

Big step forward

Can women's shoes mix comfort and style? You bet your blisters, says an Orlando woman.

By Jean Patteson | Sentinel Staff Writer
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Don't hate me because I'm beautiful.

Love me because I'm a shoe that is comfortable, *really* comfortable, as well as lovely to look at.

Oh, I know a lot of shoes make that claim. But how many really live up to it?

If you ask me, most comfortable shoes are ugly. And most stylish shoes are a pain in the bunion.

I'm different. My beauty is more than skin deep -- though my fine Spanish-leather skin *is* marvelously smooth and supple.

But, like fine bone structure in humans, my true beauty comes from my underlying design: my firm but flexible frame, roomy toe box, stable heel and deep-cushioned sole.

I'm Rosalind, one of 23 styles in a new family of dress shoes called Nota Bene. (That's Latin for "note well.") Our matriarch is Jennifer Lovitt Riggs, an Orlando native, Edgewater High alumna and graduate of Wellesley College.

I was born, so to speak, in Jenny's small white house in the College Park neighborhood, then raised in Spain, home to some of the world's finest shoemakers. Now I'm back in the States, starting to gain a toehold in shoe boutiques in the East, Midwest and California.

In Central Florida, you can try me on for size at Shoooz on Park Avenue, in Winter Park. I'm the black suede pump with leather trim and lace-and-tie bow at the instep.

Meanwhile, a little background from Jennifer . . .

The rub of inspiration

It started with a blister, says Riggs.

Three years ago, while working for a management consulting firm in Washington, D.C., she was sent to give a briefing at the Pentagon. While hiking across the vast parking lot in her high heels, she developed a blister.

"I wanted to be focused on my presentation, not my blister," says Riggs. "I remember looking at my male colleagues in their comfortable shoes, and thinking, 'I bet they're not thinking about their feet.' "

The blister healed. But the germ of an idea, like a pebble in a shoe, kept pressing for attention.

"I kept wondering, Why isn't there a dress shoe for women that's comfortable enough to wear all day but



also good-looking?" says Riggs, 33, who majored in political science and economics.

She is kneeling on the living-room carpet in her home/office, surrounded by shoe samples, looking businesslike in a black pantsuit.

Behind her are a piano and a pile of plastic toys belonging to Jack, her 18-month-old son. A gated doorway prevents Grace, her boxer dog, from grabbing a shoe for a chew toy.

Riggs' quest for a stylish work shoe began two years ago, several months after the blister incident. Putting her formidable research and networking skills to work, she surfed shoe sites on the Internet, attended shoe shows, quizzed retailers, consulted podiatrists and orthopedic surgeons, and mailed surveys to female focus groups.

Among her key findings: Working women crave dress shoes that combine fashion with function. Poorly fitting shoes cause American women to spend \$3.5 billion on foot surgery and miss 15 million work days annually, according to the American Orthopedic Foot and Ankle Society. And although some dress-shoe manufacturers are trying, none has achieved the perfect balance between appearance and performance.

Riggs decided to give it a shot.

"It was a business opportunity, but it was also a chance to create something to benefit women," she says. "I couldn't take the risk if my heart was not in it."

Staking her life savings on the venture, she courted additional investors and redoubled her research and development efforts.

She tapped Erv Shames, former CEO of Stride Rite shoes (and another Edgewater High School alumnus) to be her mentor.

She also roped in her family: husband Todd Riggs as CEO; stepfather Phil Sargent to run her Mills Avenue warehouse; mother Nancy Sargent to be her "sounding board"; and even her grandmother and great-aunt to host "lick-and-stick parties" for her mailings.

She connected with Peter Chiara, an experienced shoe designer in New York. And, seven months' pregnant, Riggs traveled to Spain to find a factory willing to make shoes a new way.

For a year, she tinkered with prototypes, schlepped samples to shoe shows and courted retailers.

In February, she moved with her family back to Orlando. Two months later, she launched her first collection of Nota Bene shoes.

"Since then, things have been really moving," she says, with obvious excitement. "We're in more than 20 stores and growing."

She also invited several high-powered professional women in Orlando to road test her designs. Carolyn Gosselin, chief communications officer at CNL Investment Co., wore a pair of black suede Nota Bene pumps for a week.

"I'm on my feet all day, running to meetings in three different buildings," says Gosselin, 46. "Normally by Thursday, the bottoms of my feet hurt. But with these, my feet didn't feel bruised at all."



"The component in the sole feels almost like a running shoe," she says. "But it doesn't look like one. Several people complimented me on my good-looking shoes."

Nota Bene shoes are selling "very well" at Shooz, says owner Jill Biege, who stocks about eight styles.

"Dressy comfort shoes are just starting to emerge in the shoe world. These are some of the first," she says.

The \$200 price tag, adds Biege, "is appropriate for the quality of shoe she's designed."

Makeover did the trick

Don't hate me because I'm expensive.

Love me because I'm a shoe that is comfortable enough to wear all day, is sturdy enough to last for years, and has a classic elegance that's always in fashion.

Essentially, I'm a dress shoe that has undergone an extreme makeover.

Jenny spent much of her time and money on "corrective surgery." That is, she reshaped the last, the block around which shoes are built. By adjusting the last's dimensions, she made sure we wouldn't pinch toes or blister heels.

Next, she experimented with different heel heights, widths and shapes, making sure they would be stable but graceful.

For insoles, she turned to our athletic-shoe cousins, using high-tech materials for cushioning and shock absorption. And she cut our soles from thick, durable, nonslip leather.

Then came the cosmetic makeover. She designed our toes in a variety of shapes -- round, square and pointed. She chose colors that range from business basics such as black, brown, camel and red, to fashion shades such as raspberry and lime. And she decorated us with tabs or laces, buckles or bows.

The result: We're pretty but practical, treading a fine line between style and comfort.

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