BRAND PROFILE: BABOLAT

A study into the strangely secretive tennis racket market found by "industry consensus" that Babolat is top of the tree. It's a remarkable feat given that the French company only began manufacturing rackets in 1994.

Babolat makes a racket

What do tennis stars Kim Clijsters, Andy Roddick and Rafael Nadal have in common? The obvious answer is Grand Slam titles to their names, but that's not all; they have all won titles using rackets made by French manufacturer Babolat.

According to a recent report in the *Financial Times*, the Lyon-based company now leads the pack in the tennis racket industry, which is valued at €290 million per year. As the leading brands prefer not to make their sales figures public, this conclusion was reached by "industry consensus". It means Babolat rackets made up a large chunk of the 7.9 million tennis rackets sold in 2015, putting it ahead of the likes of Head, Yonex and Wilson.

The family-run company didn't begin manufacturing complete rackets until 1994, after spending over 100 years supplying racket strings for an impressive roll-call of champions. Its success is built on two key pillars: spotting the next generation of tennis talent and staying one step ahead of its rivals in the race for new technology.

The birth of tennis

Babolat was founded by Pierre Babolat in Lyon in 1875, just one year after Walter Clopton Wingfield is believed to have first documented the rules of the game we now call lawn tennis. It created the first strings for tennis rackets out of natural gut, sourced from the intestines of cows (or sometimes sheep). Fast forward to 2016 and it offers a complete range of tennis equipment, as well as gear for fellow racket sports badminton and padel. Despite the long journey that the company has been on, it is still 100% owned by the Babolat family and retains operations on its original premises in Lyon.

Its first big breakthrough came in 1925 when Albert Babolat developed the VS natural gut string, which the company says has been the "world benchmark" in gut strings ever since.



A sensor integrated into the handle of the Play 'smart' racket lets players keep track of their performance.

Babolat

These strings were developed alongside Les Quatre Mousquetaires, France's golden quartet of players from the early 20th century. Jean Borotra, Jacques Brugnon, Henri Cochet and René Lacoste formed the backbone of the French team that won the Davis Cup (the premier international team tournament in tennis) six straight times in the 1920s and 1930s. Since Mr Lacoste won the French Open in 1925 using a racket featuring Babolat strings, rackets strung by the company have won at least one Grand Slam title every year apart from 2015.

Even though strings made from synthetic materials now largely dominate the market, Babolat still offers customers the option of its VS natural gut strings. Not that it has fallen behind its rivals in the technological stakes; it unveiled its first synthetic string, Elascord, in 1955 and in 1986 launched a multifilament string entirely manufactured in France.

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Rafael Nadal has won 14 Grand Slam titles using Babolat rackets.

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In 1950, Babolat set up an international distribution network to meet growing demand for its strings, which was fuelled by the success of the French players it supplied. It continued to build its popularity in the second half of the 20th century, supplying strings for Grand Slam champions including Arthur Ashe, Bjorn Borg and Pete Sampras.

The strong reputation it had established gave Pierre Babolat, chairman at the time, the confidence to take a risk and in 1994 the company began making tennis racket frames. Going head-to-head with brands of substantial pedigree in the manufacturing of frames could have been too big a task for Babolat. But the gamble paid off; in 1998 Spanish star Carlos Moya became the first player to win a Grand Slam title using a racket fully manufactured by Babolat. His win at the French Open that year and subsequent rise to world number-one put Babolat on its own path to stardom. There have been many more success stories since, with Rafael Nadal (who has won 14 Grand Slams, including nine French Opens) the most notable star to come from the Babolat stable.

An eye for talent

Mr Nadal has been using Babolat equipment since the age of 12. When the company began making rackets in the early 1990s it lacked the budget to sign established players and so had to come up with a different strategy to boost its sales. It decided to seek out the most promising players on the junior circuit and offer them the free use of its strings, provided that they also used its frames. US star Andy Roddick and Belgium's Kim Clijsters joined Mr Nadal as early recruits through this scheme. When these previously unknown juniors went on to win Grand Slams (Andy Roddick at the US Open in 2003 and Kim Clijsters at the same tournament in 2005), sales of Babolat rackets went through the roof. Mr Roddick's win was especially important as it boosted Babolat's reputation in North America.

Babolat still has scouting agents across Europe and the US searching for the next junior sensation. It realises that if a young player starts winning tournaments using a Babolat racket, they are unlikely to want to switch suppliers as they make the step up to the senior tour. World junior number one, Russia's Anastasia Potapova, and Canadian Félix Auger-Aliassime, a rising star of the boys' game, are currently on its books. Both are just 15 years of age and Babolat has high hopes that they will go on to emulate the likes of Mr Nadal and Ms Clijsters on the global stage.

Innovation as standard

Babolat says that innovation is one of its "fundamental values". It strives to make new technological breakthroughs (as well as improving its existing products) to give its athletes the best chance of winning. The pursuit of a technological head start over the competition can be seen as far back as 1981, when it created its first electric stringing machine. It went a step further in 2000 by creating a range of machines that use sensors to string rackets. The company says this innovation offers "precision through high-powered electronic intelligence".

During research and development, the company insists it keeps player performance as its "primary objective". It generates new ideas by observing and analysing the movement and performance of the sport's top players and combining the knowledge gained with the technological expertise of its staff. A good example of this is the AeroPro Drive racket, which was optimised for Rafael Nadal following in-depth analysis of his playing style.

One of Babolat's more recent innovations is the Play 'smart' racket, which has an integrated sensor able to track and record a player's performance. The sensor measures frame vibration and can detect the power and accuracy of each individual shot. An accelerometer and gyroscope provide data for "Babolat algorithms" to track racket head speed and distinguish between the different spins players put on the ball. Current CEO, Eric Babolat (great-great-grandson of founder, Pierre) says it was developed over a period of 10 years with the contribution of more than 50 technicians, scientists and researchers. Babolat spent a great deal of time working on how best to integrate the sensor into the handle of the racket without compromising its performance. Players are able to see how many shots they have played, how long they were on court for and the average length of rally. The data recorded can be uploaded to the Play smartphone application so that players can keep a record of their performance. They can compare their statistics with those of their friends and rivals or see how they would match up against the world's best players.

In a recent interview, Eric Babolat has predicted that "no tennis players will play with non-connected rackets in 2020". If this proves to be the case and technology in tennis continues to move at the same pace as in the last 20 years, Babolat will have to be at its best to stay ahead of the competition and retain its place as world number one.



Babolat's AeroPro Drive racket was designed following in-depth analysis of the playing style of long-time partner Rafael Nadal.

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