

EN_SDB x SUPERGA

Episode: The Italians' shoes

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

The tennis courts' red clay becomes as hard as concrete when there is a lot of sun.

And then, like a rocket, the tennis ball flies off, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. The players speed up, running from one side of the court to the other and suddenly changing direction as they slide to a halt.

Turin, Italy. The sun is shining, and a very fair-skinned girl is moving gracefully – as though she were dancing - on one of the sun-warmed tennis courts, racket in hand. She moves with feline grace, anticipating the arrival of the ball. Her white dress flutters with every change of direction, while her hair, tied back at the nape of her neck, remains still.

The match is intense. Although the court is private, the small crowd gathered around the playing area watches the exchanges between the player and her rival with eager attention.

Her opponent's ball hits the net and hangs in the air for a second.

A Hamlet-like doubt: which way will it fall? The girl reads its trajectory and lunges forward, diving under the net with her racket stretched out in front of her. Unfortunately, something goes wrong. Her foot slips, causing her to fall heavily onto the clay court. A cloud of dust rises, obscuring her outline. Still lying on the ground, she looks down at her left foot.

GIRL: Damn it!

But who is that girl? What has happened to her and why is she important to our story?

SIGLA

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

Welcome back to *Storie di Brand [Brand Stories]*, the podcast that uncovers the incredible stories behind some of the world's most famous brands.

Today's episode is a special one, capturing a significant part of Italian history. It's a shoe brand that perhaps best represents this country — simple yet iconic. We are talking about **Superga**. It's a brand that has become part of the lives of millions of Italians and people around the world. I remember practising tying my shoelaces on a pair of Supergas as a child.

Superga is more than just a pair of shoes; they're a 'blank canvas' that takes on the personality of the person wearing them.

Our story begins on a tennis court in the early 1900s, with a girl who has a nasty fall. But who was she? To find out, we must stay in Turin and start our story with a company that has nothing to do with tennis, and a delivery that... well, that was a little late.

Turin, 1913. A worn-out lorry jolts along a bumpy road, advancing uncertainly and fatigued by its long journey. Crammed into the cab of the struggling vehicle are two sweaty and nervous men. One of them grips the wide, thin steering wheel; the other looks repeatedly at a crumpled piece of paper.

LORRY DRIVER: Get the map out of my way! Where the hell are we supposed to go then?!

LORRY ASSISTANT: It says “Wal...Wal...ter Martiny Rubber Limited Company...”

LORRY DRIVER: Now, how on earth can anyone name their company something so long? By the time you've finished saying it, you've reached the city of Asti!

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

Frustrated, the driver sticks his head out of the window, trying to get the attention of a worker cycling in the opposite direction.

LORRY ASSISTANT: Excuse me! Do you know where Walter Martiny's factory is? The one that makes... rubber.

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

The workman interrupts him with a weary smile and, without saying a word, points upwards with a wave of his arm. The two men follow his gaze and see that he is pointing to the top of a hill, where a huge basilica with a dome and two towers on either side dominates the landscape.

WORKER: Head towards the Superga Basilica, up the hill. On the way, you will pass Mr Martiny's factory.

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

The two men in the lorry nod and set off. So, it's towards Superga, right? The lorry begins to climb the hill, and then, around a bend, there it is: the Walter Martiny Rubber Limited Company. Mr Martiny himself is waiting for them, wearing a crumpled shirt with rolled-up sleeves, oil-stained trousers, and thin-rimmed glasses that reveal an impatient and demanding gaze. With broad gestures, he signals for the lorry to enter the car park. The two men on board look at each other in confusion. Who on earth is this Walter Martiny??

Walter Martiny was born on 25 May 1887 in Turin into a wealthy family. He immediately proved himself to be an enterprising young man with a forward-thinking attitude. At just sixteen years old, he invested a small sum given to him by his parents in a factory producing vulcanised rubber, which was cutting-edge technology at the time. Vulcanisation is a process that makes natural rubber, which is extracted from rubber trees, useful for a variety of purposes. Natural rubber is soft and sticky, while it hardens and becomes brittle in the cold. The vulcanisation process, invented by Goodyear in 1844, makes this material incredibly versatile for use in everything from tyres to countless other applications.

There was great excitement surrounding this marvellous material in those years. A few years earlier, the **Pirelli** rubber company had been founded in Milan, and Walter recognised its economic potential. He therefore decided to focus on tyres and started filing patent after patent. In his laboratory beneath the **Basilica of Superga**, he worked tirelessly, reinvesting all his profits in new production lines. Italy had just been born and needed all the rubber it could get. Walter was a technician, and... well, let's say that he wasn't particularly interested in appearances. When the time came to name his company, he chose a very long – I'd say almost futuristic - name that no one could pronounce: Walter Martiny Rubber Limited Company. It sounded modern to him, but it soon caused problems. Lorries struggled to find the company headquarters.

However, the Turinese are practical people and have found a simpler solution. The workers say things like, 'I found a job at Superga' or 'We have to go to Superga', referring to the nearby sanctuary.

As mentioned, Walter's factory specialises in vulcanised rubber, but business is not going very well. Competition from Pirelli is fierce, and bicycles and cars have not yet become popular. One afternoon, Walter ventured into the fields around the city in search of inspiration. He must find a new market for his rubber at all costs. The sun is high in the sky and Walter, tired and sweaty, sits under a willow tree next to a field where farmers are working.

Looking at the sunburnt faces and bare feet of the men and women soaked in mud - Walter is struck by an idea. Farmers work barefoot or, at best, in heavy wooden clogs. In winter, when the ground is saturated with mud and moisture, it is a pitiful sight. Their feet are swollen, cut and sore. Men and women fall ill because their shoes are inadequate, permeable and non-insulating. Walter runs to the factory, takes out a large piece of unsold rubber and begins to shape and cut it.

After a whole afternoon of testing, the first pair of waterproof Superga boots suitable for all Italian men and women working in the fields was ready. It may seem a trivial product, but it

would change the lives of thousands of people. The Walter Martiny Limite- ehm, I mean Superga, was saved!

The first Superga boots left the factory in 1912. They were clunky, heavy and certainly not stylish. But they worked! They protected feet from water, mud and sharp stones. Their success was immediate and overwhelming. Piedmontese farmers queued up to buy these miraculous rubber boots. Even the Kingdom of Italy took notice, deciding to subsidise their production and supply them to the police force. It was almost like a small-scale industrial revolution.

It is the first truly useful product for ordinary Italians — a democratic object that considers only practical utility, not social class. However, Walter Martiny is still not satisfied.

Sure, he has done something useful for workers, but what's needed is something that is truly for everyone, without exception. But what could that be?

Turin, spring 1924. In one of the most elegant cafés on **Po Street**, a man sits alone at a table in the corner. His face is hidden behind a newspaper. It is Walter, enjoying breakfast and reading the business news before going to work. This time, his eyes peek out from under the edge of the newspaper and focus on something distant and completely unrelated to business figures. It is a woman sitting at the back of the room. She is elegant and looks independent. She has a modern vibe that sets her apart from the other ladies of Turin's bourgeoisie. And she is beautiful! Noticing Walter's gaze, she looks back at him. Caught red-handed, our protagonist lowers his gaze and immerses himself in the article he has just read.

Walter waits for several minutes before he feels brave enough to look up again. The young woman has fair skin and a genuine smile. She is holding a bag, the handle of a tennis racket sticking out of it. She stands up and approaches Walter boldly. He immediately lowers his gaze, but it is too late — he is trapped! The young lady greets him in English, then switches to Italian.

GIRL: Good morning, do you play tennis? Would you like to walk me to the court?

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

Completely taken aback by the invitation, Walter nods breathlessly. He silently follows her towards the club's sports field. Along the way, he discovers that her English accent is no coincidence — she is the daughter of a British industrialist and has lived in Turin for several years. In England, everyone plays tennis, and she is a fairly good player too. It is a hot day in Turin, with a cloudless sky, and the red clay courts look like concrete.

Walter sits down on one of the few chairs around the court to watch the match with a few other curious spectators. If you recall, our journey began right here today: with a girl, a red clay court, a ball on the net, and a disastrous fall.

It was the girl who tripped and fell. Worried, Walter runs to her and helps her up. Her white outfit is smeared with red earth. She takes off her shoes and throws them on the ground in frustration.

GIRL: Walter, look... These shoes only lasted three matches and they're already worn out. They're rope-soled shoes — are there no more durable ones?

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

Walter watches her walk away angrily, then picks up her shoes, which are now completely unusable. The rope soles are completely worn out and have come off. They had caused her to fall. He turns towards the girl, who has quickly regained her smile and is now walking barefoot off the court. She is a woman he has just met, but who already occupies an important place in his mind and, above all, in his heart. The only thing he can do now is get her attention. Perhaps those broken shoes will give him the opportunity he needs...

Walter doesn't go home that evening, but goes straight to the factory. He enters the completely empty laboratory and takes the rope shoe out of his bag. He realises that he has to find a solution; he has to create a pair of shoes that is both more durable and more comfortable. He spends the night surrounded by sheets of paper, pencils and rubber samples, unable to sleep.

The main problem lies with the sole. It must be durable yet not too heavy; it must grip the clay court without being too rough. Then there is the upper: it must protect the foot while allowing it to breathe. Walter tries, fails and starts again and again.

He designs soles with different patterns and experiments with rubber compounds of various densities. The only things he cares about are the shoe and the smile of the English woman who keeps him awake at night. After weeks of trial and error, Walter finally holds the first prototype in his hands. The sole is made of vulcanised rubber with a special texture: small grooves that provide grip without being too rough. The upper is made of durable canvas and is sewn with great craftsmanship. The final result looks sturdy... but rather plain, with an essential design.

In the afternoon, he goes to the tennis court where he knows he will find her. Once again, he is overwhelmed by his feelings.

GIRL: Walter! What are you doing here? Is that for me? What did you bring me?

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

Walter is thrilled. He pulls the shoes out from under his coat and hands them over, smiling slightly in embarrassment.

WALTER MARTINY: If you want to try them on...I made them for you. I mean, they're nothing special, but they should fit better...

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

The girl looks him straight in the eye and hugs him.

GIRL: Thank you! I try them on right away!

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

Walter was right once again. The first tennis match is a revelation. The shoe grips the clay court perfectly, bending but not tearing. Best of all, the shoes are still perfectly intact at the end of the match.

GIRL: I don't even feel them on my feet! Well done, honey!

SPEAKER [Max Corona]:

As she says this, she gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. Walter is paralysed; it is way more than he could ever have imagined! But this is only the beginning...

The two got married less than a year later, and for Walter, those shoes became a real obsession. His wife wears them for tennis, and everyone envies her. But if they're good for tennis courts, why wouldn't they be good for anything else?

The first Superga tennis shoes were produced in 1925. Their design was plain and simple. But it worked. For Walter Martiny, that was all that mattered. He had no idea that this basic white shoe design would become iconic for an entire nation. Its success was immediate and overwhelming.

Superga went on to sell thirteen million pairs of shoes to forty million Italians. The name began to appear on the shoes themselves. It was a success that no one had predicted, not even him. They were no longer just tennis shoes. The 2750 model instantly became a classic thanks to its simplicity and comfort, making it suitable for any use. Some people wore them on boats, others in the countryside — everyone had a pair — and thanks in part to government contracts, Superga's profits skyrocketed.

Unfortunately, those were dark years for Europe. World War II was looming, and Superga was forced to stop making canvas shoes and focus on producing rubber boots for the war effort. Superga and Walter emerged from the war devastated. Martiny was now almost seventy years old and had experienced many adventures with his wife. His creation — that factory with the impossible-to-remember name — had served the country and the Italian people, but he now felt he could no longer continue. In 1951, his lifelong rival Pirelli, based in Milan, made an offer to acquire the company. Walter accepted the offer and spent the last years of his life with his wife in a house in the Piedmont hills. Both Walter and his wife died a few years later, in 1957. However, their legacy still had a story to be written.

The economic boom hit Italian society like a hurricane. Superga shoes were versatile, comfortable, essential and democratic, and were worn by everyone: from wealthy boat owners to young people on the streets. They were popular with everyone, from students to professors. They were like a blank canvas, taking on the identity of whoever was wearing them. Some were covered in sea salt, some had paint stains on them and some were covered in red clay. They were worn however the wearer wanted, without forgetting their original purpose: tennis.

In the world of tennis, Superga set the absolute standard. In 1976, Italian tennis champion **Adriano Panatta** won three major tournaments while wearing his beloved Superga trainers: the Rome Masters, Roland Garros, and the Davis Cup. This was the culmination of a dream born from a passion that began on a clay tennis court in Turin.

The Superga Sport line was launched alongside a new 'swallowtail'-shaped logo that would become instantly recognisable around the world.

However, under Pirelli's management, Superga underwent a change of image. It became just one of many brands owned by the Milanese multinational. Managers focused on mass production, costs and international markets. However, they lost sight of the soul of the product. They forgot what had made those shoes special: attention to detail and the emotional connection with the customers.

Sales fell, and the brand lost its identity. Superga seemed destined to be forgotten, to become a nostalgic memory of an Italy that no longer existed. It was an Italy that seemed to be changing too quickly with each passing year and no longer knowing who it was.

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were all different decades, with different trends and fashion styles. Then, in 2004, a turning point arrived. Superga, a shoe brand named after a basilica, was by then on the brink of collapse. However, a forward-thinking entrepreneur recognised that this iconic shoe was an integral part of Italian cultural heritage and still had a significant role to play. **Marco Boglione**, already head of the **Kappa** clothing brand, acquired the company and in 2007 it became part of the Italian corporate group BasicNet.

Marco looks at a brand-new pair of white Superga shoes. They are clean and simple. Timeless. Like a blank sheet of paper. They don't impose a style or dictate fashion. Instead, they adapt to the person wearing them, absorbing their personality and becoming part of their story. However, they only stay clean on the first day; after that, they change. They celebrate and keep the memories of the person who wears them: from the mud of

countryside walks, the dust of city streets, the scratches from adventures, and the memories of travels. Every Superga shoe tells a different story. The secret of their longevity is that they are never intrusive, yet always present.

Every Superga owner has a different story to tell. These shoes are a blank canvas on which artists and international brands have expressed themselves. From Fendi to Yamamoto and Versace. Today, Superga has been reborn while staying true to its nature.

It produces over three and a half million pairs of shoes a year. It operates in twenty-five countries worldwide. It offers 250 different models.

However, the real success lies beyond the numbers. It lies in the fact that these shoes continue to tell stories, even after more than a century. Stories of people walking through life with their dreams, fears, and hopes.

Superga has become the shoe brand that accompanies people's lives in Italy and around the world. It is a discreet yet faithful lifelong companion that neither judges nor imposes itself. It simply stays by your side, ready to absorb every moment, every emotion and every step towards the future. They have remained true to their original design, and perhaps next time you see that sole and those unmistakable patterns, you too will recall the moment the man who designed them fell in love with a young English tennis player. Superga has kept its promise to be the blank page on which everyone can write their own story.

Thank you to Superga for making this episode possible and for giving us the honour of recounting the history of the brand and of a great Italian entrepreneur.

You will find all the links for further information in the description. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast channel. I am Max Corona, and this is "*Storie di Brand*".