

Dayton boots, the pride of East Van, aim for Olympics spinoff

By [Sarah Rowland](#)



It's only natural that Dayton boots should aspire to the status Uggs enjoyed at the Australian Games. Here, classic Black Beauty bikers pair with a Dayton T. Model: Samara Devlin. Makeup and hair: Ellen Pratt, TRESemmé Hair Care, judyinc.com.

 [Rebecca Blissett](#)

Walking into the Dayton boot factory on East Hastings is like entering a time warp. Some of nearby Little Italy's most talented cobblers, Dayton boot makers are true craftsmen. Not a single stitch is farmed out to offshore labour; everything is done in-house. And you won't see any mass-production, conveyer-belt assembly lines there, either. Using time-honoured technology and old-school sewing machines, a pair of boots takes an average of two days to make.

But don't be fooled by these old-fashioned manufacturing techniques. Dayton CEO Stephen Encarnacao has big plans for his iconic boot company—none of which involve cutting corners or even updating the production end of things. If he has his way, Dayton will double its business within the next year simply by getting the word out about its rich heritage. How?

One word: *Olympics*.

The Boston businessman, who now calls Vancouver home, is hoping the 2010 Winter Games will do for Dayton what the Sydney Summer Games did for UGGs in 2000.

“I think Canada is going to do very well on the podium,” says Encarnacao, who recently sat down with the *Straight* at Dayton's headquarters at 2250 East Hastings Street. “I may be one of the few Americans rooting for the Canadian men and women to win the [gold] hockey medal. It would be nice if we [the Americans] win. But it's critical that Canada wins because there'll be a great buzz. Like with the Australian Games, everything that was Australian suddenly became very cool, and I'm hoping to catch a little bit of that magic in the bottle and unleash it.”

Which shouldn't be too hard. If there's one thing fashionistas love, it's a street-cred story behind the brand. And with its working-class and at times bad-ass history, Dayton's got plenty of that to spare.

In the '40s, Dayton founder Charlie Wohlford gained an international reputation for making the sturdiest logger boots around. By the '60s, Dayton was more famous for its double-soled Black Beauty biker boot (\$499). But these built-to-last East Van shit-kickers soon became synonymous with violence, gangs, and Steppenwolf fans.

In fact, before there was Ed Hardy profiling in Vancouver nightclubs, there was Dayton profiling. Guys wearing Dayton boots weren't welcome in certain drinking establishments during the mid to late '60s because they were assumed to have biker affiliations. Raw deal for the *Easy Rider* set, great for the Dayton PR camp.

“I mean, most brands have to make up stories,” Encarnacao says. And he should know: before buying out his Dayton partners in the summer of 2009, he worked with several multinational shoe companies, including Reebok, Puma, and Converse.

But the question remains—why does this Bostonian give a rat's ass about keeping Daytons in East Van, where he currently employs 17 factory workers, who earn an average of \$16 an hour?

“To me, the heart and soul of the company is East Vancouver—the good part of East Vancouver: the hard work, the blue collar, the grittiness of it,” he says. “I'm not that crazy about the kind of

way money's made here in the province: by real-estate speculation and flipping real estate and paper stocks. What I really like are things that are substantive."

So much so that he took over the company when it was losing money. It's breaking even now, thanks in part to his marketing strategies. (Dayton's first TV commercial was aired during the recent *Simpsons* 2010 Olympics spoof episode.) He also hit the trend jackpot last year when biker boots for chicks became all the rage; Dayton offers them in the Low Rider style in distressed brown or black (\$379), as well as the Bourbon Confederate style in black (\$379).

Like all good trends, this too shall pass. But, if things go right the Olympics boost will outlast the fad and Dayton boots will keep on gaining momentum.

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