

# How a UB design student was handpicked to train with the world's top sneaker designer

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## What's in a shoe?

Big bucks, if it's an athletic shoe.

In the United States, the athletic-footwear industry is worth \$50 billion annually, and manufacturers are searching hard for talented designers to become market leaders in the highly competitive industry.

The problem? “There hasn’t been a pipeline,” said D’Wayne Edwards, who’s created more than 500 styles for Nike, Jordan, and other brands that have sold more than \$1 billion worldwide.

“Designing performance footwear is similar to creating cars or other products. The innovation is constantly evolving,” added Edwards. “But you have to understand how to build a shoe, and that’s what’s missing in college kids’ portfolios. There are no hard skills from a critical thinking point of view. That’s why they’re not getting jobs.”

After winning a coveted fellowship with Edwards, University of Bridgeport student Dale Shepard, 23, is well on his way to mastering the skills needed to create a top-selling shoe, plus a promising career.

Edwards personally handpicked Shepard—an industrial design major at the University’s [Shintaro Akatsu School of Design \(SASD\)](#)—to attend PENSOLE Footwear Design Academy in Portland, Oregon. At SASD, the industrial design program teaches students to be proficient in conceptualizing, designing, then building actual products for personal, home, industrial, and commercial use. That gives students like Shepard a competitive advantage, whether they’re designing medical devices, furniture, consumer packaging, or sneakers. In fact, Shepard stood out among more than 500 students from 16 countries who applied to PENSOLE’s highly competitive program. In all, 20 were chosen.

**Dale Shepard worked round-the-clock to conceive of, create, market, and pitch cutting-edge shoes that would appeal to CEOs, design directors, and other executives from footwear companies like Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour. He also had to deliver new footwear that was on time, within a budget, and creatively out of this world.**

“I’ve always been a sneaker person,” said Shepard. “But this has been really cool. You see how big a role this plays in certain people’s lives.”

To win one of the 20 slots at Pensole, where Edwards covered full tuition for every student, Shepard was required to submit a single pencil-drawn picture of an athletic shoe.

Illustration by UB Student Dale Shepard

Edwards reviewed them all before picking 20 top students-designers; he wouldn’t accept computer renderings.

“From a corporate perspective, they want to see who can use their hands. Anyone can use a computer. What can you do with your hands?” (After proving themselves with pencils, students then learned 3D modeling on computers.)

Shepard’s illustration caught Edwards’s eye because of its “proper proportions and his understanding of how footwear should be made,” Edwards said. “He has good sketching skills.”

There was much to learn. Edwards teaches the classes with other pros, like Suzette Henry, who’s designed materials for signature footwear, such as Jordan’s 19-25, Carmelo Anthony, and Derek Jeter. Creative directors, CEOs, and recruiters also guided students. The take-away: sneakers have to convey a brand’s unique image.

The sneakers Shepard created for Android Homme, for instance, had to appeal to the brand's deep-pocketed hipsters who spend hundreds of dollars to wear the Android Homme aesthetic: urban, ultra-cool, high-functioning designs fashioned out of crocodile, durable ballistic nylon, silky suede, and other luxury materials.

Pensole's no-nonsense, from-the-ground-up approach to teaching footwear design is working. Since its launch in 2010, more than 60 of Edwards's graduates have gone on to work full-time or intern at footwear companies worldwide, including Nike, Jordan Brand, Adidas, Converse, Reebok, DC, ecco, Columbia Sportswear, Bluehaven, AND1, North Face, New Balance, Wolverine, Cole Haan, and Under Armour.

That winning streak caught the attention of *Sports Illustrated*. While Shepard worked 14-hour days under Edwards's guidance, reporters covered the story for the magazine's website.

"I've never done so much work in my life, so it was a wake-up call in terms of knowing how much work is required. It was one of the best experiences of my life, even though I was working the entire time," says Shepard.

"I networked a ton with a bunch of designers from Nike sportswear and got some great feedback. My main focus is to keep working to strengthen my personal design skills so I go from being a student to being a professional. I would say I'm on my way."

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