

Willing & Abel podcast: If the shoe fits with Veldskoen CEO Nick Dreyer Nick Dreyer

Season 1 of Willing & Abel is brought to you by <M&C Saatchi Abel>, a proudly South African award-winning creative company founded on the principle of Brutal Simplicity of Thought.

[00:00:00] **Nick Dreyer:** The generosity of spirit, and this is something that has followed us since we started, and I'll, I'll remind you that Ross and I had no, we had no idea what we were doing from the beginning. So everything we did, we, since the beginning had this, like, this naive superpower, which was like, we don't know what we're doing.

[00:00:19] **Nick Dreyer:** But we're going to figure it out and we're going to build it and build it and build it and we asked for help the entire way through, but we never let our own limitations be our ultimate limitation. We never let our own shortcomings stop us.

[00:00:34] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel, a business, marketing and communication specialist and the founder of MNC Saatchi Abel.

[00:00:41] **Mike Abel:** I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist and an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing and Able, the home of hopeful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book, Willing and Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis. My guest today is Nick Dreyer.

[00:01:04] **Mike Abel:** He's an entrepreneur, CEO, and public speaker. Nick is the co-founder of Veldskoen Shoes, which started as a side hustle in 2016 and has grown into a global footwear brand selling in 32 countries and worn by South Africa's best at the 2020 Olympic Games. Welcome Nick, so great to have you here today.

[00:01:26] **Nick Dreyer:** Thank you so much for having me. And, um, it's a rare privilege to be talking to you about our story, um, especially the company that I'm in right now with you having seen close up so many great brands and businesses and have been, um, participatory in so many successful South African stories. So thank you for having me.

[00:01:47] **Mike Abel:** Absolute pleasure and looking forward to get stuck into the story. In fact, you don't actually know that I have a deep connection with Veldskoen. Tell me. And I didn't tell you before the podcast that I could sabotage you at this very moment. So I used to run the VW advertising for many years when I was at Ogilvy and running Ogilvy. And you may recollect David Kramer. And his red fellies were Veldskoen Ja, dat is reg. So we might have some ooh Veldskoen moments today. In fact, this whole thing is an ooh Veldskoen moment.

[00:02:22] **Nick Dreyer:** It is an Veldskoen moment. And when, you know, I think back at the early days when we first looked at Veldskoen even as an idea. Yeah. We looked at those, those videos on YouTube, you know, with him tearing up a mountain pass and, and figuring out how to get a Volkswagen or a fire engine, I believe it was. A fire engine, yeah, through a Volkswagon. And I had the great privilege of having David Kramer at our opening of our museum not long ago. And it was a moving moment. Uh, we actually have a pair of his Veldskoen in our museum.

[00:02:54] **Mike Abel:** That's amazing. I want to come and visit your museum. I didn't know that you had started one and that's testimony to the brand new building that you've already set up a Veldskoen museum. Well,

[00:03:03] **Nick Dreyer:** okay, maybe museum is a little bit of largesse. Let's call it a mini museum. It's a, it's a, it's a small, tiny storytelling space. A bookshelf. It's, yes, exactly. Um, but we, you know, we're setting out to become the new tiny thin giraffe that everybody bought when they came to South Africa. Have you ever seen one of those wooden sculptures of a giraffe? Veldskoen is trying to become the new wooden giraffe, which is something that everyone leaves South Africa with as a, as a memory with. And the museum serves that purpose or the mini museum serves that purpose to teach them a little bit more about why the shoe is so important. And, um, and hopefully they want to take it with them.

[00:03:39] **Mike Abel:** I love it in fact, I'll tell you another David Kramer story while we're chatting. So, my grandfather, paternal grandfather, had movie houses in Worcester and Paarl. And back in the day, during interval, David Kramer would come out with his guitar and entertain the audience, uh, while they changed the reel. And, uh, his song Budgie and the Jets at the 20th Century is based on my grandpa's movie house, the 20th century.

[00:04:05] **Nick Dreyer:** That is, that's incredible. Why can't they keep, why can't they do that anymore? Yeah. Why can't we have a mid-movie break and having, have some talented musician come in and entertain us for a couple of, a couple of songs.

[00:04:15] **Nick Dreyer:** A Veldskoen moment. A Veldskoen moment. There we go. Ster-kinekor, you're listening.

[00:04:19] **Mike Abel:** Love that. So it's very interesting, you know, when I talk to entrepreneurs, because I like to go a little bit back in your life to understand your journey here. So we're going to talk about you as a young boy, all right? Did you have any sense growing up in Pretoria what you wanted to be when you were big, as they say? Were your parents entrepreneurs?

[00:04:41] **Nick Dreyer:** Not at all. My parents are civil servants. My, um, mom was a teacher and um, a librarian. And my dad was a firster, uh, a pilot, a fighter pilot. Oh, wow. And he then ended up being, uh, working in military intelligence at the time of the transition of the government. And, um, he was, of course, very busy. I'm always nervous when I say what I wanted to be, because I once told a publication that I

actually wanted to be a fighter pilot like my dad, and then they published that I was a fighter pilot. So I've got so many mates that come to me and go, were you actually a fighter pilot? And I wasn't, but I had visions of Top Gun, you know, and, uh, as a young boy and then, um, going into standard nine or matric sort of 17, 18 years old. It was a, it was an interesting time in the country, 1996. And to be fair, all I really wanted to do was travel. I didn't know what I had to do to do that. But I knew that I wanted to do something which would allow me to see the world. And that ended up being hospitality. And I ended up studying that in the Cape.

[00:05:46] **Nick Dreyer:** Amazing.

[00:05:47] **Mike Abel:** And with that, I saw you became at some point the general manager of the Magnificent Element House.

[00:05:52] **Nick Dreyer:** Yes. That's the, maybe the formative part of my career and hospitality. Um, I was very lucky. I applied for a job at this place called element house. I didn't really know anything about it. I started as a G as a duty manager. I then, I think a year in discovered that it was owned by this. Man called Paul Harris. Yeah. Um...

[00:06:14] **Mike Abel:** Another great South African entrepreneur

[00:06:15] **Nick Dreyer:** ends up being my great mentor. Oh, really? In life. Um, great. I also walked through the halls of Element House in the first eight months trying to understand what all the fuss was about for the art. And, uh, Maggie Laubser, Maggie was in pen and I couldn't, I couldn't give him head around. So I spent about a year Yeah. Studying these works and studying artists and I became deeply passionate about it to the point where I loved it so much. Paul allowed me to, to really get my hands and mind into that art collection. And that culminated many years later, becoming involved with Everard Reid, um, the great, the great gallery of Africa. And so. Element House is a, is a very important part of my, of my young career segment, I suppose.

[00:07:02] **Mike Abel:** I'm also a great art lover, as you may or may not know, and collect contemporary African art, but I do have some of the masters. But every time I do go there for a meal or a function, I walk around and I just try and absorb what they've got on their walls. And I was actually meant to be there two weeks ago for Art Angels. I don't know if you're there, Nicholas charity events. But what an amazing place. Um, so what salacious, uh, information are you going to give us on the celebrities that were there?

[00:07:32] **Nick Dreyer:** I can't, I can't, um, give you any information without implicating myself.

[00:07:38] **Mike Abel:** So when you and Michael Jackson were in a bubble bath?

[00:07:39] **Nick Dreyer:** I tell you, no, that's just very special property, which has attracted so many special people. And, um, the one thing I will tell you about having met so many high profile human beings that have said at that hotel is. Learning that they are so human, most of them and just really nice people and the humility that comes with it. Um, I, uh, I was very lucky once to meet Denzel Washington at the hotel. Um, in fact, he was staying next door and had come for a couple of meals and I just remember being overwhelmed with what a gentleman he was. And it's, it's, it's often that that catches you out. You think these people are above. Yeah. But really they are very aware of the humanity. So I, I, I love the time spent, spent there and meeting all of these interesting people.

[00:08:29] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Well, it's good to hear about Denzel because I've always been a great fan and it's always nice to know when the human being matches up to the celebrity, I guess. Nick, you started Veldskoen Shoes as a side hustle. What was your main job at the time?

[00:08:46] **Nick Dreyer:** Failure. No, it's true. Ross and myself at the time of thinking about Veldskoen were in a position where I had an exhibitions business and, uh, and an art advisory business that. The art advisory business had not even managed to start. So it, it, it didn't even have a chance to fail. I had this because of cashflow just because it just, at the time I thought that folks around the world would want to pay for advice around art services and art logistics and appraisals and all the rest of it. Turns out most folks want that advice for free. And I couldn't, I couldn't raise an invoice. So that didn't even start. Then I started an events business, um, which specialized in big exhibitions. So we brought out the world's biggest Lego exhibition, the art of the brick. And we brought out, um, Titanic, the artifacts of the Titanic. And that business at the, when you say Veldskoen was a side hustle, it wasn't actually a side hustle. It was an idea born out of absolute desperation to try and figure out how we may survive the in the coming months, and it was the same for Ross. Ross is in the building industry, his business had suffered terribly, and um, when we came up with this idea about Veldskoen we had this joint destruction that was imminent.

Young families, almost no income, we'd both dug massive holes, and we had to figure out how to get out of it. So Veldskoen was more a hopeful dream that kept our spirits up over that difficult time, than it was A side hustle or an idea that we wanted to just go out and build it. And I think that's a, it's, it's a surprising thing for people to hear that. But when we built Veldskoen, it was because we had to build Veldskoen. We just happened to have a really great idea, but it wasn't that we woke up and planned out a business and a brand. It was born out of absolute desperation.

[00:10:48] **Mike Abel:** That's incredibly valuable for people listening to, to your story today, because it actually coincides. This is a lot of serendipity in this conversation because actually my post on LinkedIn earlier today and on my other social channels was A picture of an iceberg where I say people only get to see the shiny white thing above the water. Nobody knows of all of that stuff that actually lies beneath it. And you talk so clearly about the challenges around that. So what sparked the Veldskoen idea?

[00:11:20] **Nick Dreyer:** This is the romantic, one of the most romantic business stories I've ever heard. Even though I was participatory, this is how it happens. You're a fan of Plettenberg Bay. So am I, my mom was there and I set off driving from.

Plett to Cape Town, which as you know, is a 66-and-a-half-hour journey. Yeah. And Ross was in Cape Town. Yeah. And this is my best friend. This is my friend since I was eight years old. Oh, wow. Ross and I, that's amazing. We we're best mates. Okay. And often I find myself phoning him. We speak to each other 10 times a day on the phone. It, it drives our families crazy. But we always have, he's like a brother. He's like a brother. Yeah. And on this very day, I said to him, boy, I'm in the car for six and a half hours. I'm going to give you a couple of calls just to stay awake and all the rest of it. And he was like, yeah, I'm, I'm driving around Cape town trying to be a builder still, and I'll be in the car a bit so let's chat. So I think it was about two hours in when we, as friends do moaned about something about in South Africa. And the thing that we moaned about was the opening of the, well, the opening ceremony of the Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro. And we moaned that the South African team, when they came out, looked appalling. They wore these strange tracksuits. Yeah. I remember it. We subsequently found out there was only extra large and small, and, um, the team had walked out and Ross and I had this quite organic argument about one, come on, surely we could have done better than that. And secondly, the argument was okay, but what could they have been wearing to make them feel and look South African. And then a little debate starts and it was like, they should have been wearing Madiba shirts. And I think one of us said, yeah, they're cool. But the truth is, is that Madiba wears a Madiba shirt, you know, it's not every South African wears a Madiba shirt. And then it was like, yeah, but there's very little that every South African wears.

You know, the French, not everybody wears a beret, but it's, it's associated to the French and the Congolese with all their colours. And we just, we were searching for something. And in the conversation, one of us said, the only thing that every South African knows, piece of apparel that every South African knows to be South African is a Veldskoen. And the other guy said, yeah, but they'd never going to walk out with Veldskoen because Veldskoen are deeply boring. And you'll notice I'm not accrediting either Ross or myself at this point for who said what, because we genuinely don't remember. Yes at braais, we'll claim it. The truth is we don't really remember. And I had just been exposed to a pair of shoes that had, it was an Oxford Brogue and it had a bright yellow sole on it. Okay. And it was a Cole Haan and they've done a partnership with Nike. And this was in my mind and I said to Ross, but why does a felt skin have to be boring? And he goes, what do you, what do you mean? So I said, surely we could, if you had to add colour to a felt skin, wouldn't it look different? I then phoned a young guy that was working in my exhibitions business who could do Photoshop. And I said to him, won't you please Photoshop a pair of false skin and Photoshop the soles yellow and matching laces. And he says, okay, cool. I'll do that for you. He says, what other colours would you like? And off the top of my head, I said, why don't you just take the colours of the South African flag? 20 minutes later, I'm still in the car driving and the WhatsApp comes through and all of the images come through of these Photoshop Veldskoen, but it's one image that he'd Photoshopped in all the different colours and I send it to Rossi immediately and we're swiping through them and the shoe stays the same and the colours change.

And a lightning bolt went off in the car as it did in Ross's car. And we had seen something, we had seen something look so different. The sentence was, we should start a Veldskoen business. The next person that spoke I think was Ross and he said we should call it Veldskoen and I said to him Ross You could never call a company Veldskoen because surely that's not possible. And he said that's a trademark, he says let me let me figure it out. Yeah, let me figure it out This part of the story then gets live very granular because we're back and forth all the time. But the highlight is When I arrived in Cape town, I think it was four hours after we started the conversation, Veldskoen PTY limited was registered with SIPC and we'd put it in an application to trademark the word Veldskoen which nobody had ever done.

And that, in that moment. Veldskoen Shoes was born incredible. The only born in a car. It was born in a car, and it was born to parents that had zero experience in shoes, zero experience in marketing, zero experience in e-commerce, zero experience, even in starting their own businesses, really, if you think about the failures that we had, yeah, and nothing in design, nothing in fashion. The two of us were the least likely people ever to start a footwear business. And to this day, I'd think we are the least likely, but it was in that moment that it was born, and then the race was on. We had to go. And that's how it starts.

[00:16:41] **Mike Abel:** It's amazing. I mean, you look at, uh, you know, South African brands that have done really well around the world. One happens to be my brilliant client Nando's, you know, great concept born out of, uh, you know, an exceptional meal that, you know, Robbie and Fernando had Chickenland. Exactly. Pty Ltd.

[00:17:03] **Mike Abel:** And, uh, and then you look at some of the newer brands in South Africa today, you know, uh, Maxhosa, Laduma's clothing range. You look at the art world, uh, Nelson Macamo, that's taking on the world. And then you look at Veldskoen which has a very different heritage and what I love about it is it's the opposite of the obvious because if you look at South Africa's past, you know, Veldskoen's were worn by the most conservative Afrikaans people during apartheid, you know, and here it is as this modern, vibrant, beautiful, um, future looking South African brand. And so was there when you created Veldskoen how did it occur to you that it would be relevant within a new South Africa?

[00:17:51] **Nick Dreyer:** Well, when we started reading about Veldskoen and really learning about it, we found that it has a 300 year Southern African history. Really? Okay. So the one undeniable place that it existed was in the conservative South African context. And then it was also school shoes in Zimbabwe. It was also the hunter boots. I didn't know it was school shoes in Zimbabwe. Yeah. It was the hunter boot in parts of the city. Yeah. And it had a rich history. Yeah. And it was, and it was wide, widely loved and it was loved for a couple of reasons. One a Veldskoen intrinsically since it's been made has always been known to be very well made.

Yeah. In other words, it can last. It's a, it's a, it's a product of quality. Yeah. That was baked into its. Yeah. The other thing is a Veldskoen is super comfortable. We've always known a Veldskoen to be comfortable. Not me and Ross. Literally, it's, that's what it's known for.

[00:18:50] **Mike Abel:** Have you ever worn a Veldskoen before?

[00:18:51] **Nick Dreyer:** Never. Um. Then I think also the other thing that characteristic of a Veldskoen is that it doesn't take itself too seriously. And when you overlaid that to where we were operating mostly at the time, which is South Africa, that felt a lot like South Africans. South Africans are very well made. We're, we've been put through the fire. We've been hardened. We're, we're, we're good stock. Second thing is we're unbelievably comfortable people. We really are. We're known for it globally. And then the last one is we also don't take ourselves too seriously. So we made us, we made a conscious decision that felt skin would be for everyone, the soul of South Africa. One, the market is bigger when it's for everyone to, it was the natural place because we wanted to make a shoe that represented all of South Africa at the Olympic games. That was literally the. Genesis of the idea. And in order to do that, you had to represent Mzansi, add the colour, add the vibrancy, celebrate South Africa in everything we did. So I read shoes called the Pinotage, the yellow shoes called the vilakazi I didn't

[00:20:01] **Mike Abel:** I didn't know that name. So carry on.

[00:20:03] **Nick Dreyer:** They, and the Jay Bay, the blue one, the best left break, surf break on planet earth, vilakazi, the only street with two Nobel peace prize winners on it that have lived there. What a remarkable thing. Pinotage, our own varietal. So we celebrated South Africa in every single thing we did. And we try to occupy the room. In the, in the social consciousness as a small brand, which celebrates and thinks about all that is positive South Africa without denying the other stuff, but rather shining a light on the stuff that we can control, which is the positivity and the energy that this beautiful place offers, not just us, but as a place and we just absolutely focused our minds on creating a product that would make us feel good about being South African. Yeah. Bring us together. To bring us together. And we almost wanted to create a uniform for people that feel South African. And that really is all of us.

[00:21:02] **Mike Abel:** What I love about your story and what I'm thinking about is that iconic moment of Madiba and Francois Pienaar . You know, and how a sport that had represented a different past suddenly became the thing that I guess you probably should be most proud of as a country having now won four Rugby World Cups, you know, and, and a sport that represents the, the, the very best. And I think that there are so many learnings that if you lean into something hard and embrace the upside and the positivity and the unifying aspects, you can unlock incredible magic.

[00:21:40] **Nick Dreyer:** 1994 taught this country that we're in the business of miracles. We do this. This is a tough place. Yeah. We have cultural diversity. More than most places on planet earth, but we have come through it. We've come together and we've come together through symbols like rugby and soccer and president Madiba. Um, and Desmond Tutu and, and cricket. Let's not forget cricket. Let's not forget them and the Drakensberg and Table Mountain and everything. So The idea that there is positive symbolism in South Africa that can make us all try and grow and, and remember who we are and remember what we're capable of as, as people is very, very important to us. And we, we focus our energy as a brand and Ross and I

are built this way. We are optimists. I love that you call yourself an optimist. Yeah, we, we are optimists and we are actually patriotic, but we. We, we're real and we don't shy away from the tough stuff. But the reality is, is that I still believe this is one of the greatest places on earth to be.

[00:22:45] **Mike Abel:** Of course it is. Yeah. And I think that there are countries around the world and entrepreneurs around the world that when they listen to this podcast will think, how do I apply that magic to my own country? Our own DNA? Because I think that a huge part of why South Africa's creativity is in such demand is because it's fresh, you know, and it's got soul in it. It's not just designed in terms of commercial gain, but it has an extra dimension. I mean, one of the things that fascinated me about Veldskoen and I don't want to age your target market in any way, but my late dad, he passed in January. It was his birthday in, uh, in September last year. And, uh, we've got a holiday place out in Benguela area, um, Hermanus. And, uh, I went to Ou Meul to go and buy some chicken pies for lunch. Yeah. And I saw vellies for sale there. Yeah. Um, your Veldskoen, and so I looked at it and you've just reminded me, because I bought him the blue pair. Yes. And it said Jay Bay on it. Yeah. And I remembered growing up in Port Elizabeth, which is where I'm from, Yeah. Gqeberha surfing with him. At J Bay. Yeah. And, uh, and so I bought in those. So what is the distribution channel that you apply for Veldskoen? Because it was very interesting for me to see Veldskoen in a place that sells pies and coffee and wine as opposed to a clothing store.

[00:24:14] **Nick Dreyer:** I'm so pleased you've mentioned it. So the, the conventional wisdom for a brand, right, is more stores. Open stores like brand centric stores. But when Ross and I started Veldskoen, there was two critical components to it. One was price. It had to be accessible. Uh, in our shoe, the heritage shoe, the J bay, the pinotage, all the rest of it had to be accessible from a price point of view. It's escalated a little bit now, but we actually put that price under tremendous pressure and we absorb inflationary costs. Almost every year in order to keep that shoe at a price where it makes sense for everyone. Yes, it is out of reach for a lot of people, but it has never been priced outpriced. So the first component was to price it correctly. The second component is if you want to be the shoe for everyone, it's got to be available everywhere. I like that. So we have spent six years. Making sure that we are available in Nababeep, in, uh, Bloemfontein, in Potch, in Durban, in Umhlanga in Cape Town, in Plett. We've tried to find places. We've tried to be as wide as possible. And the way that you do that is by not only focusing on traditional apparel or footwear retail. I mean, we're available in butcheries, you know, we're, we're available in a butchery outside, um, the, the Hartbeespoortdam. We're available at an optometrist in Stellenbosch. We're available everywhere that retail partners feel they could sell it to South Africans and we embrace all of it. And remember, we're not burdened by, is our brand a good fit? You know, because it's often, I don't want to associate my brand with this brand. I don't want to associate my brand with this brand. The truth is, Veldskoen is for everyone. The young, the old, the good-looking, the not-so-good-looking, the thin, the fat guy like me. It's for boys, girls, any colour, any wealth. Waiters, CEOs, it doesn't matter. So if you can find a pair of false skin, what you're really finding is you're finding that thing that makes us, us, and you're choosing to buy it at a really great price and it must be available to you. And if you like it, which most people do, then you can buy it for your kids. You can buy it for your dad. You

can buy it for your sister. It really is irrelevant. It just, it's, it's become a ubiquitous product in South Africa.

[00:26:49] **Book Ad:** Mike Abel's book, Willing and Able, lessons from a decade in crisis. Captures the stories of clients and partners and the wins, losses and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration to learn what it takes to disrupt industries or discover how to transform your company meaningfully. and truly empower your people, you'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:27:22] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's so fascinating. And again, you know, for our listeners to apply some creative thinking around targeting, because normally targeting your audience is highly scientific and specific. But when you say your target audience is Everyone, everyone with feet...

[00:27:41] **Nick Dreyer:** everyone with feet, and even some folks without feet as you saw with the Olympics.

[00:27:45] **Mike Abel:** Yeah it's kind of reminds me, you've got one of my clients is, uh, AVR and they've got, you know, these fabulous biscuits that we all grew up with called bakers. And it kind of feels very much to me like, Baker's biscuits, you know, that, you know, no matter who you are, no matter what age you're going to find something, you know, there that you enjoy. And I think that having a ubiquitous, to use your word, footwear brand that people will attach their own identity to, as opposed to the brand-defining them is really interesting. You know, many years ago, Nick, I worked on. I mentioned VW, but Citigolf, and the colours of those souls reminded me a little bit of the red, yellow, blue. And, uh, and we always just, people used to say to us, well, who is the target audience for the Citigolf? And we used to say people who are not that young in years, but maybe young in heart, because a lot of the people weren't the students buying the car, but people buying it for affordability. But what they loved was the value system and the colour associated, the vibrancy, the hope, the opportunity. And I think you seem to have. Plugged into that zeitgeist.

[00:28:51] **Nick Dreyer:** We started with a broad view of the market. Funnily enough, now that we're maturing, we are looking for veins of opportunity within that market by moving into slightly more focused areas. And I'd be interested to hear your take on it because I think most companies that are big, I suppose, they're looking for a particular audience that they're looking for, you know, especially at launch, I think you're, you're trying to find. Your audience because it, it focuses your spend, it focuses your marketing, rans all the rest of it. We started wide. Okay. And even our first Facebook campaign was, the legend is Back. We made people assume that we had existed for 300 years. So everyone was like, oh my God, my dad used to love it. Or Oh my goodness, I've been looking for these for my kids. So it was broad. Yeah. But what we've done over time, of course, because of the price pressure that we faced with the original shoe. Um, we've been, we've been creating other products in other product, product segments to the point. I was going to go there. Tell me. So, so

we started, um, the first one was Chelsea boots. We had a big demand for Chelsea boots in the UK. So we started to create a Chelsea boot, but we followed the colour through. So the gusset, that elastic piece on the, on the Chelsea boot, we made those our colours. Then we started to make children's shoes. Then we started to make slightly more casual shoes. We've just brought out a sneaker range all the way through to now a golf shoe, but the golf shoe isn't being sold to folks that have never heard of Veldskoen. It's being sold to golfers that have been wearing our shoes for the last four or five years and giving them a product that they can add to their cupboard within our brand, but it like ticks all of those brand dynamics. Comfortable. Well, really well made. And you'd enjoy this because from a brand positioning perspective, we realized we could never compete with golf shoes in the world because they're all aimed at performance. Use these shoelaces and hit it further. You know what I mean? So I'll go off shoe. Is positioned as the above-average shoe for the below-average golfer. That's hilarious. Because what we learned was 90 percent of people are really bad at golf. Yeah. So we want to give them a uniform to feel comfortable on a golf course. And so I see whole shoe. Yeah. So we've now started sponsoring golf days, but the only way we sponsor them is if you give the four ball that came last a pair of shoes and it's proven to be super fun, but it's also, it's a really well made shoe designed by a professional golfer. So is it a suede shoe? It's actually the whole grain leather. Okay. And it's been, it's been, it's a proper golf shoe. I can, I can tell you that, but again, just in terms of market segmentation and trying to find opportunity within a broad market, that's how we've gone about it. But we were lucky because the entire country knows what a Veldskoen is. It's the other way around. I think we, what, where we arrived was that everybody know, knew who we were, even though we didn't exist. And that's different to when you're trying to launch a product. Into a market and educate folks. You can't do that. You can't, you can't sell the word of a brand to every single South African. You're going to have to find pockets where you can operate and spend money to do that. So it's just interesting how Veldskoen just by sheer, almost luck, I suppose, captured all of that brand equity. And now we can start focusing. Yeah. It's the other way around.

[00:32:12] **Mike Abel:** That's fascinating because while you're talking, I'm thinking to myself, well, the definition of a brand is how consumers feel about a product. Um, so if you look at Veldskoen, the brand, is Veldskoen footwear? Always Veldskoen clothing, always felt skin other things. So when you look at Nike, and I presume you've read Shoe Dog, being a shoe man yourself, you'll see that Phil Knight obviously started off, you know, with Nike being, um, a tekkie or a sneakers, pair of sneakers. And uh, sorry for the listeners overseas, tekkie's is our South African colloquial term for sneakers. And, uh, now Nike, Nike Town, you know, whether you're buying track suits or hoodies or whatever, you can buy anything from Nike. Is Veldskoen going to branch out into other areas other than footwear? Is it going to be an apparel brand?

[00:33:11] **Nick Dreyer:** It's tempting, but no. Um, we will have ancillary supportive product. So we will have socks and we will have belts and we will have caps. But apparel, shoot is in the name. A skoen is a shoe for those that don't know what a scone is. So it will be very heavily biased towards footwear and it will have support product. That will support the brand, but we're not going to bring out a, um, Veldskoen jacket, you know, it might be on a limited run basis for specific tasks or,

um, for specific events, but I don't think it will be mainstream in terms of trying to have a clothing range. Um, oddly enough. We're very popular in travel, so, um, we'll probably end up doing a Veldskoen duffel bag. Something that you could put shoes into. That's nice. Yeah, but the way I see Veldskoen is, when I look at it as a brand, I look at it, funnily enough, not against another footwear brand. Yeah. I think it feels to me a little bit like Levi's. Levi's, everyone's had a pair of Levi's. And we want everyone to have a pair of Veldskoen in their cupboard at some point. So, and a pair of Levi's 501s are attainable, you know, they're at a price point where they are, you know, they're not super premium, but at the same time they do sell. And then you can get into the whole, um, fashion side of that business, but really it's a stock item for your cupboard, a white t-shirt, a good white t-shirt and a pair of jeans. And we're, we're saying that a cupboard needs a pair of Veldskoen and you can have a lot to choose from. You can have a basic one. You can have different colours. It's all the rest of it. But the, the, the nexus of it is, is to say it's super approachable and it's something that. It's not going to let you down on a Tuesday afternoon when you, you just want to go to your mate's house, or you can put on a pair of Veldskoen, you can go to a board meeting, or you can go climb up a mountain. It doesn't matter.

[00:35:18] **Mike Abel:** And Nick, tell me, uh, or maybe you could, uh, have your footwear brand as Veldskoen and your, uh, ancillary brands or spinoff brands as vellies, because you've got another colloquial term in vellies that I presume you guys will use at some point in time. So how did you get your footwear into the Olympic Games? Because you spoke about the shambolic outfits that our athletes wore the first time. Uh, can't be that easy to take a brand new business, uh, that you've started in 2016 and just a mere four years later, our Olympic athletes are wearing Veldskoen. How did that happen?

[00:35:51] **Nick Dreyer:** This is another great story. And this is a great South African story. So firstly, we had no idea how to do that. And I think we should acknowledge that in business, 90 percent of the time you don't know how to do what you want to try to do. Yeah. You have to try and figure it out. Yeah, you fail forwards. Fail forwards, great way to put it. And we had no idea, like anybody would have any idea. Yeah. So Nik Latouf, who was involved in our business early, um, he said, why don't we just ask? Funny that. Funny that, why don't you just ask? And he filmed me, and I made a Facebook video, and um, the Facebook video is still on Facebook, you can have a look at it. Oh, so you asked publicly? I asked our audience, and I said, Hi, it's me, Nick we really would like our shoes to be on the Olympians at the next Olympic Games, but we've got no idea how to do it. If there's anybody out there that could give us some advice or point us in the right direction, it would be really very much appreciated. And the next day, my cell phone rang. The phone goes, hi, Nick, it's Ravi. I'm the CEO of SACOC. I heard you looking for me and I said to him, you must be joking. It takes your breath away. Anyway, we started talking and he said, and I explained to him what we wanted to do. I told him the story of Veldskoen and he embraced it immediately. He said, look, we have to do this. We've got to get you on the opening games. But remember, this is like. 2019, we're still very small. And the next thing COVID hits, they put the games out and nobody knows what's going on. But we negotiated this thing hard and everything was, was looking on track. And then at the last minute, the great South African retailer, Mr. Price wrote a very big check to sponsor the Olympics. And I thought we were, we were toast. There's no way. You

know, Ravi was like gracious to give it to us, but when a big sponsor comes along, surely, surely they're going to take this opening set. And I phoned Ravi up and Ravi was very short with the other phone, he goes, Nick, I'll phone you back tomorrow. But he says, just, just stay calm. Phones me back back the next day and tells me that two things had happened. One, SASCOC fought to keep Veldskoen as the apparel, footwear apparel, for the opening ceremony. So separate from the Mr. Prost deal. They, they asked that it would be separate. And to their credit, they did. Mr. Price thought it was exactly the right thing to do. Yeah. They got it. They got it. And I just think that's a cool thing to think about. You know, we, we, we're so critical for many good reasons. We have the ability to really shine and SACOC in that moment. In a small way, shone and at the same time, a big retailer, shone as well. And I didn't believe it was true. You know, we carried on, we went and delivered the shoes. We saw them on stage when they were getting, when we saw this uniforms unveiled. And what a moment. Ross and myself at home at our Paarden Eiland office with our families and kids and our team, and we're watching and waiting for South Africa to come out. And there's the flag bearers, Chad, and the rest of the athletes. And there's a Villa Cosi and there's a Pinotage pair of Veldskoen. And we erupted.

[00:39:18] **Mike Abel:** I'm getting goosey's

[00:39:20] **Nick Dreyer:** I burst into tears. I'm sure. Ross and I burst into tears. And it was, it was this, it was only upon reflection that we thought about that as a brand story, the full circle brand story. But in that moment, it was more about survival. We'd built something. We'd. We'd faced cataclysmic death in COVID. We'd, we'd as a team all come together, hung in there as a family, and this represented an achievement, but also it, it felt like we'd broken through. And now we were on a different path towards potentially building a global brand. And at that moment was a critical moment in the thinking and in the belief system that we had in the business.

[00:40:10] **Mike Abel:** So Nick, what's so beautiful about your story is, there are a number of things that I take out of this particular example, and that is, firstly, you're going onto Facebook and asking, and that is, there's a saying that, you know, when you want something badly enough, the universe conspires to give it to you. And people don't often share their hopes and dreams, they keep it very secretive, but the universe vibrates towards putting stuff out there, not keeping it secret. The other thing that you talk about is a generosity of spirit, which I think Mr. Price absolutely showed you, because they knew they could still, um, achieve all of the fame through the sponsorship, um, and, uh, and commercial requirements without having the footwear. So they got that and they, they gave you that opportunity and then, um, you know, in terms of the Olympic committee doing something that was for the country, you know, and you don't often find that when an organization will look at something and say, this might be, might not be a big commercial opportunity, but it's an opportunity for resonance, for connection, for traction with our country. And that's magnificent.

[00:41:29] **Nick Dreyer:** And just to contextualize that moment, I can't tell you how small we were. How can I imagine? We were a small business. Yeah. Four years old. We had no, no rights talking to SASCOC, to the Olympic committee about putting

anything on anybody. Yeah. We had no, we, we, we were not just boxing out of our, we weren't even boxing out of our, we weren't even out of our weight class yet. The likelihood of that happening. It's so slim, but the generosity of spirit, and this is something that has followed us since we started. And I'll, I'll remind you that Ross and I had no, we had no idea what we were doing from the beginning. So everything we did, we, since the beginning had this like, this naive superpower, which was like, we don't know what we're doing. Yeah, but we're going to figure it out and we're going to build it and build it and build it and build it. And we asked for help the entire way through, but we never let our own limitations be our ultimate limitation. We never let our own shortcomings stop us. And that was just another good example of it. Um, but the one thing we had to be, and I think this is also important to bear in mind, we had to be truthful about who we were. You've got to recognize. In critical moments that you don't, you don't have all the answers. You don't have the answers. And if you open yourself up to that, that's where growth happens. That's where that elixir comes, that moves it forward. And it comes in the most strange ways.

[00:42:58] **Mike Abel:** So have you brought experts on board now? Do you have a whole lot of footwear?

[00:43:05] **Nick Dreyer:** No, no. It's not because we're not open to them. They're welcome to come and tell us exactly how to grow and build a scale of a business. I think you're not ready. You're proving that. But you know, when we started seven years ago, selling shoes online was almost unheard of. Yeah. Because you had to do exchanges. You know, Warby Parker broke through when it came to eyeglasses, footwear as well. Seven years ago, it wasn't. There wasn't a model. There wasn't a blueprint. We were trying to figure it out. There was even less people in South Africa that were buying stuff online. And we've never hired, if we could, we would have hired agency, but, um, we still can. Hopefully we go into it. Um, but the, the reality is, is that we were not just a bootstrap. We were a true bootstrap. We were literally using sales to fund the business. So Ross and I just had to learn everything. And then we hired people. In key positions, almost to alleviate workload, not to build a business. So interesting enough, our first hire was a copywriter. Okay. Yeah. How funny is that for a footwear business? Our first hire was a copywriter, then a designer. Yeah. And you storytellers were storytellers. Yeah, exactly. And that part, we knew we needed real talent and you could hire young people that had different eyes, views on it. So it's just interesting to, to, to think how we, we built the business from a resource perspective. Again, you know, we're trying to build it for everybody, but we just didn't have the resources to be able to plug in expertise and scale. Every single person in Veldskoen has learned on the job.

[00:44:38] **Streetstore Ad:** The Street Store turns 10 this year. The world's first rent-free, premises-free, free pop-up store provides a dignified shopping experience to those in need, allowing them to choose from a selection of pre-loved clothing and shoes. Over a thousand stores have been hosted around the world in the past decade, and now we're calling on you to host your own. Visit thestreetstore.org to sign up and find out how.

[00:45:06] **Mike Abel:** So I'm going to ask you a hard question because I don't know the answer to it, uh, and that is, are Veldskoen made in South Africa and are the products that go into your footwear locally sourced? Are we building jobs here?

[00:45:19] **Nick Dreyer:** It's the one total and utter non-negotiable in our business. We have to make Veldskoen in South Africa and we have been making Veldskoen in South Africa since the first day we made them. We simply can't entertain it in any other country in the world. The reason is as champagne is to France, a Veldskoen is to South Africa. It would be wrong. And interestingly enough, I told you that we put in the trademark application and in South Africa, we have no intent and we have never, we have never pursued anybody that calls a Veldskoen a Veldskoen because we, we, we, we're trying to make the pizza bigger. We're trying to make more people wear Veldskoen. It doesn't have to be ours, but we have the trademark globally. If you have a Veldskoen in Spain and it's not made in South Africa, we will and have enforced that trademark aggressively. The entire point. Is to help South Africa in the same way that for South Africa has helped us. We have managed to grow through our manufacturing partners. Hopewell in Durban. We have managed to grow their capacity. We've, we've managed to inspire others to start Veldskoen.

[00:46:31] **Mike Abel:** Do you know how many jobs have been created through Veldskoen.

[00:46:33] **Nick Dreyer:** It's a, it's an equation that's hard for us to, to come up with because we aren't at the cold face of the manufacturing. What I can tell you is it takes 60 pairs of hands to make one felt skin. One of our Veldskoen Now it goes to, it goes to quantify in year one, we made 500 pairs of Veldskoen I think we're aiming at 200,000 a year now. Oh, wow.

[00:46:56] **Mike Abel:** That's incredible.

[00:46:56] **Nick Dreyer:** Products. So if you're, if you look at it in those contexts, clearly you're going to be making more jobs. Clearly you're going to be creating more opportunity and our entire supply chain. From leather, to the soles, to everything, all from South Africa. Please keep it that way.

[00:47:14] **Mike Abel:** It will never change. You know, you spoke about in Mzansi, and I think that...

[00:47:17] **Nick Dreyer:** you know It can't change. You know, we, we feel like we're the custodians of something as opposed to the owners of something. And, and the reality is, is that that must be protected.

[00:47:29] **Mike Abel:** I think what you've also spoken about, Nick, is the immense role that luck plays. in these things happening because so much of what you've told me are actually lucky coincidences, lucky moments, but in and amongst a whole lot of bad luck. Sounds like you and Ross have had a lot of bad luck, uh, along the way.

[00:47:54] **Mike Abel:** A tricky question, but I'd love, one I'd love an answer to if you have one. Many seemingly small moments in your life that can have, uh, a massive impact that people don't understand. Meeting someone, a eureka moment, studying the wrong thing. Um, are there any small moments that you could reflect on that, uh, that you think, uh, have led you here?

[00:48:17] **Nick Dreyer:** I have some pivotal ones. There's a series of them, you know, sliding doors, I suppose. Um, why did I apply for a job at Element House? You know, that's a huge moment in my life. Also, Ross and I bumping into each other at standard six at school, you know, or before standard six. Younger, since eight. Yeah, well, we, we bumped into, we were younger and we then became friends because our, my dad and his mom were shopping for our school uniform and we were in the same shop together. Yeah. And so there's a moment. The Veldskoen moment, the car, but I think one crazy innocuous moment, which Ross and I shared was when we were deciding on the actual shoe, the strange moment where we were in our manufacturer's office and they'd made all the samples and we looked at them and in the room was another sample, but not ours. It was a, it was a, another shoe. It was just standing there and Ross and I had been through like two, three months of development and all these coloured shoes in front of us. And we looked at it and we're like, just doesn't feel like that one. Yeah. And we pointed at that one. Yes. And they were like, Oh my God, these guys changing their minds and blah, blah, blah. And in that moment we were like, no, we think it's that one. Everything else is the same except the last in the mold has to be that shoe there. Yeah. And we left. And to this day, I think Ross and I will. If you had to tell us what the greatest danger of our entire business was, is that if we had accepted those original samples and didn't change. Because now the thing that makes us, us, is when people wear the shoe, they adore them.

[00:50:06] **Mike Abel:** Well, let me talk to that a little bit, because I know what's going on here. You know, the great philosopher Blaise Pascal said that the heart knows reason, that reason knows nothing of. And I think that when people in business listen Yeah. That intuitive sense. Also the other thing that happens in business is people radically underestimate gut feel. Gut feel is not an instantaneous moment. Gut feel is the accumulation of your life experiences telling you something in that moment. So I think that what you're talking about is kind of that collective memory, experience, hope and ambition leading you to that shoe.

[00:50:48] **Nick Dreyer:** I also think it, it relates to design and I was so lucky in life with Element House to have seen art up close and great design up close and great architecture up close and spend time with the Museum of African Design in Maboneng. And when you have a cumulative amount of visual literacy that builds up over time, there comes a moment when you can see something that's not right. And you don't know why it's not right, but you're, it's a certainty and Ross and I, we were so close to it, that when we looked at it. You're, you're right. That experience of having looked at so much, boom, it's not right. And we could see the thing that was right on the same table. But it was that wealth of experience and learning and a lifetime of things.

[00:51:39] **Mike Abel:** And you know, what I love about that is, for people listening to the story, is the power of intuition, intuitive thought, you know, um, because I've worked in marketing for over three decades, uh, and I've sat in a lot of research. What you often see is when you show people from an advertising or a marketing point of view, a butterfly metaphorically flying, the first thing that they want to do is to shove a pin through the thorax, take the wings off it. You know, roll out the proboscis, get the dust on their fingers, and all of a sudden it goes from being this beautiful, mobile, ethereal thing to being something quite ugly. An ornament. An ornament. Yeah. Yes. Um, and I think that that's what we need to do. We need to embrace intuition far more in these kinds of decisions because everything that you've told me so far defies logic.

[00:52:33] **Nick Dreyer:** Yeah. I want to give you one more example of intuition where it played a huge role in our business. That was right in the beginning. You know, you can build a business on a spreadsheet and you could be rich beyond your dreams. Yeah. What you're never is poor beyond your dreams on a spreadsheet. You never forecast the down end. Ross and I had done that. Okay. We've been there and we drew up a spreadsheet of what this business could look like. Sales, less cost of goods equals gross profit. Less expenditure equals net profit. And we looked at the spreadsheet and we looked at the spreadsheet and we looked at the spreadsheet and one of us, I think it was both of us, looked at each other and said, no, I'm not getting it. And what we did was we took our dining room table and we brought shoes out and I said, okay, cool. Here's a pair of shoes, Ross. And he goes, okay, cool. Let's write down how much does it cost? It costs X amount. How much are we selling it for? Nice. How much money do we have? Okay, now we've got 40 Rand left. Bang. We can buy another pair of shoes. Now we have two pairs of shoes on the table. And we modeled it out. in real life with real shoes on a table so that the two of us could get our very slow arithmetic minds to visualize what a break-even could look like because we couldn't understand it on a spreadsheet.

I've worked on many spreadsheets. I've seen income statements and balance sheets and all the rest of it. But I think what you've also got to figure out sometimes, and this was our intuition telling us, is to say, take a step back down to the very basics, visualize it differently, and figure out if you're actually a growing concern and what it's going to take visually. In order to grow this business. And that moment when Ross and I spent, we spent a full day at a dining room table, one pair of shoes, writing it down, two pairs of shoes, writing it down until eventually we had like 40, 50 pairs of shoes and going, okay, that's what the business looks like. And then we understood it.

[00:54:43] **Mike Abel:** Amazing. Um, you know, I think you're very lucky that, uh, a lifelong friendship, uh, has played out in such a remarkable value system in your business that comes through in droves. A lot of people, you know, that I've helped along the way in terms of ideas, you give them an idea and then what they do with that idea is they run off to somebody with a big bucks. And they do the idea with them rather than saying, you know, here was the idea that we germinated together. Let's go on that journey together. And I think that what those people often do to your earlier observation is they might make A lot of money, but they don't make a huge

amount of deposits in the soul. And I think for you and your best friend to have created this remarkable business together, to be doing this together, to be loyal and truthful and honest to one another is just a fantastic story in and of itself. And hopefully you'll write a book about this friendship one day, uh, because I think it's worthy of a book. I mean, I've had my same closest friend. Yes. My mom met uh, his mom in the nursing home 56 years ago when they were having me and my friend John. Yeah. And similarly for, you know, we've never done business together actually. But for 56 years, you know, we've supported each other through this life journey and it's been, uh, one of, uh, of immeasurable richness in every way.

[00:56:15] **Nick Dreyer:** Nobody must underestimate though that it's all roses. Yeah. You know, Ross and I, we have, no, we have, we have a set of rules, man. And, um, we debate harder than anybody you'll know. Yeah. And if you

[00:56:30] **Mike Abel:** listen to myself,

[00:56:31] **Nick Dreyer:** emotional honesty is, yeah. And Ross and I go hard. Yeah, we do. But we've got a set of rules backed into our relationship that ensures that we can come back tomorrow and do the same thing.

[00:56:41] **Nick Dreyer:** Yeah. And we're aligned. You know, we both know what, what, why we're doing what, what we're doing.

[00:56:47] **Mike Abel:** And so you're aligned, is that aligned in values?

[00:56:48] **Nick Dreyer:** Yes, we're aligned in values. We're very similar in terms of our value set. We're family, family orientated. We, when we started Veldskoen, remember it was in this incredibly difficult period um and we made a deal and we shook on it. And the deal was that this business would look after our families. And that was the point. We were going to build something beautiful. We would be in service of that business, but we would work as hard as we can so that we can secure the family's futures. And that deal has never wavered, and it won't, because we're fully aligned in looking after each other. Because at that moment we didn't have anybody else.

[00:57:30] **Mike Abel:** Well, you know, Nick, people often say, you know, um, What are the prophets? What's the bottom line? What's the this? What's the that? And I always say, soft sell is the hardest sell of all the stuff that happens between the cracks, the, the real shit, if I can put it that way, I can put it that way. It's my podcast, the real shit that matters. And I think that you've spoken a lot about that. I've got one last question because you and I have had a very rich and layered conversation here today, and I've absolutely loved hearing your story. I must just tell you that I'm going to leave inspired and I hope our listeners leave inspired to, uh, you seem like a very curious man. What are you curious about at the moment?

[00:58:14] **Nick Dreyer:** I'm, I am curious. Um, right now I'm curious about 35 mil photography. Oh really? Yeah. I just, I love the arts as you know, and I'm not autistic in that I can't paint. Yeah. Um, but I find I find the technical application of things quite

super interesting and the development of things. And I, I think one of the subjects that I'm, maybe it's cause I've got kids. Yeah. I'm, I'm trying to be more present and I'm trying to value my time with them. And you know, a phone, when you take a picture on a phone, these things have become so easy and accessible that I don't think we revisit them. And I don't think, even though they. The ability to capture images is so prevalent. We don't value them as much. And I think taking a picture with a 35 mil camera, it's either a great picture or it's not a great picture. And I think the value goes up exponentially because it's a little bit more difficult to do. And so I'm quite interested in that process. I'm not saying I'm anywhere near able to. Yeah. But I'm trying.

[00:59:23] **Mike Abel:** Well, I, I like to put it a little bit differently. I hear exactly what you're saying because I think you've either captured the moment or you haven't

[00:59:31] **Nick Dreyer:** Yes. You know. It's very true. Not the image. Not the image. Yeah. The moment. Yeah, the way it feels. Exactly. At the time. That's right. Love that. You can have it.

[00:59:41] **Mike Abel:** Thank you. Nick, I really loved hearing your story today. Thank you so much for sharing it with me and my listeners.

[00:59:49] **Nick Dreyer:** Mike, thanks so much for having me. What a, what a treat it is to sit in a room and speak to somebody that has been, has been so close to iconic South Africa and iconic South African storytelling in terms of business and brand. And, uh, to give me the opportunity to tell our story on your platform.

[01:00:14] **Mike Abel:** It's so inspiring to see a South African proudly take on the globe with a brand that is so unique to this land. It really shows that you can achieve incredible things when you have a good idea. backed by good people who believe in it. Thanks so much for listening today. If you enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five-star review. Tune in to Willing and Abel next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

[01:00:41] **Credits:** This podcast is produced by 2Stories. Written by Linda Scarborough, produced by Carol Williams, with audio editing, engineering and sound design by Kozi Mzimela, with production assistance from M&C Saatchi Group South Africa's team, Maciek Dubla and Nadia Siegel. Special thanks to Sonic Nursery and Edible Audio for the recording of these episodes.