in, well, we're already kind of in the outdoor world a little bit with some of the boot products that we just launched.

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