

Outsourcing makes Chucks feel a bit less comfortable

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Where other people rely on a calendar to mark the seasons, I prefer gym shoes, Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars to be precise. Four seasons equal four pairs of shoes. It has been that way with me for a very long time.

On the South Side of my youth, shoes made the boy. At an early age we chose between Keds and Converse. Thus began the lifelong task of self-definition. My friend Frank wore black, so I took white. Bob liked high-tops, I stuck with low-tops.

Know the shoe to know the person.

Taylor was the Hoosier's Hoosier, born in 1901 in rural Brown County south of Indianapolis. After his (stellar, of course) high school career, Taylor barnstormed and played what professional ball there was in that era before the NBA.

One day in 1921, he walked into Converse Shoes' Chicago sales office to offer suggestions on how the company could improve its All-Star sneaker. Two years later, Converse added Taylor's autograph to the shoes' "All-Star" patch. Gratitude mixed with savvy marketing.

Taylor repaid the favor during the next 35 years by giving basketball clinics across the United States, South America and Europe. He combined Jonathan Edwards with Henry Ford to preach the virtues of doing things the right way with the help of the right product.

The old player possessed courtside charm, stemming in part from his ability to drop-kick a basketball through the net from 50 feet away.

Converse Chuck Taylors also have excelled as an emblem of dissent. Somewhere there must be pictures of sitcom beatnik Maynard G. Krebs and Abbie Hoffman wearing All-Stars.

George Harrison and Bruce Springsteen have worn Converse, along with Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa and Twyla Tharp's dancers in "Moving Out."

The editor of Details Magazine, a man profoundly hip down to his untucked shirttails, is fond of low-tops. We share a bond. He may even feel bad for all the workers Converse let go in January 2001.

The move was part of a bankruptcy reorganization. The 1990s had proven to be too much Nike and not enough Chuck Taylor. To its credit, Converse managed a Chrysler-like turnaround. The company has also stopped making shoes in the U.S., which was the other reason I so loved my low-cuts.

Converse operated plants in Mission and Lumberton that employed a total of 1,400 workers. I live in Berwyn, where the median household income is \$44,000. That is \$13,000 more than Mission and \$17,000 better than what a family can expect to make in Lumberton.

So it goes in the unsettled world of globalization.

The Converse Web site ignores such unpleasantness and accentuates the positive, such as a young Julius Erving buying his first pair of Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars in 1957. They cost \$3.95. Factoring in inflation, that would have come out to \$25.53 in 2003. As I recall, that is what an American-made pair of Converse All-Stars cost in 1999. The pair I bought July 19 set me back \$37.99, plus tax. How odd, given that Converse moved production to China. CBS News reported in March the average factory wage there had yet to crack \$2--a day.

My understanding of economics is that lower costs are passed on to the consumer. But these are not my old Converse All-Stars. Apparently, they're not Chuck Taylor's, either.

Douglas Bukowski is the author of the upcoming "Pictures of Home."

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