

Gola, UK's oldest and distinctively British sportswear brand celebrates its centenary this year. To mark its anniversary of surviving against the odds and enjoying its successfully revitalised image, Gola has launched a limited Centenary Collection of footwear and bags, published 'The Gola Years: 1905-2005' book and teamed up with Northampton Museum and Art Gallery to exhibit key items of its memorabilia from the past 100 years.

Sounds Spanish but quintessentially British



The first Gola football boot was heavy, above the ankle, with reinforced toecap and all leather soles and studs.

Gola started life in 1905 when Joseph Leeson & Sons produced a range of football boot styles, as sports were becoming increasingly popular with those working in factories. The first Gola boot was sturdy, with a rugged, handcrafted design that was to change little until the 1950s.

The end of World War I may have sparked off the advent of numerous sporting disciplines but it had also crippled companies which had devoted their efforts to those on the front line. Leeson was no exception and, during the Depression of the 1930s, the company was bought by another boot maker, W. Botterill & Sons of Bozeat, Northamptonshire. The brand name Gola was adopted for its popular football and rugby boots.

After a period of producing army boots, by the mid-1950s Gola's production was still centred on boots, shoes, football and rugby boots that very much resembled the pre-war designs. Only later into the '50s did Gola turn its attention to other sports and changed its production to directly moulded rubber soles and much lighter football boots with a lower cut upper.

That decade was crucial for the brand, as it marked its venture into the world of sports sponsorship and the launch of its flagship trainer—the Harrier. Gola's famous relationship with Liverpool Football Club started whilst Bill Shankly's team was on its way to the FA Cup Final at Wembley, stopping off at the Gola factory to pick up some free boots. Whilst at Wembley, adidas approached the team and paid it to wear its boots. Despite accepting the money the players wore Gola footwear with adidas-like stripes painted on and went on to win the cup. The brand continued kitting out sportsmen and women, and Manchester United.

Gola's famous Harrier trainer was launched under that name in 1968 in a move to keep up with brands such as adidas or Puma. The trainer was suitable for squash, volleyball,

badminton and training, and instantly became a hit of the late 1960s and early '70s. These two decades saw product diversification, and in the 1970s Gola forged strong links with its main distributor, Langdon and Sons, part of Europleasure plc which bought 30% of the brand. By 1974, Gola was a global brand (in the 1960s it was already exporting to 67 countries) and the ERG Group, to which Europleasure belonged, took over Botterill, the Gola brand and Bozeat Boots to merge them into Gola Sports Limited.

The start of the 1980s proved less lucky for Gola, as fierce competition, recession and management shake-ups forced it to close its factory in England and it ceased production in 1983. The same year, William Lamb & Co. bought the brand and set up the subsidiary Gola Lamb Ltd. A change of tactics followed and Gola started recovering, targeting youngsters, venturing into non-sports retailers and capturing the female buyer. In 1984 it turned its attention to grass roots football and sponsored the English football Conference League, known as the Gola League, which, coupled with powerboat and skydiving sponsorship deals, kept it in the public eye. But another dip followed in the mid-1990s and Gola again ceased production.

Resurrection came in 1996 when Gola was bought by footwear distributor and current owner Jacobson Group. With the goal to relaunch the name as an affordable brand, targeting the young and the fashionable, Harvey Jacobson played on its heritage and trendy British image which luckily coincided with the popularity of everything retro and the big return of '70s trends. By 2000 Gola's sideline of retro footwear, bags, track suits and other iconic items branded Gola Classics, were again selling worldwide.

Today Gola has sales of \$150 million per annum, small in comparison with some of the major international brands. It has a network of 30 worldwide distributors, plans to develop and expand its clothing range over the next few years and a strategy to return to the production of well-priced technical sportswear. After 100 years, its staying power cannot be faulted. 