


**BRAND PROFILE: JOMA SPORT**

A company founded in rural Spain in 1967 is now among the top ten global sports brands, with a growing presence in Europe, Asia and the Americas and an expanding list of elite athletes championing its products.

# From humble beginnings to the top ten

**L**ast year was eventful for Joma, a sports brand set up in a remote part of Spain in the mid-1960s. Founder, Fructuoso López, was just 18 years old when he started Joma, making footwear by hand in his house in the village of Portillo de Toledo in the largely rural region of La Mancha. Always fascinated by technology, he invested as soon as he could in tools that helped him test the leather he sourced for suppleness. His investment in continuous improvement has helped turn the Joma of today into the top athletic apparel and footwear brand in sports-mad Spain and one of the top ten sports brands in the world. Prophets are seldom celebrated in their own backyards, but in 2011 a local business magazine named Mr López as La Mancha's Executive of the Year. His reaction was to say: "There has been a great leap in the quality of sports clothing and footwear since I started in the business. I started out making footwear and everything then was made by hand, although with raw material that was of extremely high quality, but the research and development that goes into products today was missing then. These days, we even carry out detailed research into socks. Consumers have become very demanding and brands have no choice but to move forward with them, or even anticipate their needs."

Fructuoso López emanates entrepreneurial spirit. Teenagers in villages in the province of Toledo in the mid-1960s had few non-agricultural options when entering the world of work. The Joma founder says now that what drove him in the early days was a desire

*2011 Davis Cup winner as part of the Spanish team, tennis star Feliciano López comes from the same small town in La Mancha as Joma.*

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*Frédéric Kanouté of Seville, a prominent Joma-sponsored footballer. Football was the first sport that Joma got involved in.*



to be the master of his own destiny. "My home was the only factory I had, and my hands the only tools," he recalls, "but I remember feeling as though I were running the biggest business in the world."

His world then, though, was one in which not everyone owned a pair of shoes, and it was this that spurred him towards becoming a maker of footwear. Shoes had been a luxury product when he was growing up: Fructuoso López wanted to make them more available to the people in his community. He calls his interest in technology an obsession, but describes the processes Joma has in place today as "infinitely more developed", working directly with elite athletes, interpreting their needs and working with biomechanical experts from research institutes such as the footwear research institute of Toledo (ASIDCAT) and the Valencia biomechanics institute to turn them into running shoes, tennis shoes, and boots for indoor and outdoor football.

As a lifelong participant in sports, Mr López says the sportswear market was a logical path for him to follow. "The self-sacrifice and perseverance that sport demands are attractive to me," he says. And what better way to represent these values and show what they mean to a brand than to persuade top sports stars to play a leading role in promoting your products? It was 1989 before Joma secured its first big names, one of them in particular with

international resonance. Athletics were important to the company, and a team was already working hard to secure for Joma some exposure on home ground at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, but football was, and in many ways still is, its main focus. Just as today's poster-boys include Pepe Reina, Liverpool and Spanish national team goalkeeper, and Seville FC's former African footballer of the year Frédéric Kanouté, it's no surprise that Joma's first sponsored athletes in 1989 should have been footballers. They included attacking midfielder Txiki Begiristáin and marauding full-back Miquel Soler from FC Barcelona, both recent high-profile signings for the club at the time, but the real star name was that of Emilio Butragueño, famous for his goal-scoring exploits for Real Madrid and the Spanish national team. Coveted by every big sports brand in circulation then, Joma's relationship with Butragueño was to prove long-lasting, even surviving his departure from Spanish football. When the striker made a surprising move to modest Mexican club Atlético Celaya in 1995, Joma followed, setting up a Mexican subsidiary, basing it in Celaya and taking up the role of kit supplier to the local team.

International expansion had begun in 1990, when Joma set up in the German market. Important moves into the US (1999), China (2000), Italy (2002), the UK and Brazil (2003) followed. The case of Brazil is interesting. Joma pulled out of the Brazilian market in 2007, but announced a return towards the end of 2011, saying that the main lesson it had learned in the sometimes complex trading environment of Brazil was not to try to run all activities there from Spain. This time it will have a locally based partner and, with the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games on the horizon, it is confident of making a success of its business in the South American country at the second attempt. "I began to look at international expansion because I could see that the local market was about to become the global market," Mr López says.

Another development during the last decade has been the impact Joma has begun to make on the tennis market. It was fitting that Feliciano López, a member of Spain's 2011 Davis Cup winning team, should have been the first tennis player to become a sponsored Joma athlete (in 2009) because, like the company, he too was born in Portillo de Toledo, although he left the village at the age of two. He was joined on the Joma roster in 2010 by former Roland Garros champion Juan Carlos Ferrero. These tennis stars wear Joma clothing as well as shoes and it's fair to say the level of textile technology

*The company now makes collections for athletics too.*





*Joma founder Fructuoso López (right) at the presentation of a new kit collection for the Spanish Athletics Federation.*



the company employs in its current collections for tennis, athletics and, of course, football is considerably higher than when it kitted out Emilio Butragueño's Atlético Celaya in the 1990s.

Highlights include proprietary moisture management technology DRY MX, the construction of which it says "imitates the gills of aquatic creatures" to make athletes' shirts more breathable. Shirts that the Spanish team, including Feliciano López, wore to win the 2011 Davis Cup final against Argentina in Seville in December 2011 featured DRY MX, as well as a special flatlock construction. More widely, the range of innovations also includes proprietary labels for fabric that is "manufactured using technology and materials that respect the environment", for seamless, skin-friendly "bioelastic" material, for lightweight fabric made from microfibre and for its own temperature-regulating micromesh system. The company, however, gives little away about exactly how it chooses its materials and puts products together.

Most of the information it puts into the public domain is about its success in applying these innovations to finished sports garments for its elite athletes. Of its most recent successes, though, the most public came not from a product for top sports people but instead from one for ordinary fans. In August 2011, Joma took over from rival sports brand Kappa the contract to supply kit to one of Spain's top football clubs, Valencia CF. During the first three months of what has been reported to be a five-year contract, the company reported surprisingly high sales of replica shirts among the team's supporters. To Joma's surprise, the shirt that has sold best among supporters is none of the three official ones that genuinely replicate what the team wears, but a fourth, unofficial one that the sports brand said was specifically for the fans. The top consists of yellow and red vertical stripes and is reminiscent of La Senyera, the traditional flag of the Valencian region. Sales of the Senyera shirt in the first months of the Joma deal reached 25,000, surpassing sales of even the club's traditional first-choice white shirt. Valencia CF has used this design for official team colours in the past, most famously in winning the Spanish cup against Real Madrid in 1979. However, a more recent attempt to re-introduce it, by Nike in 2004 (albeit with the addition of blue sleeves), failed to achieve commercial success. Perhaps Joma's ambitions are more modest. Perhaps its timing and taste are more attuned. 

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