

Roger Federer uses a combination of Luxilon Alu Power Rough (pictured right) and Wilson Natural Gut 16



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## TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

TEST-DRIVE A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT STRINGS



→ While Luxilon's polyester offering, the Alu Power 125, is swung by many professional players on tour, it's often part of a hybrid combination with different strings in both the mains (the strings that run from top to bottom of the racket head) and the crosses. The most popular stringing arrangement on tour, regardless of the manufacturer, is polyester in the mains for durability and natural gut in the crosses to increase feel and reduce stiffness in the racket.

Babolat, whose VS string is a common choice of gut among the pros in their hybrid string jobs, is just one of many brands with massive offerings when it comes to tennis twine. As demonstrated by the pros, how you customise your racket and what strings you use comes down to personal preference so we would recommend test-driving various types and tensions before purchasing a reel. After all, there is no substitute for feel.



“LUXILON ORIGINALLY MANUFACTURED PRODUCTS SUCH AS MEDICAL STITCHES AND BRA STRAPS”

# THE TOUR'S BEST KEPT SECRET?

How a Belgian string manufacturer has revolutionised the sport on the men's and women's tours

WORDS: LEIGH WALSH

» **BELGIUM MAY BE** famous in tennis circles for producing two of the finest female players of the last few years – Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin – but some might argue that perhaps their greatest gift to the world of tennis came in the form of monofilament tennis strings.

Luxilon, which was founded in 1959, originally manufactured products such as medical stitches and bra straps, but it wasn't until 1984 that the Antwerp-based company first dabbled in the stringing business. It was a decision that, some say, changed the game of tennis for good.

Luxilon, a fusion of the words 'luxury' and 'nylon', entered the market with the revolutionary Big Banger string, but it was the introduction of the ALU Power 125 in 1994 that made the tennis world sit up and take note.

The 'Luxilon shot' as it was dubbed by the pros in the mid-90s was first made famous by loveable Brazilian Gustavo Kuerten. Powerful groundstrokes dripping in topspin may be the norm in today's professional game but players haven't always been able to hit full throttle with such merciless ease and control. Some have credited wider frames for the increase in power and spin, while others point to the strength of the players themselves. But for many experts, the secret lies in the strings.

“Luxilon strings have changed the game of tennis in many ways,” said Ryan Polito, the Wilson & Luxilon strings product manager. “Modern players swing very fast at shots and generate a lot of their own spin. However, the unique features of Luxilon string allow it to ‘snap back’ quickly and impart even more spin on shots. Now players

can hit big, powerful shots and control this power with added spin.”

When Kuerten was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in March of this year he was asked what Luxilon strings did for his career. “Three French Opens and one Masters Cup,” he responded with a grin. “They gave me a lot, so much.”

The former world No.1 arrived at the 1997 French Open sitting at No.66 in the world rankings. Two weeks later he surprised everyone, including himself, by beating former champion Sergi Bruguera in the final to collect the first of his hat-trick of titles in Paris. Everyone wanted to know his secret and Guga didn't mind sharing it, crediting Luxilon for his rapid ascent.

Today, according to data collected from the 2011 US Open and the 2012 Australian Open, a whopping 73 per cent of the ATP's top 100 players string their rackets with Luxilon, while 59 per cent of the WTA's top 100 use the popular brand. But Luxilon, which is distributed worldwide by Wilson, has an interesting business model in an era when athletes are handed freebies like flyers.

“Some professional players do receive Luxilon string for free,” said Polito. “Some of these are contracted players that have a sponsorship agreement with Wilson. Others are players who have a contract specifically for Luxilon strings. However, there is still the vast majority of players that pay for Luxilon strings.”

The brand, which boasts players like Roger Federer, Juan Martin del Potro, Victoria Azarenka and Petra Kvitova, allocates 20 per cent of its workforce to research and development activities. And with minimal margins separating players at

the top of both the ATP and WTA everyone is looking for an area where they can gain that extra edge.

“Our research and development team is always testing new materials, constructions, production processes, and treatments to continue to make cutting edge string,” Polito emphasised. “We want to be the string of choice for every player, regardless of whether that player is a professional or a weekend warrior.”

For recreational players strings can often be an afterthought but if a player is looking to make improvements in their game then being selective with strings is a good place to start. There are various types of strings and tensions that suit different gamestyles so a little time spent testing them could make a big difference in the long term. It's the fine details that are important in tennis and Luxilon know all about being precise.

“They source many of the raw materials that go into the strings,” Polito added. “These materials are controlled from beginning to end, so they know exactly where the materials come from and how they are handled, transported, stored, and processed for manufacturing.”

“Every set of Luxilon string is individually numbered and can be tracked to know what day it was made, what time it was on the line, the air temperature, and who was monitoring the production line. This dedication to quality control ensures that every set of Luxilon string plays identical and at peak performance.”

Luxilon strings don't come cheap with a 220-metre reel retailing at £191.99. But with an average of 325,820 metres of Luxilon used on the tour last year, the pros have decided that you can't put a price on quality. ■