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The edge on Football Boots

Over the years the demands and expectations of a footballer's on field performance have increased dramatically. Players now need equipment that is reliable and enhances their skills and performance. Add to this the footballer's demand for comfort, fit and traction on the grass playing surface.

The lower extremity of the body is the most commonly injured area on a footballer, accounting for up to 71% of all football-related injuries. With a footballer running in excess of 15km in a game, overuse injuries, such as Achilles tendonitis have become a common cause of players seeking medical and trainer attention. The playing surface and footwear interaction is seen as a possible contributor to injury.

Football boot sales and production is relatively small for Australia and only a small proportion of this is returned for research, design and reinvestment. This lack of investment has been reflected in the past in Australia by a lack of development of boots for the unique activities involved in Australian Rules Football.

To fully understand where the technology of football boots is today, we need to first look at their journey to this point.

The boot design

The original football boot was one derived from Australian rules' cousins rugby and soccer. Until recently the majority of boots on the market in Australia marketed as football boots for Australian rules were in fact soccer boots. Boots style names like Brasilia are evidence of this. Today research has lead to Australian Rules football boots becomes closer and closer to it's running shoe brothers.

The studs

In the 1970s to overcome traction problems, various adjustable studding formats and positions were introduced. These studs were often positioned under the ball of the foot and many players found them uncomfortable and painful to wear, especially on hard grounds. Today, the screw-in stud boot tends to cause more muscle fatigue and is the least popular.

La Trobe University research recently noted that stud and cleat positioning on football boots could affect the pressures that are exerted under the foot of an athlete and that there is a possible role of the football boot to contribute to injury patterns in an athlete. In turn, improved football boots may be developed, with the aim of increasing wearer comfort and minimising injury during play.

Boots like the Blades were developed to reduce this irritation on the ball of the foot. The innovation of new cleat designs spread pressures under the foot and made boots more versatile during the periods when grounds were harder. Asics developed an out sole design specifically for Australian Rules Football in the 1990's that allowed rotational movement when the foot was planted on the ground. This was aimed at reducing knee injuries caused by the foot locked on the e ground and player rotating and accelerating off, as may happen after a mark or receiving a handpass.

These outsole designs are now becoming more popular and more developed allowing greater player performance. The added flexibility allows the forefoot to achieve natural propulsion that is so important in a football boot. And no stud is positioned directly under the first metatarsal or ball of the foot, something that will make a great many players happy.

The midsole

Up until recently, football boots were constructed with the sole of the boot adhered to the upper without a midsole, which is seen in running soles and most street shoes. This midsole in running shoes is the foam like material between the sole and the show upper. It provides the shoe with its shock absorption and motion control. Many achilles and hamstring problems were seen to b contributed to by this lack of midsole as the achilles tendon was under tension with the heel flat on the ground.

Recognising that the old-fashioned flat-platform football boot was a contributing factor in such injuries, one running shoe and boot company Asics re-examined the age-old philosophies of what a football boot should look like, and more importantly, how it should perform. Through their research of the Australian game they developed the radical GEL Lethal range of football boots in the 1990's.

By adding a running shoe like midsole and a uniquely Australian rules orientated outsole Ascis tests found, the GEL Lethal does place less stress and strain on muscles and ligaments in the legs when compared to the traditional boot, where these muscles and ligaments are required to work much harder to enable the player to perform.

This midsole "wedge" has been now taken on by many boot manufacturers to the benefit of players.

So what's best for you?

Ultimately, there is no "ideal" boot for all conditions. It depends on a lot of factors. Let's look at the main three; your foot, the surface and your game.

The foot shape will determine which boots you will fit into and are comfortable. Some are wider than others and some are deeper than others. Some biomechanical issues may indicate that you need a more supportive shoe or a more shock absorbing boot. Anatomical features (boney bumps etc.) may mean some boots suit more than others.

The conditions of the playing surface change throughout the year and may mean different boots are required for different surface types. These include pre-season training on summer's hard grounds, to moulded or wedged shaped soles for general use providing more uniform pressure distribution for weight bearing, to the screw-in stop boot for maximum traction in the depths of winter.

Your games can make a difference too. If you run all day on the ground then a lighter more supportive is better. While more localised players may seek and boot that enhances kicking sensitivity.

The best option is to look for boots at a good sports retailer that have staff that are trained in identifying foot features and that know the features of each of the boots they have available. Brand is irrelevant. The shop staff will know what boot best suits your foot and game and then provide you with a selection of boots to try and feel which fits best. To make sure check if they will offer a fit guarantee, that way you can't lose.

Have an awesome season!