

Can Sneakers Become Sustainable?

COMPANIES ARE COMING UP WITH INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO MAKE THE INDUSTRY MORE ECO-CONSCIOUS.

By Ashley Mateo

The life cycle of a running sneaker has typically been pretty linear: A company gets the raw materials, uses them to develop finished parts (like the midsole or the upper), assembles those into a shoe, then sells that shoe to a customer, who wears it until it breaks down—and then throws it out.

What if, instead of tossing your shoes to rot in a landfill for the next 100 years, you could send them back to the company knowing that a) your used kicks will be recycled into a fresh pair, and b) you get a fresh pair in exchange?

That's the idea behind On Running's Cyclon shoe, launching this fall. Instead of a one-time cost, buyers pay \$30 a month and can exchange their sneakers twice a year (On says they last up to 600 kilometers, or six to nine months). That works out to around \$180 per pair—a similar price to performance shoes.

When the new pair arrives, you send the old ones back in the same box; On will then repurpose the raw materials to create new Cyclon shoes. The Cyclon is fully recyclable: The single-unit upper is made from an undyed yarn derived from castor beans, while the bottom unit is made of the same material family, allowing the whole shoe to be recycled without having to separate the pieces.

"We're taking our first steps in challenging linear life cycles," says Francois-Xavier Dosne, head of innovation business strategy at On. "In a circular system, products are designed to be reused instead of ending up in a landfill. A circular system keeps material in use for as long as possible."

Dosne says this business model will extend to more shoes: "It's invigorating to channel our athletic spirit in the race toward a more sustainable future."

And a race it is: While the Cyclon may be the first "subscription" shoe, On wasn't the first brand to debut a recyclable

sneaker. In April, Salomon released the Index.01, a unisex road shoe. Owners print a free return shipping label from the company's website and send the used shoes to the closest collection center, where they're recycled through regional programs and reused in future products.

Adidas unveiled Futurecraft.Loop in 2019, a fully recyclable prototype made from a single material and no glue, says Kimia Yaraghchian, a product manager focusing on sustainable initiatives. Consumers scan a QR code to get a pre-paid return label for the worn shoes; Adidas then upcycles the components into the next generation of shoes.

The "Made to Be Remade" Ultraboost, the commercial version, is available now. You shouldn't notice a difference between the sustainable and traditional versions. "There's no way we would launch a product that doesn't pass the standards of a similar shoe," says Yaraghchian. "Sustainability can not be a sacrifice to anything else, otherwise consumers won't trust the product—and then we won't be able to implement that bigger change."

Holistic sustainability (responsible sourcing, waste elimination, carbon footprint reduction) is the real key, which is why some brands are focusing on adapting their most popular running shoes to be environmentally friendly (and, eventually, fully recyclable). Recently, Brooks made the Ghost 14 the brand's first carbon-neutral shoe. It doesn't equal recyclable, but it's a first step, says David Kemp, senior manager of corporate responsibility.



Almost all the shoe's upper textiles have been converted to a minimum of 30 percent recycled polyester (many are 100 percent). The brand plans to launch a take-back program in 2022, and their first "circular performance running footwear by 2030," says Kemp.

As committed as these brands are to sustainability, there's one element they can't control: getting people to send back the shoes. That requires a shift in behavior on the part of consumers—i.e., you. "It's so important that we create this mindset that every product is valuable," says Yaraghchian. "Even at the end of its life, it can be reused—it's not trash."