GILLETTE: SPORT, ADVERTISING AND MEMORY

How a Razor Brand Became Part of the World's Biggest Games



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INTRO

Gillette is one of the most heavily advertised brands in history. In the United States it was already tied to the great sporting events of the 1940s and 1950s, sponsoring baseball, boxing and televised sports programs.

In America, Gillette did not simply buy advertising in sport. It helped invent the modern model of sports sponsorship.

A few facts:

In 1939 Gillette bought the sponsorship rights to baseball's World Series. The deal was such a commercial success that it pushed the company to invest more and more in sport.

In 1942 the Gillette CAVALCADE OF SPORTS was born, a program that brought together the brand's main sports sponsorships, first on radio and then on television.

In the forties and fifties, for many Americans, sport and Gillette were almost inseparable. The brand was associated with baseball, boxing, college football, horse racing and the great national events.

Above all, Gillette became famous for the Friday night boxing broadcasts, watched by millions of viewers.

The historic slogan:

LOOK SHARP.

FEEL SHARP.

BE SHARP.

It tied shaving directly to the values of American sport: discipline, success, precision and personal image.

Before it became a global shaving brand, Gillette became the soundtrack of American sport.

When millions of Americans turned on the radio or the television to follow a game, Gillette was almost always there waiting for them.

While in America Gillette was growing together with sport, radio and television, in Europe a completely different ground was taking shape.

After the war, millions of families were not looking for luxury. They were looking for normal life.

A home.

A car.

A refrigerator.

A television.

A better life than the one their parents had lived.

It was in this setting that the Italian economic miracle was born.

And with it came new spending, new habits and new symbols of modern life.

Gillette did not arrive as a luxury good.

It arrived as a promise of quality, reliability and progress.

Every blade sold told the same idea: the future would be better than the past.

In the sixties and seventies, Italy was changing its face.

Cities were growing.

Factories were working.

Advertising was coming into people's homes.

And international brands like Gillette were becoming part of the daily life of millions of people.

Without fanfare.

Without showing off.

But with a steady presence that would run through generations.

That is why the story of Gillette Italy is not only the story of a brand.

It is also the story of the economic miracle seen from the mirror of an Italian bathroom.

THE ITALIAN MANAGEMENT

Every Sunday at 2:30 in the afternoon, Italy stopped.

Football had by then become the country's common language.

In factories, in bars, in homes and in offices, people talked about the same matches, the same players and the same teams.

While in the United States Gillette had built its presence through baseball, boxing and televised sport, in Europe it was becoming more and more obvious that football was the most powerful vehicle for the brand's growth.

Inside Gillette, this awareness was very much present.

The European managers, and the Italian ones in particular, understood that football was not just a sport.

It was a form of popular culture.

A way into millions of homes at the same time.

The 1970 World Cup in Mexico was the first great test of this vision.

Not everyone was convinced.

The American parent company looked at the operation with caution.

But Europe was destined to become a strategic market, and the bond between Gillette and football would open a road the brand would travel for decades.

Today these steps belong to the history of advertising.

Back then they were simply decisions to be made.

And my father was there.

Later, I would be there too.

FIFA 1970–1998

Inside the stadiums of the 1970 World Cup, the Gillette name was impossible to ignore.

The big advertising boards held strategic positions next to other leading names of the international economy: Kodak, Coca-Cola, American Express and Mercedes.

Every brand had its own space.

The unwritten rule was simple: be seen without sharing the stage with a direct competitor.

The match was played on the field.

The memory was built around the field.

The cameras followed the ball, but along with the ball, the brands that had chosen to tie their name to the event also came into the homes of millions of people.

It was a simple and brilliant mechanism.

Ninety minutes of football.

Millions of viewers.

One single image sent around the world.

At the end of the match, people remembered the score.

They remembered the champions.

And almost without noticing, they also remembered the brands that had come along with the show.

That is how world football became much more than a sporting competition.

It became one of the most powerful advertising tools of the twentieth century.

And Gillette was already there.

In the years that followed, every World Cup refined that model.

More technology.

More television coverage.

More investment.

More viewers.

But always a relatively small number of global companies, almost an exclusive club, able to stand beside the most watched event on the planet.

The tournaments were:

Mexico 1970

West Germany 1974

Argentina 1978

Spain 1982

Mexico 1986

Italy 1990

United States 1994

France 1998

In every country, the sponsoring companies gave their customers tickets to the most important matches.

They were not prizes tied to particular purchases or sales targets.

They were relationship tools.

A way to turn a brand into an experience to remember.

Salespeople could attend the events too, usually together with their families.

We were there.

And above all, we were there in 1990.

For Italy it was the World Cup of the Magic Nights.

For Gillette Italy it was something more.

The Italian company gave its customers official pins with the logo and the mascot of the tournament.

Special editions and products dedicated to the event were also made.

For many, they were simple promotional items.

For those who still keep them today, they have become fragments of memory.

Because World Cups end.

Matches end.

Advertising campaigns end.

But some memories keep moving through time.

THE NEW SLOGAN

In 1989 Gillette introduced one of the most famous slogans in the history of modern advertising:

THE BEST A MAN CAN GET

It was not just an advertising line.

It was a statement of leadership.

For the first time, the brand stopped talking simply about blades, razors and technology.

It began to talk about the man.

His ambitions.

His work.

His family.

His image.

His desire to become better.

The strength of the slogan was right here.

Gillette did not say:

“We have the best razor.”

It said:

“You can be the best a man can become.”

The product became a tool.

The goal was the person.

The advertising campaigns showed men engaged in sport, in work, in family life and in everyday challenges.

Shaving was no longer the center of the message.

It was the ritual that came with every new beginning.

The slogan had already become an integral part of the company’s identity. It was there in the communication, in the presentations, in the conventions and in the very way the company told its own story.

It was not only about selling.

It was about leading.

About innovating.

About being recognized as the world’s point of reference for the category.

For many years that line captured the spirit of the brand perfectly.

It did not talk about price.

It did not talk about promotions.

It did not talk about discounts.

It talked about excellence.

Maybe that is exactly why it stayed in the memory of millions of people around the world far more than many of the campaigns that came after it.

Because products change.

Technologies change.

Generations change.

But few ideas manage to outlive their time.

“THE BEST A MAN CAN GET”

was one of those ideas.

THE END OF AN ERA

With France 1998, a cycle that had begun almost thirty years earlier came to a close.

From Mexico in 1970 to the end of the century, Gillette had walked alongside every stage of the globalization of football.

For a generation of managers, customers, distributors and consumers, the bond between Gillette and the great sporting events seemed natural.

It had become part of the very identity of the brand.

Then something changed.

Not suddenly.

Slowly.

Strategies shifted.

Priorities shifted.

Markets changed.

Executives changed.

And so did the ideas about what Gillette should be in the new century.

The result was that an important part of the memory built between sport, innovation and global leadership was gradually set aside.

Maybe it was inevitable.

Maybe not.

But looking back at that path today, one question remains open.

How can a brand that helped write the world history of sports sponsorship forget such an important part of its own heritage?

This book was not born to answer the question.

It was born to remember that this story really happened.

And that someone lived it from the inside.

AFTERWORD

This book tells a story that spans three decades.

A story made of sport, advertising, innovation and people.

A story that starts with American baseball, runs through the FIFA World Cups and reaches the end of the century.

The story ends in 1998.

But the questions it leaves open reach all the way to today.

Because a brand does not live only on the products it sells.

It lives on the stories it chooses to tell.

In 1989 Gillette found an extraordinary answer:

THE BEST A MAN CAN GET

A simple line.

A line able to travel across the world.

A line able to outlive its own time.

In the years that followed, I watched the market as the son of a man who spent forty years inside Gillette, and as a professional who spent eighteen there himself.

From that observation came a conclusion.

The story told so far is not wrong.

It is incomplete.

The answer I found does not belong to this book.

It already exists.

It already has a name.

It already has a slogan.

It already has a campaign.

And it appears inside this saga.

Ferdinando