

SMALL WORLD

ATHLETIC : Cool-hunting sneaker freaks around the globe are taking their latest obsessions online — and discovering that they are not alone. << By Lois Sakany

True collectors are at the root of the current craze for athletic footwear.

Known as "sneakerheads," their passion has led to a recent explosion of Internet sites devoted to buying, selling, reviewing and even collaborating with major brands on the industry's most coveted — and often, most expensive — styles.

Obsessing over sneakers is not an entirely new phenomenon; after all, in 1985, rap group Run DMC released a song titled "My Adidas." But the global community of collectors that exists today owes its presence in large part to the Web, which acts as a virtual command center for all collecting activities.

By far, most of the sites related to collecting are blogs, which feature news of new athletic-footwear releases as well as events related to collecting. Of course, devotees aren't concerned with just any athletic footwear; their main focus is limited-edition styles that are sold by either just one or a handful of retailers — online or off.

The impact of these seemingly niche online diaries cannot be underestimated. In February, Nike released 250 pairs of a limited edition Dunk, available only at a Downtown Manhattan store called The Reed Space. On the morning the shoe hit retail, fights broke out in front of the store when someone tried to cut in on the line, which had started forming the day before. The crowds weren't accidental. Visitors to Freshnessmag.com, a New York-based "sneaker freak" blog, learned about the style in an entry posted on the site a month prior.

"Similar to any other topic, the Internet has helped spread communication more quickly," said Josh Rubin, founding editor of Coolhunting.com, a New York-based blog he began just over two years ago as "a running database of things that I like. In the case of sneakers,

news used to be spread by word of mouth in different shops in urban areas. The Internet has helped create a broader, more diverse audience of collectors."

The global nature of this phenomenon is reflected by Hong Kong-based Kix-files.com. Started in July 2004, the site's original goal, according to Mike Huang, who is responsible for posting the majority of its content, "was to provide local news to international readers." A year later, the site has expanded to include both an online shop and a forum, where individual collectors are able to chat with one another about trading and selling collectible athletic footwear.

Fans worldwide are able to compare notes, thanks to the site's bilingual nature. When people log in from the U.S. or Europe, they see the English version, and when they log in from an Asian country, they see the Chinese version. As one of 11 moderators who monitor and edit the forums, Huang, who is bilingual, will sometimes help translate posts for visitors who don't share the same language.

How the sites' moderators receive the insider information on limited-edition footwear release dates and other news speaks to the symbiotic relationship that exists between them and the major athletic-footwear brands including Nike, Adidas, Reebok and Puma.

As the number of sneaker-related sites exploded, major manufacturers quickly realized the high potential for marketing hipness through the collector sites, and lines of communication were set up — both directly and indirectly — to feed them news about the brands.

As Robeson Mueller, one of six founders of Los Angeles-based 5th-Dimension.info, explained, "The majority of our information comes from connections with people who are, in some way, industry insiders. Companies like Nike work with people who have an 'in' on the subculture, whether it's a DJ or a musician. Most of the time, they're sneaker freaks as well. They have a visibility that's larger than the typical consumer, but they're one in the same."

One of those influential industry insiders is Paul Rodriguez, a 19-year professional skateboarder sponsored by Nike. That the news on the April release date of his first shoe, Nike Zoom P-Rods, was all over collector sites but barely mentioned in the mainstream press was no accident. "Nike has misstepped before when they tried too hard to pump out skate shoes," said Mueller. "The skate culture is very insular, so [Nike] wanted to market it in a more organic way."

In addition to pumping the sites with information, many major brands also advertise on or otherwise support the sites. Paul Fahey, who created Sneakerpimpsusa.com to provide sneaker fanatics with updates on Sneaker Pimps, "the world's largest global touring sneaker exhibition," is well aware of this. In addition to receiving rare shoes from the major brands, both Reebok and Finish Line help sponsor the current leg of his tour, which had a combined attendance of more

than 7,000 during recent stops in Shanghai and Beijing.

But Fahey, like most collectors with Internet sites, isn't in it for the money. "If I do make any money," he said, "it all goes back into losses I make in other cities. I'm having a lot of fun. [The exhibit] supports my living."

Beyond the major manufacturers, the ease of starting a site and marketing product on collector sites has made it possible for a handful of new designers to emerge. Both VisVim, out of Japan, and the San Francisco-based J.B. Classics are small new brands that have received good buzz on a variety of collector sites.

There are also designers/artists, whose reputation for embellishing branded footwear with their own designs has been enhanced by the Internet. Seth Brau, 19, a New York University student, for example, is known for the intricate designs he paints on Vans' Authentic, Chukka and Classic Slip-On styles. Rebranded under the name Five Three Footwear, he sells them on his Website, Fivethreefootwear.com as well as at Fred Segal. They range in price from \$175 to \$225.

"The cutting edge of fashion is rare sneakers," said Brau. "The [brands] love us because we're creating a culture around the shoe."



Above: Sneaker trendsetter Josh Rubin founded Coolhunting.com. Right: Some other sneaker-obsessed sites, Kix-files.com (top) and 5th-Dimension.info.

