SHOE DOG

PHIL KNIGHT

'A refreshingly honest reminder of what the path to business success really looks like... It's an amazing tale.' Bill Gates

'Candid, funny, suspenseful, literary — this is a memoir for people who love sport, but above all it's a memoir for people who love memoirs.'

ANDRE AGASSI,
eight-time Grand Slam champion

Fresh out of business school, Phil Knight borrowed fifty dollars from his father and launched a company with one simple mission: import high-quality, low-cost running shoes from Japan. Selling the shoes from the boot of his car, Knight grossed $8000 that first year, 1963. Today, Nike's annual sales top $30 billion. In this age of start-ups, Knight's Nike is the gold standard, and its swoosh is instantly recognized in every corner of the world.

But Knight, the man behind the swoosh, has always been a mystery. Now, in a memoir that's surprising, humble, unfettered, funny and beautifully crafted, he tells his story at last.

Knight details the many terrifying risks he encountered along the way, the crushing setbacks, the ruthless competitors and hostile bankers — as well as his many thrilling triumphs and narrow escapes. Above all, he recalls the foundational relationships that formed the heart and soul of Nike. Together, harnessing the electrifying power of a bold vision and a shared belief in the redemptive, transformative power of sports, they created a brand, and a culture, that changed everything.

'An inspiration for everyone with an unconventional dream.'

MICHAEL SPENCE,
Nobel Prize-winning economist
soles. Air Jordan changed Nike, took us to the next level, and the
next, but it changed Strasser, too. He felt that he should no longer be
taking orders from anyone, including me. Especially me. We clashed,
too many times, and he quit.

It might have been okay if he’d just quit. But he went to work for
Adidas. An intolerable betrayal. I never forgave him. (Though I did
recently—happily, proudly—hire his daughter, Avery. Twenty-two
years old, she works in Special Events, and she’s said to be thriving.
It’s a blessing and a joy to see her name in the company directory.) I
wish Strasser and I had patched things up before he died, but I don’t
know that it was possible. We were both born to compete, and we
were both bad at forgiving. For both of us, betrayal was extra potent
kryptonite.

I felt that same sense of betrayal when Nike came under attack
for conditions in our overseas factories—the so-called sweatshop
controversy. Whenever reporters said a factory was unsatisfactory,
they never said how much better it was than the day we first went
in. They never said how hard we’d worked with our factory
partners to upgrade conditions, to make them safer and cleaner.
They never said these factories weren’t ours, that we were renters,
one among many tenants. They simply searched until they found
a worker with complaints about conditions, and they used that
worker to vilify us, and only us, knowing our name would generate
maximum publicity.

Of course my handling of the crisis only made it worse. Angry,
hurt, I often reacted with self-righteousness, petulance, anger: On
some level I knew my reaction was toxic, counterproductive, but I
couldn’t stop myself. It’s just not easy to remain even-keeled when
you wake up one day, thinking you’re creating jobs and helping poor
countries modernize and enabling athletes to achieve greatness, only
to find yourself being burned in effigy outside the flagship retail
store in your own hometown.

The company reacted as I did. Emotionally. Everyone was reel-
ing. Many late nights in Beaverton, you’d find all the lights on, and
soul-searching conversations taking place in various conference
rooms and offices. Though we knew that much of the criticism was
unjust, that Nike was a symbol, a scapegoat, more than the true cul
prit, all of that was beside the point. We had to admit: We could do
better.

We told ourselves: We must do better.

Then we told the world: Just watch. We’ll make our factories
shining examples.

And we did. In the ten years since the bad headlines and lurid
exposés, we’ve used the crisis to reinvent the entire company.

For instance. One of the worst things about a shoe factory used to
be the rubber room, where uppers and soles are bonded. The fumes
are choking, toxic, cancer-causing. So we invented a water-based
bonding agent that gives off no fumes, thereby eliminating 97 per
cent of the carcinogens in the air. Then we gave this invention to our
competitors, handed it over to anyone who wanted it.

They all did. Nearly all of them now use it.

One of many, many examples.

We’ve gone from a target of reformers to a dominant player in
the factory reform movement. Today the factories that make our
products are among the best in the world. An official at the United
Nations recently said so: Nike is the gold standard by which we
measure all apparel factories.

Out of the sweatshop crisis also came the Girl Effect, a massive
Nike effort to break the generational cycles of poverty in the bleak
corners of the world. Along with the United Nations and other
corporate and government partners, the Girl Effect is spending tens
of millions of dollars in a smart, tough, global campaign to educate
and connect and lift up young girls. Economists, sociologists, not
to mention our own hearts, tell us that, in many societies, young
girls are the most economically vulnerable, and vital, demographic.
So helping them helps all. Whether striving to end child marriage,
by 1997 we had four. I was very proud. And when I learned that we were to be honored and celebrated by the Vietnamese government as one of the nation’s top five generators of foreign currency, I felt that I simply had to visit.

What a wrenching trip. I don’t know if I’d appreciated the full depth of my hatred for the war in Vietnam until I returned twenty-five years after the peace, until I joined hands with our former antagonists. At one point my hosts graciously asked what they could do for me, what would make my trip special or memorable. I got a lump in my throat. I didn’t want them to go to any trouble, I said.

But they insisted.

Okay, I said, okay, I’d like to meet eighty-six-year-old General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the Vietnamese MacArthur, the man who single-handedly defeated the Japanese, the French, the Americans, and the Chinese.

My hosts stared in amazed silence. Slowly they rose and excused themselves and stood off in a corner, conversing in frantic Vietnamese.

After five minutes they came back. Tomorrow, they said. One hour.

I bowed deeply. Then counted the minutes until the big meeting.

The first thing I noticed as General Giáp entered the room was his size. This brilliant fighter, this genius tactician who’d organized the Tet Offensive, who’d planned those miles and miles of underground tunnels, this giant of history, came up to my shoulders. He was, maybe, five foot four.

And humble. No corn cob pipe for Giáp.

I remember that he wore a dark business suit, like mine. I remember that he smiled as I did—shyly, uncertainly. But there was an intensity about him. I’d seen that kind of glittery confidence in great coaches, and great business leaders, the elite of the elite. I never saw it in a mirror.

He knew I had questions. He waited for me to ask them.