Phil Knight

An Oregon runner building a business through Japanese shoes, American customers and transpacific credit

A runner’s education in trade, credit, and the Pacific

Phil Knight (born 1938) is the American entrepreneur who co-founded Nike with his former University of Oregon track coach, Bill Bowerman. His formative work was the creation of a small transpacific business: finding Japanese shoes, making them useful to American runners, building a distribution network, and obtaining enough credit to keep the goods moving. Blue Ribbon Sports, the partnership established in 1964, became the platform for the Nike brand in the early 1970s. Its later scale can obscure how much of Knight’s education occurred in this interval, when a promising sales season could leave the business dangerously short of money.[1]

Knight’s distinctive ability was to connect people who knew different parts of a problem. A coach understood what happened to feet over miles of training. Japanese manufacturers possessed machinery, materials, and production knowledge. Runners and specialist sellers knew which shoes actually worked. A Japanese trading company eventually understood a financing problem that conventional bankers found alarming. Knight’s enterprise emerged through repeated exchanges among them. The Pacific was the working geography of that education.

Oregon: learning to care about a shoe

Knight grew up in Portland, the son of William Knight, a lawyer who became a newspaper publisher. His father knew Bowerman from their own university days and introduced Phil to the coach while he was still a schoolboy.[2] The connection was an advantage. Running also gave Knight a community and a product he could judge through use, long before he had a business to build around either.

At Oregon, Knight ran under Bowerman and became one of his shoe testers. Nike’s archive preserves a 1958 letter in which the coach offered to modify his running flats, and describes an experimental pair made with rubber-coated fabric.[3] The materials were crude; the question was precise. Would changing a shoe improve what an athlete could do in it?

This was a practical apprenticeship in taking an ordinary object seriously. Shoes were subject to examination, alteration, and argument. Their weight and seams were experienced by bodies; their merits could be tested on a track. Knight encountered

invention at this small scale before he encountered it as a theory of business. Bowerman also supplied a model of exacting authority. Recalling him at Stanford in 2019, Knight described a teacher whose ambition extended beyond winning races to preparing his athletes for competition in the rest of their lives.[4]

Knight graduated from Oregon in 1959, served in the Army, and continued his education at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. He completed his MBA in 1962. There, the experience of running began to acquire a commercial form.[5]

A question that crossed an ocean

In Frank Shallenberger's small-business class, Knight was asked to propose a business. Other students gravitated toward electronics. He turned to the subject he understood: running shoes. In a 1981 interview, he recalled a market in which Adidas and Puma represented the advanced end of athletic footwear while Japanese makers were improving rapidly. His assignment joined that industrial observation to a runner's dissatisfaction with available equipment.[6]

The question associated with his paper became famous: could Japanese sports shoes challenge German sports shoes as Japanese cameras had challenged German cameras? Nike's archive traces the photographic comparison to conversations he overheard around his father's newspaper. Stanford's account confirms the essential proposition: good athletic shoes could become a viable business if a suitable manufacturing source made them affordably.[7, 8]

The analogy did useful work. It allowed Knight to imagine an established hierarchy changing. German dominance described the market he saw, but gave him no reason to assume that the same producers must dominate indefinitely. At the same time, a lower production cost would mean little if runners distrusted the shoe. His idea therefore required several things to be true together: Japanese quality had to improve; a price difference had to survive freight and distribution; and American athletes had to be willing to try an unfamiliar maker. A classroom paper could connect those possibilities. It could not establish them.

After graduation, he went to find out. Shoe Dog places his Kobe factory visit within a longer journey begun in 1962, financed partly by his father. Knight recalls a stay in Hawaii before continuing alone to Japan.[9] Education, family resources, and freedom to travel gave the proposal a chance to become an experiment.

He approached Onitsuka, maker of Tiger shoes, and offered to distribute its products in America. Former Nike historian Scott Reames describes him presenting himself as Blue Ribbon Sports before the company existed.[10] Persuasion came before organizational substance. Knight would have to create the business that his proposal asked another company to trust.

Onitsuka had its own history and ambitions. Kihachiro Onitsuka had established the

business in Kobe in 1949, framing sport as a contribution to the reconstruction of Japanese life. By 1960, its engineers had produced the ventilated Magic Runner, attempting to reduce the heat and blistering associated with marathon running. In 1964, its range and international athletic presence expanded across several sports. This was an inventive manufacturer seeking markets. Knight was encountering a potential partner with knowledge and ambitions of its own.[11]

The agreement made him an intermediary between two sporting worlds. What he initially brought was an argument about American demand, familiarity with runners, and willingness to sell. Japan supplied more than a favorable price. It supplied a working product and an industrial organization he did not possess. His first consequential act was to persuade that organization that a young American could open a useful route to customers.

Building a business while keeping a job

The samples were slow to arrive. When Knight had shoes to show, he approached Bowerman, hoping for a sale and an endorsement. The coach saw another possibility: a manufacturing connection through which his own ideas might become reproducible shoes. On January 25, 1964, the two agreed to a partnership over lunch in Portland. The handshake preceded the first signed partnership document preserved in Nike’s archive by two years.[12, 13]

They put up $500 apiece. A Time account published in 1982 describes the purchase of 300 pairs of Tigers and storage in Knight’s father’s basement. The familiar image of Knight selling shoes from a car at track meets belongs to this stage. It was a way to reach people concentrated in one place, already thinking about the activity for which the product was made.[14]

The often-repeated $50 origin story concerns an early sample purchase.[15] The partnership’s investment, outside earnings, commercial borrowing, and later trade finance better explain how the enterprise continued. A first order is easy to narrate. Replacing inventory, paying people, and financing a growing shipment are recurring obligations.

For years, Knight kept earning his living elsewhere. He worked as a certified public accountant and taught at Portland State University; he did not commit to Blue Ribbon full-time until 1969. This prolonged overlap matters. The decision to begin was followed by years in which the business had to coexist with paid work, rather than immediately supporting its founder. Accounting was also a useful vantage point from which to see the difference between reported success and available cash.[16]

Knight’s sales task rewarded knowledge more directly than the image of a charismatic salesman suggests. A coach or runner could ask about fit, cushioning, or performance, and receive an answer from someone who had run seriously himself. Bowerman’s association added credibility. The enterprise could begin close to home because both men belonged to

the world they hoped to supply. But familiarity was only a beginning: someone still had to turn intermittent encounters into a dependable customer network.

[External image / 外部圖片] A low street-corner building with restaurant signs, identified by Nike as its first office site.
The Portland building that housed Blue Ribbon Sports' first office, opened in 1967. Nike's archive identifies the site at SE 50th and Powell; the restaurant signage in this photograph should not be read as a view of the office in 1967. NIKE, Inc., Department of Nike Archives; photographer not separately credited · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

Johnson and the American end of the connection

Jeff Johnson became essential to that work. An anthropology graduate student turned social worker, he joined the venture in 1965. The contemporary Inc. profile describes him selling shoes from his Los Angeles apartment after his other work. As Blue Ribbon's first full-time employee, he acquired responsibilities that ranged across selling, product development, and advertising. The founders still had their own jobs.[17, 18]

Johnson opened the company's early shop at 3107 Pico Boulevard in Santa Monica. Nike's accounts differ over whether to date its opening to 1966 or January 1967, but agree on its importance as a place organized around runners. It offered something a shipment alone could not supply: a setting in which customers could meet the people selling the shoes, return with problems, and feel that their specialized interest had a home.[19]

The smallness of the running world made its relationships unusually consequential. Bob Anderson, founder of the publication that became Runner's World, recalled that Johnson proposed and wrote an extensive running-shoe survey in 1967. It compared Adidas, New Balance, Tiger, and Puma, and rated Tiger models particularly highly. Anderson later acknowledged Johnson's commercial connection while explaining why he had accepted the judgments. Expertise, enthusiasm, publicity, and selling overlapped in a community still building its institutions.[20]

That overlap deserves attention without being romanticized. A runner's recommendation might be informed by genuine use and still advance his employer's interests. The same people could help define the standards by which products were compared and profit from the comparison. Blue Ribbon was learning to influence a market through participation in its culture. The later Nike organization would operate at a much larger scale, but this early arrangement already made credibility a business asset.

Knight's role in such a team was partly to recognize capacities he did not supply himself. Bowerman's experiments and Johnson's energetic contact with runners were distinct forms of expertise. Keeping them connected to the Japanese end of the business required ordering, correspondence, travel, negotiation, and attention to money. The work of coordination was less visible than either a new sole or a successful sale. Without it, neither

would reliably reach the other side of the ocean.

The return journey of an idea

The trade was becoming two-way. Shoes crossed from Japan to the United States; observations, requests, and designs went back. During a trip to the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, Bowerman stayed an extra week to meet Kihachiro Onitsuka and another executive, examine factory equipment, and explain his proposals. He wanted a receptive production partner as much as Knight wanted a supplier.[21]

One of the collaboration's important results was the Cortez. Nike's account connects its development to distance runner Kenny Moore's foot injury and Bowerman's experiments with greater cushioning. ASICS' s corporate history describes the Tiger Cortez as a response to American demand for a more cushioned training shoe, using an additional layer in the sole. The companies disagree over the precise chronology: Nike points to an early 1967 catalog, while ASICS dates the American release to 1969. Both accounts establish that the shoe emerged during the Onitsuka–Blue Ribbon relationship, before it carried the Nike identity.[22, 23]

The significance lies in this shared production history. Knight did not have to become a shoemaker to build a footwear business, but he did need a way for knowledge about running to affect manufacture. A distributor able to convey useful design information occupied a more substantial position than one that merely resold a finished article. It could help improve the product and deepen demand. It could also begin to wonder who controlled the value created through the exchange.

Bowerman's parallel work on jogging helped enlarge the potential constituency for such shoes. His 1967 book, Jogging, belonged to a wider movement through which running became an activity for many people beyond competitive track athletes. The company was situated near both high-performance experimentation and a developing recreational practice. Product development and market growth reinforced one another, although neither could remove the financial problem of supplying more people.[24]

Credit across the Pacific

Growth made that problem harder. An importer has to commit to goods before the proceeds of their eventual sale are securely in hand. Production and transport occupy time. A successful order can establish demand while creating the need to finance a still larger order. Profitability over a year and liquidity on the day a bill falls due are different tests. Knight's determination to keep expanding repeatedly brought him into conflict with lenders worried about his limited financial cushion. Recalling these years at Stanford, he said major Oregon banks had judged the company too heavily leveraged.[25]

The crucial alternative came from Nissho Iwai, a Japanese general trading company, or sōgō shōsha. The trading house dealt across industries and borders. Its successor Sojitz

places the beginning of its relationship with Blue Ribbon in 1971, when Knight's business had only about thirty employees. Sojitz's own historical account says Knight, frustrated by limited bank credit, sought a loan from a Japanese bank's Portland branch. A banker directed him upstairs to Nissho Iwai. The story is another participant's retrospective account, but it corroborates the importance of a Japanese commercial institution to Nike's development.[26]

Nissho's relevance extended beyond lending money. The academic study by Michael Donaghu and Richard Barff, based on company interviews and published in 1990, describes the firm arranging independent manufacturing sources as well as providing financing and import–export services. These functions fitted together. A trading company could help connect a buyer to producers, understand the movement of goods, and earn from enabling further trade. It had reasons to evaluate a growing importer differently from a bank focused on its balance sheet.[27]

Nike's 1981 annual report supplies closer contemporary confirmation: Nissho-Iwai American Corporation had provided financing and import–export services since 1972.[28] Sojitz's 1971 date and Nike's 1972 date may describe different stages of the relationship; the sources do not settle that distinction. They agree on the importance of the continuing connection.

This places Japanese agency at the center of the story. The business that became an emblem of American sporting ambition depended on Japanese production and on Japanese willingness to finance its expansion. Knight's achievement included finding and sustaining those relationships. Their importance also qualifies a simple story of personal independence: his room to act grew through obligations to other organizations.

A supplier becomes a competitor

By 1971–72, the relationship with Onitsuka was breaking down. Donaghu and Barff describe an effort by the Japanese manufacturer to take a controlling interest in Blue Ribbon and the growing American business's search for an alternative. Nissho helped connect Blue Ribbon to other Japanese manufacturers, including Nippon Rubber and Nihon-Koyo. Developing a Nike product line therefore involved a reorganization of Japanese relationships, rather than an immediate departure from Japan.[29]

The transition included Mexico. Knight recalls ordering soccer shoes from the factory Canada for sale as football shoes: outside his agreement's restriction on competing track footwear, he reasoned, though against its spirit.[30] His account exposes the uneasy ethics of preparing an alternative while still relying on a supplier.

The brand supplied a name and a visible identity for that alternative. Johnson proposed Nike, after the Greek goddess of victory. Carolyn Davidson, a Portland State graphic-design student Knight had employed for freelance work, designed the Swoosh in 1971. The initial bill was $35. Nike's archive describes a hurried, practical choice from drawings reviewed

in a small Oregon office. An emblem that later appeared inevitable began as one decision among many under pressure.[31]

The disagreement with Onitsuka led to litigation. Both companies claimed the other had violated their arrangement. Former corporate historian Reames says the American ruling distinguished between the Cortez design, which neither party exclusively owned, and the commercial name, which Blue Ribbon had promoted and could retain. Onitsuka continued with the related Tiger Corsair. The outcome makes the intertwined origins visible: the new brand carried forward knowledge and reputation built during the old partnership.[32, 33]

In 1972, Nike shoes reached athletes at the United States Olympic Trials in Eugene. Bowerman and Geoff Hollister also hand-assembled experimental waffle-soled shoes, later known as Moon Shoes. Their grip grew out of Bowerman's effort to deal with changed running surfaces. The famous waffle-iron episode belongs to a longer process of failed materials, revised molds, and wear tests. The Moon Shoe remained a limited prototype rather than an instant mass-market product; later models developed its possibilities.[34]

This distinction between experiment and dependable manufacture is central to Knight's vocation. An interesting shoe had to become an order that could be filled, at a quality a customer would accept, with money available to settle the bill. The celebrated invention was one part of a much larger task. By the time Nike had its own name, Knight had spent a decade learning what the rest of that task involved.

Independence and its limits

Control remained incomplete. The company explored American production as well as additional Asian sources. In 1974, Blue Ribbon began pursuing the vacant Wise Shoe factory in Exeter, New Hampshire. The local historical society's account shows an importer recruiting people and using an existing shoemaking place to establish its first American plant. This was a practical attempt to acquire capabilities and alternatives, rather than the application of a settled doctrine that every shoe must be made abroad.[35]

The immediate risks persisted. Knight recalls in Shoe Dog that, during a 1975 cash crisis, the Bank of California withdrew support and Nissho paid off the bank debt after reviewing the business.[36] The rescue is his retrospective account. The enduring financing relationship is independently documented.[37]

By 1981, Nike reported roughly 90 percent of its shoes coming from twenty overseas contractors, with the balance made in its own northeastern American plants. Sources included Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and England. Nike personnel supervised quality inspections against company specifications.[38] The import business had become a production system spread across countries.

The original question had changed. Knight had begun by asking whether Japanese shoes could find a market in America. He now had to decide how an American company could maintain a coherent product and reputation across many manufacturing relationships. The

opportunities were greater, and so were the distances between a decision in Oregon and its effects elsewhere.

[External image / 外部圖片] Aerial view of Nike headquarters buildings around a lake in 1989.
Nike’s Beaverton headquarters under development in 1989, seen from the air. The buildings and central lake make the scale of the company’s later institutional home visible. NIKE, Inc., Department of Nike Archives; photographer not separately credited · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

A larger public

The company would repeatedly have to learn what kind of organization it had become. Nike went public in December 1980.[39] A recognizable name and access to the stock market did not settle the harder questions: whom its products were for, what its customers were buying beyond footwear, and how much responsibility followed a brand across the ocean to the people making its goods.

One answer arrived with Michael Jordan, whom Nike signed in 1984.[40] The first Air Jordan, designed by Peter Moore and released in 1985, carried an athlete’s identity into a product a customer could own.[41] The distinction matters in a life often compressed into the story of a solitary founder. Knight did not design this shoe or supply its athletic meaning. His company brought together a designer, a player and a commercial organization capable of making their association visible. The original business had connected Japanese production with American runners; this version connected sporting achievement with an audience much larger than the people who played the sport.

Yet Jordan did not make Nike infallible. While Reebok cultivated women buying shoes for aerobics, Nike underestimated the market. Reebok’s sales passed Nike’s in 1987. Knight’s attachment to function and sporting authenticity had become a blind spot. In a 1997 interview, he still resisted describing Nike as a fashion business. But the organization had changed: more deliberate planning, consumer research and marketing replaced some of its earlier improvisation. Nike regained the lead in 1989. Knight also acknowledged the premise he had needed to revise: “I used to believe that a good product sold itself.” His eventual willingness to work with advertising specialists was a consequential extension of the willingness, decades earlier, to rely on people who knew things he did not.[42]

The numbers complicate any story of an uninterrupted Jordan-led ascent. Nike’s consolidated revenue fell from roughly $1.07 billion in fiscal 1986 to $878 million in 1987, then recovered to more than $1.2 billion in 1988. Its annual report attributed the recovery in part to Nike-Air products, a richer mix of higher-priced footwear, and improved inventory management.[43] Commercial reinvention involved the less photogenic work of controlling stock and getting products and prices right.

The factory behind the promise

The greater challenge was already built into the production system. In the 1990s, scrutiny of Nike’s overseas suppliers exposed the distance between the freedom promised in its advertising and conditions on factory floors. An internal Ernst & Young inspection, made public in 1997, described excessive working hours and hazardous chemical exposure at a Vietnamese contractor. The controversy concerned measurable conditions, not simply disagreement over Nike’s image. Contemporary reporting also recorded activists’ objections to inadequate wages and to operating in countries that restricted independent labor organizing.[44] The geographical separation that helped make the business possible could not make the people producing the shoes disappear from its account of success.

On May 12, 1998, Knight announced a package of labor initiatives. Nike’s annual report specified minimum ages of eighteen in footwear production and sixteen in other light manufacturing, expanded monitoring involving nongovernmental organizations, stronger environmental and safety management, and measures intended to bring factory air quality to U.S. occupational-safety standards. Education and small-loan programs were also included.[45] These were specific commitments against which the company could be judged. They were not evidence that the underlying problems had been solved. Global Exchange’s Medea Benjamin welcomed parts of the announcement while pointing to its failure to ensure a living wage.[46]

Later research makes the distinction more than a cautionary footnote. Richard Locke, Fei Qin and Alberto Brause examined audits of more than 800 Nike suppliers in fifty-one countries between 1998 and 2005. Their peer-reviewed study found that monitoring alone produced limited improvement, despite substantial corporate effort. Better results appeared when monitoring accompanied changes that helped suppliers organize work and improve production. The researchers argued for combining external pressure, transparent inspection and interventions addressing the causes of poor conditions.[47] In this part of the story, neither a founder’s assurance nor an auditor’s visit was sufficient. Responsibility required changing how the dispersed enterprise actually worked, including inside businesses Nike did not own.

[External image / 外部圖片] Phil Knight and Jerry Rice cutting a ceremonial ribbon outside a Nike building.
Phil Knight, right, with Jerry Rice at the dedication of Nike’s Jerry Rice Building in 1999. NIKE, Inc., Department of Nike Archives; photographer not separately credited · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

Family, succession, and institutions

The later years also brought a loss outside any corporate measure. Knight’s son Matthew died in a scuba-diving accident in El Salvador in May 2004, aged thirty-four. He had been there making footage for a fundraising effort for local orphanages.[48] In December of that year, William Perez succeeded Knight as chief executive and president; Knight remained

chairman.[49] His withdrawal from formal leadership took more than another decade. On June 30, 2016, Nike announced his retirement from its board and Mark Parker's appointment as chairman. Knight became chairman emeritus, with an invitation to observe board meetings. The same announcement described the transfer of his voting interests in Swoosh LLC to a trust controlled by his son Travis.[50] Succession involved both an executive office and the arrangements through which the founding family held influence.

Meanwhile, wealth accumulated through Nike moved into institutions with ambitions beyond sport. Knight committed $400 million to Stanford's Knight-Hennessy graduate scholarship program in 2016.[51] Phil and Penny Knight's medical philanthropy reached a further scale in August 2025, when OHSU announced their $2 billion commitment to its Knight Cancer Institute, alongside plans for a self-governed cancer organization within the university.[52] In September 2026, the University of Oregon announced another $1 billion commitment, intended to establish a college of engineering at the Knight Campus. It followed their $500 million gifts in 2016 and 2021; the proposed college still required the appropriate governance approvals.[53]

Those commitments belong to the final phase of a career still marked by its earlier contradictions. Knight repeatedly assembled capabilities scattered among other people and places, then gave the combination room to grow. That capacity could build an extraordinary enterprise and, later, enlarge universities and medical research. The factory history supplies the necessary second measure: the value of what an organization creates cannot be separated from the conditions under which other people make it possible.

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32. Andrew Mitrak, interview with Scott Reames, "Nike's First-ever Historian Shares Secrets Behind the Swoosh," A History of Marketing, November 5, 2025, https://marketinghistory.org/p/scott-reames-nike-historian. Reames helped research Shoe Dog; his account is a knowledgeable corporate participant's interpretation.↩

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1969; Nike's Bowerman history cites a 1967 catalog. The developmental sequence is clearer than a single uncontested launch date.↩

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36. Phil Knight, Shoe Dog: A Memoir by the Creator of Nike (Scribner, 2016), chapters "1962" and "1975"; publisher information, https://www.simonandschuster.co.uk/books/Shoe-Dog/Phil-Knight/9781471146732. An authorized online version of the 1962 chapter appears in the 2017 Young Readers Edition excerpt: https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Shoe-Dog/Phil-Knight/9781534401181. Memoir is used for attributed recollection, not as a neutral contemporary record.↩

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