

Plant based trainers for the future of running with Zen Running Club

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Richard Rusling and Andy Farnworth, the cofounders of Zen Running Club about elite performance innovation, sustainability and joining the Amazon Sustainability Accelerator.

Temps de lecture : minute

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We've spent decades working in elite performance innovation at some of the world's biggest brands and became fed up with the lack of genuine strides being made when it came to sustainability in the footwear industry. Zen was born out of a pressing need for sustainable innovation that puts performance first.

We share a love for running and being active outdoors yet running shoes often rely on materials and plastics that damage our planet, with the average shoe spending 500 years in landfill once its thrown away. Even trainers marketed as "eco-friendly" or made from recycled waste still contain oil-based components, meaning they're non-recyclable and fail to address the global waste crisis.

We wanted to create a brand that is committed to changing the way that shoes are made, without falling behind the high performance trainers right now in the category.

Tell us about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

We're a high-performance running shoe brand that's dedicated to both performance and sustainability - we want to create a future for running that does not compromise the planet. Our latest trainer, the **FUTUREOne**, features a 68% bio-content midsole made from eucalyptus, sugarcane, castor beans, and natural rubber, making it one of the most sustainable performance running shoes available today. Our aim is of course to get this to 100%. We are currently selling directly to consumers through our website, but are constantly expanding relationships with various suppliers such as Amazon.

We also work closely with the *Running Industry Alliance*, a member-based community that brings together various sectors of the industry, to share ideas and educate the industry about the need for sustainable innovation.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Zen was founded in 2020 and we then launched our first shoe, the ZR 01. Fast forward to today and we have just launched the **FUTUREOne**, which earlier this year was accredited in Runner's World's 2024 shoe awards for 'the very best shoes you can buy right now', this was a huge moment for us and something we are immensely proud of.

We've also just been selected for the *Amazon Sustainability Accelerator*, a programme to support startups who are passionate about sustainable innovation. We spent a few days with them in Berlin last month and it was incredible to be among such an impressive and inspiring group of

entrepreneurs all trying to help the planet.

Tell us about the working culture at Zen?

We have the spirit of the sport coursing through the veins of every team member - from casual 5K enthusiasts to dedicated marathon runners and even Olympians. This diversity in running backgrounds mirrors the melting pot of talent within our team, bringing together an eclectic mix of individuals from across Europe. Our office echoes with a symphony of accents - Dutch, Portuguese, Irish, German, and British - each contributing to the unique energy and perspective that defines Zen.

Our team members bring with them unique professional experiences, cultural nuances, and personal passions. This fuels our creativity, enhances our problem-solving capabilities, and ensures that we approach challenges from multiple angles.

As we continue to grow and evolve, we will always remain committed to fostering an inclusive environment that celebrates diversity in all its forms, of course united by our shared passion for running and sustainability.

How are you funded?

Our journey began with strong grassroots support, securing initial funding from a close-knit network of friends, family and high-net-worth individuals who shared our vision and believed in Zen's potential. As we enter our next growth phase, we're expanding our horizons. We're currently engaged in a new funding round, reaching out to a broader spectrum of investors, including prominent private equity firms and venture capital houses. This strategic move aims to fuel our expansion and accelerate our market impact.

Our involvement in the prestigious Amazon Sustainability Accelerator 2024 has also opened the doors to Amazon's extensive network of impact-focused investors.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Our most significant challenge has been balancing the complexities of sustainable manufacturing while maintaining the high performance standards expected in premium running shoes.

To overcome this, we adopted a multi-faceted approach which involved innovating new materials, catalysing breakthroughs in bio-based midsole technology. We also meticulously rebuilt our supply chain, partnering with suppliers who share our vision for sustainability. When it came to design, we implemented a rigorous, iterative design process, constantly testing and refining our prototypes. This allowed us to fine-tune the balance between sustainability and performance, ensuring neither aspect was ever sacrificed.

There is no doubt that this challenge has been a transformative experience. It's pushed us to innovate in ways we never imagined and has ultimately resulted in products that we're incredibly proud of – shoes that are both kind to the planet and a joy to run in.

Perhaps most importantly, we learned to be patient. Sustainable innovation takes time, and we've had to resist the pressure to rush products to market before they meet our exacting standards.

How does Zen answer an unmet need?

Zen addresses a critical gap in the running shoe market by combining high performance with bio-base materials. Our trainers perform

exceptionally well while significantly reducing the impact that the industry has on the environment.

We want to meet (and inspire!) the demands of a new generation of runners who seek not only excellence on the road but also a product that aligns with their values.

What's in store for the future?

We want to change the game for good and set a new standard for the industry. We will be the first to create trainers made from 100% bio-based material.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Embrace the journey of continuous learning and adaptation. Starting and growing a business is an inherently uncertain process, filled with challenges and unexpected turns. The most successful founders are those who approach this journey with a growth mindset, always ready to learn, pivot, and evolve.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

You won't be surprised to learn that our day begins with a morning run. Whether it's a quick 20-minute jog or a longer, more invigorating session, this time is sacred. It's just about the only time of day without distractions, just the rhythm of feet on the pavement and clarity of thoughts. A morning run can help to reset both body and mind. It's an opportunity to reflect on the day ahead, prioritise tasks and contemplate

longer-term challenges.

Richard Rusling and Andy Farnworth are the cofounders of Zen Running Club.



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