

'Smart' racket offers tennis revolution

17 March 2014, by Ludovic Luppino



A new 'connected' tennis racket, Babolat Play, pictured in Paris, on March 13, 2014

Aluminium and graphite swept away the wooden racket that Bjorn Borg used to win 11 Grand Slam titles, but smart rackets that analyse power and spin promise a new tennis revolution.

One such intelligent racket is already on sale in the United States and will be launched in Europe in May.

The Babolat Play will cost 399 euros (555 dollars), about twice the price of a classic tennis racket.

Eric Babolat, head of the French company that developed the racket, said "it is like Star Wars is coming to tennis."

The Babolat Play is shaped like any traditional racket.

But sensors inside the handle record the power of a stroke, the impact of the ball on the racket strings, the kind of stroke, the spin and game time and send the information to a smartphone, computer or other device.

Babolat, whose company is one of the oldest

tennis equipment makers in the world having made the first animal gut strings in 1875, is convinced that within 10 years all rackets will be equipped this way.

The Babolat Play's basic design is an updated version of a racket produced by the Lyon company already used by Chinese women's star Li Na.

The new racket only looks different because it has a blue diode light at the bottom of the handle which flashes when the sensors are turned on.



Eric Babolat, the CEO of a company specialized in tennis equipment, poses with a new 'connected' racket, in Paris, on March 13, 2014

The rechargeable racket can be linked to a computer, tablet or smartphone with a cable or by wifi.

The application will, for instance, tell you how many balls were hit cleanly and how many were sliced.

Maybe not all players will welcome publicising their slice ratio. Babolat plans, however, to launch a social media application that allows players to compare their success rate and set challenges.

"It could be useful for an amateur, but also for a star such as Rafael Nadal," said Babolat's communications director Thomas Otton.

"Maybe Nadal gets some information from courtside cameras but what happens when the ball hits the face of the racket has remained a secret."

Nadal and French player Jo-Wilfried Tsonga tested the rackets at a demonstration event. But Babolat is still waiting for a player to use one in competition.

It has been accepted by the men's Association of Tour Professionals (ATP) and the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) since January 1.

Jean-Christophe Piffaut, a former head of the Roland-Garros [tennis](#) museum in Paris and a writer of a book on the history of the sport, said he was mystified as to the interest of the racket for professionals.



Thomas Otton, global communications director for the French tennis equipment maker Babolat, shows the company's new 'connected' racquet, during the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, on January 10, 2014

"Top level players have a coach and get a lot of information from video. I think this (racket) will only confirm what they already know," he said.

Eric Winogradsky, a former professional and coach who now works for the French Tennis Federation, is convinced that the smart racket does have a future, however.

"The information crossover is interesting," Winogradsky told AFP.

"This is the future. Lots of other sports are already doing this, why not us?"

The Babolat Play will soon face smart competition.

Sony Corp is developing a sensor that can be fitted to any racket. The first models will be launched in Japan in May in a partnership with the Yonex racket maker.

If the smart racket gets a grip, the battle could become who can make it even more inter-active. Eric Babolat already predicts an application that allows coaches to send information back to a player.

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APA citation: 'Smart' racket offers tennis revolution (2014, March 17) retrieved 24 October 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-smart-racket-tennis-revolution.html>

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