

Apparel: Raddatz seeks to build Rolls Royce of golf shoes

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Paul Raddatz knows what your feet need.

Raddatz, the owner of Par West Custom Golf Shoes, learned about shoes from the ground up. From his start in the leather tanning business, through a career of making custom Western-style cowboy boots, to the start of Par West six years ago, Raddatz looks at what makes each foot unique and how best to accommodate each one's needs.

"I have yet to see two feet that are identical to where a standard pair off the rack will accommodate most people's feet sizes," he said. "Proper fit means you're going to have built-in comfort with the shoe. It adjusts to the bottom of your foot and the proper fitting and the circumference of your foot."

And with golfers, where stability is especially important, the right fit can make a big difference. Shoes off the rack are made with foam fillers so that as many different people as possible can cram their feet in. In fact, Raddatz said, each individual size in an off-the-rack shoe needs to be able to fit as many as seven million different people. The foam used to accommodate that many individual feet doesn't provide a stable base for your swing. It also breaks down quickly as you flex your foot and walk, creating space inside the shoe.

"That space when you're torquing your body to swing at a ball, is going to eventually allow your feet to move," Raddatz said. "A good swing starts from stability. So what I do is net fit that (foot) without foams, so that it's going to maintain the integrity of the shape."

To get the proper fit, Raddatz uses a foot mold kit that measures several parts of each foot.

"The idea of the foot mold kit that you sunk your foot into is to look at your arch and to also look at your instep where that shoe will break," he said. "We get an idea of the structure of the bottom of your foot so that we can make the foot bed to accommodate the shoe. Then we take the measurements tracing and the measurements to get a more accurate reading of the circumference of your foot, so that it laces properly."

"From that we're going to make what's called a last, which is a shoe form that the leather stretches around. And we make a custom last for each individual customer based on those measurements."

The last for each customer is given a serial number and stored at the Par West factory, so that new shoes can be made at any time for an existing customer.

The cost of the shoes starts at about \$850 to \$900 per pair, and can go up to \$2,400 depending on materials used.

"I try and build the Rolls Royce of a golf shoe for people and the value stands the test of time," Raddatz said. "It's like buying a well made car. You get to drive an excellent car throughout the life but you also get it back when you trade it in. If you're going to buy a \$200 pair of shoes every few years, over the life of the shoe mine's a great value too."

Par West shoes are made with American buffalo hide on the inside linings and hand-sewn treated soles and nylon thread that stands up to chemicals used on greens. Any shoe can be resoled or reconditioned to look like new. Plus, each pair comes with protector, a water-repellant silicone to spray on your shoes every few rounds for maximum protection.

About 30 to 40 tour pros have Raddatz make custom golf shoes for them, but he doesn't like to name names. Many pros have footwear contracts and can't promote the Par West shoes they enjoy outside of competition.

But Raddatz is happy to tell you about his first tour pro customer.

"My first pair of shoes I ever made was for Payne Stewart," he said. "Payne Stewart was sponsoring the NFL players and I was asked to make him a pair out of genuine football leather. That was 1991. And I had a great experience with Payne. That really was one of the things that prompted me to start my company."

Par West operates a small factory in Mexico that turns out 10 to 20 pairs of shoes each week.

"That's where I look to keep it," said Raddatz, a native of Wisconsin. "I think that the service and the quality is consummate with how many shoes you really want to produce at that level -- I can pay attention to the details of making a custom shoe."

To find out more about Par West Custom Golf Shoes, including how to get a custom fit kit and start the process of having your own custom shoes made, visit www.parwestshoes.com.

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