



Rice husks are the secret of shoe designer Hitoshi Mimura's success.

HITOSHI MIMURA: THE TAKUMI OF RUNNING SHOES

TA•KU•MI *n.* Japanese for “master” or “master craftsman.”

Usage: Denotes the highest levels of ability: “Of the 300 craftsmen employed in Lexus’ Tahara plant, only 10 hold the title of *takumi*.” **Synonyms:** *meister, maestro.*

IN THE MARATHON-MAD COUNTRY THAT IS JAPAN, ASICS DESIGNER **HITOSHI MIMURA** IS TO RUNNING SHOES WHAT MASAMUNE WAS TO THE SWORD IN THE 13TH AND 14TH CENTURIES: A LEGENDARY CRAFTSMAN.

AT THE 2000 SYDNEY OLYMPICS, MIMURA’S SHOES HELPED JAPAN’S **NAOKO TAKAHASHI** TO MARATHON GLORY. IN 2004, RUNNER **MIZUKI NOGUCHI**, WEARING MIMURA’S INNOVATIVE RICE-HUSK-DERIVED FOOTWEAR, CAPTURED OLYMPIC GOLD ON ATHENS’ SLIPPERY STREETS.

AFTER THAT, SHE DUBBED MIMURA “THE GOD OF SHOES.” WE PREFER *TAKUMI*.

BY ROB GOSS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KO SASAKI

I INTERVIEW HITSOHI MIMURA in his office-cum-workshop at Asics’ R&D center in the port city of Kobe. The 60-year-old former marathon runner and shoe master is dressed in a blue Asics training top and dark slacks. His skin carries the tan of a man who likes to be outdoors; his hair is neatly parted at the side like so many Japanese men his age. We exchange business cards and slight bows, and then he relaxes into an armchair with a signed poster of Mizuki Noguchi hanging on the wall above him. Noguchi’s heartbreaking injury at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which caused her to withdraw from the Games, is still very much on his mind. One photo in particular stands out in Mimura’s office: not the enlarged newspaper clipping of him showing Japan’s Prince Akishino around his workshop, or the promotional shot of Mimura holding a pair of custom-made marathon shoes, but a signed picture of Noguchi kissing a shoe after her triumph in Athens. That shoe is one of Mimura’s. And its sole is revolutionary.

LEXUS: How was Beijing?

HITOSHI MIMURA: I’ve been to the Olympics eight times, but the opening and closing ceremonies in Beijing were probably the best. They were gorgeous, elaborate, and expensive. As for the sports facilities, they were first class—you could really feel the vigor of the country in them. As for the marathon course, that was very strictly controlled. For example, in Japan you can stand along the road and cheer for the runners, but that kind of atmosphere didn’t really exist because there were just so many restrictions. The area around the starting line, for example, was off-limits to spectators, so it kind of seemed like a competition for the athletes only.

How many athletes were wearing your shoes? Mara Yamauchi from England, Deena Kastor from America. There were many more racers: three from North Korea, two from

Korea, two from Japan. I think I had about 25 to 30 in the women's marathon.

So you work with an international group?

Yes, the company is working on being a global company. We also had three from China, including the male runners, but China has a contract for everything including shoes with Nike. The runners wanted to use Asics shoes and tape the Nike logo over the top, but they weren't allowed to do that.

Are there any runners who you think might do well in London in four years?

It's really difficult to say. Marathon runners need muscle endurance. Kenyan and Ethiopian runners have that and they have the running skills—both male and female runners—so they will be the main threat to the Japanese runners. If Noguchi is fit, she is an athlete who has the muscle endurance. If she were fit, she could have won the gold. This would have been her second gold, so she was under a lot of pressure to win and she trained a lot. All top athletes run the risk of getting injured.

In that respect, marathon running seems almost cruel, especially as you have only a handful of races in a career. Compare that with a sport like soccer, where you can get injured for two weeks and then be back playing again. Soccer is 45 minutes and another 45 minutes and the players start and stop.

The marathon means running the entire two or two and a half hours. Soccer players don't train that much every day in terms of running, but marathon runners have to run a lot every day—more than 45 kilometers—so what happens is that they became very tired, and when fatigue accumulates it leads to injuries. With Noguchi, she wasn't fully fit for running two or three weeks prior to the actual race—she was able to jog, but jogging wouldn't win her the gold. We were shocked—the Japanese people were shocked—but I think she was the one who was most shocked.

What are the differences between custom shoes, like the Olympians wear, and store-bought shoes?

The custom-made shoes are basically made to suit the needs and requirements of the actual venue where the race will take place, because you have to think about climate conditions and road conditions. You have to know about the place; you have to go there yourself. If you think about speed and distance and being able to run fast, custom-made shoes are shoes for a particular athlete. Also, if you train really hard like an athlete, then the custom shoes would be great, but if an ordinary runner wears them there is a chance they might get injured because the shoes are for well-trained athletes. There is also the issue of durability. For each Japanese athlete at these games, four or five pairs of shoes were prepared because the shoes are good for about

200 kilometers. Ordinary people would want their shoes to last three to six months, or even more. They want their shoes to be durable.

For five or six years or something. [Mimura smiles a bit and sucks air through his teeth.] That's not good. The sponges change shape, so that affects the function, and that isn't good for your body. Basically your shoes get old—the longest you should use a pair would be about a year.

What else should ordinary runners know?

Long-distance runners need a little room in terms of width and the toe area because the feet swell up a bit as you run—how much bigger depends on the person, but some people's feet will swell up to 5 millimeters—a size bigger. The most important factor is fit, because there are many people whose two feet aren't the same size.

Like Naoko Takahashi? That's right. There is an 8-millimeter difference between her legs. [He compares various measurements.] This one is the computer generation and this is the one by hand, and this is the analysis. With these measurements we design the shoe.

You measure 13 points, is that right? Why so many? There are several purposes for them. In track and field vertical movement is the main movement, but sometimes there are side-to-

side movements and that sometimes causes sprains, so you can measure that. There are 13 points, but for track and field I use five or six; it depends on the event. If you use the computer to measure it, it takes 30 seconds to get the results.

But the hand measurement is the real craftsmanship? The computer measurement really is simple and gives quick results. It serves as a simple and easy-to-understand method for people like ordinary joggers, but this [he points to the hand-drawn diagram] is for professionals. It's more detailed and precise.

Can I ask you about the rice husks used to make the soles?

I went to look at Beijing in April and at the end of June with Noguchi. The city was very hot and we thought the chances were the athletes would be pouring water over themselves when running, so the road would get very wet. The traditional sole is very light, but it's very slippery, and you have to think about that. We thought about making nonslip soles that are also light and are shock resistant because the road was hard. [He holds up a shoe with a polyurethane sole.] This gets really slippery when it rains. With the rice husks [he points to black flecks in the sole of another shoe] the sole is spongy.

Where did the idea for the rice husks come from? We did a lot of research in the labora-



Mimura's hand drawings ensure a perfect custom fit for elite athletes.

tory. At the Atlanta Olympics there was also a problem with the heat, and we had to think about Yuko Arimori running in that heat, so we thought of rice husks because, first of all, they are very light, and they have a good grip even on wet surfaces. And they are very cheap—if you ask, people will just give them to you. In Atlanta, Arimori wore soles with rice husks, but back then, in terms of technology, many things went badly. There was a problem with the shape changing and with the sole shriveling up, so in Sydney, Naoko Takahashi didn't wear them.

Noguchi wore them in Athens, though?

That's right. In Athens the course was probably the worst I've seen. The

surface was hard, there were many ups and downs, and the road was really slippery, so we had to readopt the idea of using rice husks. We'd known four years out where the Olympics would take place, so we were able to do our own research in advance and we basically made and remade the sole 25 or 26 times to get it right.

As a craftsman there must have been many career highlights.

In terms of the Beijing Olympics, the athletes who won gold in the high jump and triathlon wore our shoes—that was very nice. We had an athlete win a medal in wrestling with our shoes. The best thing is being able to face the challenge of entering other fields I've never

worked in before—I made shoes for boxing, fencing, shooting, and weight lifting at the Los Angeles Olympics. The shoes I made in 1981 that were used for the boxing and weight lifting in 1984, the designs are still being used today, which means a lot to me.

What do you think of Noguchi calling you "the god of shoes"? Nobody would feel bad about that. (Mimura pauses to pick up the shoe that Noguchi was due to wear in Beijing.) You know, she could have won. □



Left to right: Mimura in his Kobe studio; Naoko Takahashi at the finish line in Sydney (2000); Mizuki Noguchi triumphs in Athens (2004); Mimura's hand-drawn diagrams; a rice husk sole for a custom, Mimura-designed Asics running shoe.

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