

Ex-Nike designer creates Foot Defender to prevent diabetes amputations



The Foot Defender has a flat bottom to ensure even distribution of pressure around the foot.
Courtesy of Foot Defender

By Demi Lawrence - Staff Reporter

December 08, 2022, 03:14pm PST Updated 12/09/2022 9:54 am

In Michael DiTullo's seven years as a designer at Nike, he always loved thinking outside the box.

So when he was approached by Dr. Jason Hanft, a podiatrist from Miami about designing a shoe that could save lives, he was all in.

"Every 20 seconds, someone's getting their foot amputated (because of diabetes ulcers). And if you have an amputation within five years, you don't have a 50% survival rate. That's worse than most forms of cancer, as far as the survival rate," DiTullo said. "So it's really amazing to take what I was using to create Olympic boxing boots for the Chinese boxing team, or for NBA athletes, and put it to this."

Together, Hanft and DiTullo created the Foot Defender, a medical boot he designed to help diabetes patients experiencing foot ulcers. Treatment for foot ulcers often include bulky medical boots that are sometimes uncomfortable and do little to relieve the pressure. DiTullo said as a result, many patients end up not wearing their boots, which heightens their risk of amputation if the wound progresses.

For four years, DiTullo worked out of his Portland home office with Hanft to design a shoe that would be less bulky, resemble a more normal-looking shoe and actually take pressure off the wound.

"I wanted to give (patients) all that medical stuff with the exterior that felt like a sneaker so that you could wear it to work, or to the grocery store, and not feel like all eyes are on them," DiTullo said.



Michael DiTullo (left) and Dr. Jason Hanft (right) created Foot Defender to help save diabetes patients from amputations.
Courtesy of Foot Defender

The Foot Defender differs from a traditional medical boot in that the bottom of the foot is flat, which more evenly distributes pressure rather than staying focused in problem areas such as the ball of a patient's foot, DiTullo said.

He also said he designed the tall part of the boot with a fully removable velcro front and an air pump to allow for easy access and to ensure it fills the spaces between the boot and leg to offer stability and protection.

For the majority of the years of development, Foot Defender was fully funded out of Hanft's pocket. About a year and a half ago, he said they were able to raise \$5 million to expand its sales scope, create a direct to consumer platform and accelerate product development.

Since its launch this spring, Hanft said the team has been able to double its sales and implement a half-off discount on its site for active military members, veterans and first responders. Navigating the medical equipment market has been a challenge, he said, but said Foot Defender has been well received.

And the team isn't done yet, DiTullo said. They are currently working on developing a slip-on house shoe with the same flat base to ensure evenly distributed pressure. DiTullo emphasized that the slip-on isn't just for people who have foot ulcers, but for anyone who wants a good house shoe that will also protect their feet.

"For me, it's just an honor as a designer to work on these things and take things on. I just love to learn," DiTullo said.

The Foot Defender is available online for \$250 without the need for a prescription, and is reimbursable through insurance.