

Letters To The Editor

Published: June 9, 2004

Giving Up Heels May Be a Stretch

Your May 19 article "Déjà Shoe: Flats Are Back" gives me hope that style and fashion may not always be in conflict with comfort. During more than 20 years of practice as a chiropractic orthopedist, one of the most common causes of back pain in my women patients is the height of their heels.

One caution: When transitioning from heels to flats, the wearer's calves, thighs, buttocks and back may ache for several days or weeks. Calves and legs, especially, have become adapted to heels and must be stretched throughout the day. A standing calf-stretch is easy to do almost anywhere, anytime.

When the fashion pendulum inevitably swings back to heels, I would truly be happy for my potential patients if they do not follow the trend, but my experience says otherwise.

Dr. Joseph K. Askinasi
New York

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

© 2004 Dow Jones & Company. All Rights Reserved

WEDNESDAY, MAY 19, 2004 - VOL. CCXLIII NO. 98 - ★★ ★★ \$1.00

Déjà Shoe: Flats Are Back

Stiletto-Wearers Are Buying Sexy Low Heels

By SALLY BEATTY

A NEW FASHION movement is afoot. Flat shoes — a look that has been all but absent since the 1950s — have been stampeding out of stores this spring, fueling a boom in women's shoe sales.

A host of hot designers — Prada, Marc Jacobs, Lanvin, Hermès — showed flats for women on the runway the past two seasons, departing from the usual drama of towering high heels. Now, retailers report a parade of women (many with sore feet) seeking styles that are both dressy and more down to earth.

Areti Serkizis, a 29-year-old pharmacist, may be typical. She's planning to buy two pairs of flats for work: one with a stylish pointed toe and a second with a rounder toe. She says she loves pretty shoes but doesn't want to do permanent damage to her feet. "In the beginning I tried wearing even little heels to work, but I went home crippled," she recalls.

A far cry from the "sensible" shoes of old, the new flats are even more comfortable, including "wearable" looks such as cashmere sweatsuits, sophisticated suits in stretch fabrics and slim, European-style sneakers. "Designers are all paying greater attention to the needs and wants of women," says Gregg Andrews, a fashion director with specialty retailer Nordstrom Inc. "They are realizing the fashion industry is a business."

Sabrina Kleier Morgenstern, a real-estate agent, just bought six pairs of Delman ballet flats — in light pink, hot pink, white, off-white, black and orange — and says she plans to cut way back on wearing stilettos. At around \$225 a pair, Delman ballet flats aren't cheap. But Ms. Kleier Morgenstern says she spends all day on her feet, visiting construction sites and running up and down stairs, so the investment is worth it. "It used to be that if you wanted to be comfortable there weren't that many options," she says. "Now I can be practical and also chic and sexy."

Delman, an 85-year-old New York shoe house, has been selling slender, ballet-style flats to socialites and celebrities for more than 50 years. It says demand for these styles has exploded over the past year or so. Sales are up more than 20-fold, says Doris Johanson, president of Delman, a unit of closely held Nina Footwear Corp. "Our business has reached a whole new dimension," she said from a shoe factory in Spain, where she was checking out new flats for fall. Even after expanding production capacity, Ms. Johanson says, "we have more orders than we can handle."

Marshall Cohen, chief analyst at NPD Group, says he is expect-

ing a 15% to 20% jump in women's flat-shoe sales for the spring and summer season beginning in March. That would help reverse a 22% decline in sales of women's flats for the year ended in February. Sales of women's footwear overall rose 5% for the period to \$19.9 billion, fueled by brisk sales of high heels, according to NPD Group.

"As retailers, we welcome [the trend to flats] because we see it as an additional category," says Robert Burke, senior fashion director of Bergdorf Goodman in New York. "The same customer is buying high heels and a flat shoe at the same time."

Some think dressy flats could even eat into sneaker sales, says Rhonda Brown, president and chief executive of footwear, accessories and retail for Jones Apparel Group, which owns the Nine West and Enzo Angiolini shoe brands. Though they are still a small part of her business, dressier flats have been growing at double-digit rates since early spring, says Ms. Brown. "We think it's important and is going to continue."

The trend is most noticeable right now on the coasts and in big cities where many women walk to work, says Rob Schmertz, president and brand manager of the Steve Madden brand at Steven Madden Ltd. "But it will all filter to the middle of America over the next few months," he predicts.

Indeed, the switch to flats may require a transition period. With high heels so much in fashion over the past few years, many women have closets full of pants cut long enough to drape over their three-inch heels. Sarah Wilson, a research analyst, says she's tempted by the sexy new flats but can't bring herself to have all her pants shortened. "It's such a change," she moans.

ANTIDOTE to high heels
(left to right): Sofia Coppola
in 2004; Audrey Hepburn
in 1954; Prada show in
October; Delman's flats for
spring (bottom)

