

Paul reported, "I have hunted in temperatures of 115 degrees for the past month including seriously hot, rocky, sandy stuff in the Namib Desert in Namibia. The boots held up perfectly. The crepe sole is very quiet and I loved it but it has died now."

Such testing would have taken years if we attempted to do it ourselves because none of us spend the required amount of time afield.

During the spring, summer and fall of 2007, Russell addressed a PH-inspired footwear concept that has just been introduced. The Thula Thula PH (Thula Thula means "quietly, quietly" in the Zulu language) was designed as a closing boot, final approach footwear for dangerous game. We were told by a number of PHs that on final approach they like to go in barefoot. Realizing that the barefoot option was probably not realistic for most safari clients, we designed a shoe that affords foot protection yet is as quiet as barefoot walking because it has no midsole or rubber sole.

But there were a few hiccups in the process. Our first prototype was made for Jeff Wemmer, President and CEO of Monahans, Texas Hunt Company. He put them through their paces in the rugged and unforgiving high plains of west Texas during the spring, summer and fall of 2007. Wemmer, a former endurance athlete, was training in the desert for a difficult mountain elephant hunt in Zimbabwe. In the fall and winter of 2007, he continued to test his original pair of Thula Thula "PH" boots during his rigorous dove and quail hunting regimen, logging well over 100 foot-miles. Jeff reported, "Wearing the Thula Thula PHs is like walking barefoot. They provide great feedback from the ground. They're the quietest shoes I have ever worn, the most comfortable and better than any other boots I've worn."

The first prototype pair was made with a heavy-duty giraffe hide, molded sole because we had been told by several PHs that giraffe hide is the toughest leather available. They said the African natives made sandals out of it to protect their feet from thorns. True, to a point. When giraffe hide is used at full thickness it probably is very tough. But when split down to 10 ounce leather, the maximum thickness from which Russell can make a molded sole, giraffe hide

is not any tougher or longer-wearing than the bullhide used in our snake boots. In fact, giraffe was not as tough as bullhide.

Following a number of changes, we built more test boots. I am currently wearing a pair of Version 2.5, as are Craig Boddington, Jeff Wemmer and PH Ivan Carter. Ivan was wearing a pair when we told him to put them to the test. He took us literally. He wore them for 10 solid weeks while guiding clients to an amazing array of buffalo, lion, leopard, rhino and elephant (19 in all) from the Zambezi Valley of Zimbabwe to Botswana to the Eastern Cape. Ivan wore them daily, for all applications, not just final approach. He said he walked well over 350 kilometers (more than 217 miles) in them.

Ivan described the Thula Thulas quietness as "excellent, as good as barefoot," and comfort as "excellent, simply the best-fitting hunting shoes I have ever worn. Great ankle support, no rub spots and very comfortable from the get-go. They molded perfectly to my feet."

In June 2008, when he was briefly back in the United States on business, Ivan sent us a pair of boots that had been used and abused in terrain for which they were never intended. Ivan wore them every day in every possible situation – in the mountains, rocks, and sand. We told him to put them to the test and he did.

He requested that we resole them and, to increase wear, put a thin rock-climbing sole on the bottoms to give a bit of grip in the rocks.

When our production manager looked at the boots, he was shocked. "They look like they are 10 years old!" Herge said.

Unknown to Ivan, we had already begun the rock climbing sole discovery process at the suggestion of Jeff Wemmer. We discovered that one sole being considered presented us with cement issues similar to those experienced with the gum rubber sole. After months of sorting through different sole configurations and cement compounds, we settled on a thin, grippy Vibram Grip Rock sole, the sole used by rock climbers. Ivan's badly abused boots were rebuilt, fitted with the Grip Rock sole and shipped to him in Africa.

Craig Boddington tested his Thula Thulas. When asked if he would like to try the new Grip Rock sole on his boots, he said, "Mine were great in Botswana's sand. I wore them every day. I want to leave mine alone. Man, are they quiet, very comfortable!"

As Ivan pointed out, a pair of Thula Thulas with a thin rubber sole would be ideal for client hunters because they will never wear them out.

Ivan Carter is a young, fit PH who takes his hunting very seriously. He is regarded as one of the hardest working PHs in all of Africa, walking hundreds of miles every season. Looking at his boots, we agree. They have been through more than anyone might imagine, literally years of wear in a short time.

Sometimes you learn more than what you bargained for. In Ivan's case, we placed no limitation or restriction on how the boots were to be used and didn't tell him that the Thula Thula boots were not intended for mountain hunting or rock climbing. We wanted to find out how they would stand up to a fit and serious PH. We doubt that even stainless steel soles would have fared much better given this type of punishment.

Having sent one pair of Russells through the Ivan Carter Torture Course, we decided to give him another pair of boots to test. Russell made a pair of Safari "PH" II boots with the gum rubber sole and Doug's special new cement

In July, when Ivan returned from Africa after five weeks of hunting with clients, the cement had held and Ivan issued the following report.

"The "PH" II's comfort and fit were excellent but not as soft as the Thula Thula PHs I used on my last trip to Africa. *But excellent just the same.* All my hunts were for elephant and buffalo in the Zambezi Valley, the mountains of the escarpment in Chewore South, to the flat, sandy environments closer to the Zambezi River. Some days, I walked as much as 30 kilometers. According to my diary I walked close to 450 kilometers in these boots. The "PH" II were just as quiet as barefoot. I had no issues with the soles. There were no signs of wear. Due to the nature of the gum rubber soles, they maintain their grip as they wear, which is an excellent trait."

Ivan also reported that the new Vibram Grip Rock soles Russell cemented to his repaired and refurbished Thula Thula PH test boots, "Are awesome. The soles are quiet, grip well and should easily increase the life by threefold."

If you want to learn something fast, give the product to a PH. That option puts product testing on an extremely fast track. But then, that's why we do it – to learn. 🐾