

## BOOK REVIEW

# RAFA – MY STORY

RAFAEL NADAL WITH JOHN CARLIN

(SPHERE BOOKS – 2011)

In this revealing autobiography, co-written with journalist John Carlin, 10-times Grand Slam champion Rafael Nadal offers an in depth look at his life, family and upbringing on the Balearic Island of Mallorca.

Set against the *"Greatest tennis match of all time"* Rafa describes his state of mind during the 2008 Wimbledon final against Roger Federer, and reveals a number of surprising personal details, including his insecurity regarding tennis, and his sometimes difficult relationship with his uncle and coach Toni.

Throughout the book the significance of his family, which includes various grandparents, godparents, uncles and aunts, on Rafa's life, becomes apparent. Joan Forcades, his physical trainer since age 14 says, *"Rafa is no more than the sum of his parts. To understand Rafa you have to realise that when he wins, not only does just he win, but the entire Nadal clan wins too."*

The prevailing unassuming Mallorcan culture, has also greatly influenced Rafa's, and he says there's nothing he looks forwards to more than going home between tournaments to escape the crazy world of celebrity, to a place where he is looked upon as just any normal person, either at Manacor or the beach resort of Porto Cristo.

Though the book deals extensively with the coaching relationship of Rafa and Toni, Rafa states that the person who has influenced him most is his father Sebastian, who took him all over Mallorca as a child to play tournaments, and who was, and remains, a constant source of support.

Rafa tells how as a child he was trained to *"endure"* by Toni, who employed a Spartan philosophy, in which no whining or excuses were allowed. *"Endure, put up with whatever comes your way, learn to overcome weakness and pain, push yourself to breaking point but never cave in. If you don't learn that lesson, you'll never succeed as an elite athlete,"* Toni instructed Rafa.

Rafa describes how once as a seven-year-old, on a boiling hot day, he had forgotten to bring a water bottle to a match. Toni though, refused to get him another one, in order to teach his nephew the lesson that you should always come prepared to play, and that it was his fault that he didn't have that water bottle.

One of Rafa's godparents even accused Toni of *"mental cruelty"* against his nephew, and Rafa states in the book that Toni has made him more insecure than he should be.

Rafa though, is at pains to say how much he loves and respects Toni, and that he would never have become the player he has without his help.

Though much is made of Toni's harsh tutelage, it becomes apparent that Rafa himself from a young age possessed a fanatical competitive edge, and was self-driven to achieve greatness. Rafa describes how age 10, and having lost a match he should have won, his father tried to console him.

*"Come on. It's no big deal, you can't always win."* Sebastian said *"Look, you've had a fantastic summer with your friends. Be happy with that. You can't have everything. You can't be a slave to tennis. You've had a fantastic summer, why's that not enough?"*

Rafa though, burst out crying and said, *"Yes but all the fun I had then can't make up for the pain I'm feeling right now. I never want to feel this way again."*

By age 12 Rafa was one of the world's top juniors and practicing up to four hours per day. Despite his success, Toni continually felt the need to put him down, always told him he needed to do better and banned any family celebration, even when he won a big tournament. Instead he would tell Rafa, *"You haven't achieved anything yet, we need much more."*

Toni did this to ensure that success did not go to Rafa's head and says of modern day children, *"The problem nowadays is that children have become too much the centre of attention. Their parents, their families, everybody around them feels a need to put them on a pedestal. So much effort is invested in boosting their self-esteem that they are made to feel special in and of themselves, without having done anything. People get confused: they fail to grasp that you are not special because of who you are but because of what you do."*

He says of Rafa, *"Humble is the way you've got to be in this period. There's no special merit in it. What's more I wouldn't use the word humble to describe Rafael. He just knows his place in the world. The point is that the world is quite big enough already without you imagining that you're big too. People sometimes exaggerate this business of humility. It's a question of knowing who you are, where you are, and that the world will continue exactly as it is without you."*

For Rafa's parents the need for him to become a good person far outweighed their desire for him to become a successful tennis player, and they strove hard to make him understand that though his results might be exceptional, that didn't make him anything special.

Rafa's mother said, *"Sometimes people say to me, How lucky you've been with your son! And I reply "I've been lucky with my two children. I don't give*

*much importance to the fact that Rafa is a super-champion, because what makes me happiest in life is the knowledge that I have two children who are good people. They're responsible, they have very close and good friends, which is very important for them both, and they haven't given us any problems. This is the real triumph. When all this is over, Rafael will be the same person, my son - and that's it."*

*Toni says of Rafa, "When I saw his enormous potential I thought beyond his actual abilities a player, what sort of person would I like to see on the court? Someone who has a personality but is not a show-off. I don't like divas, and there are plenty of them in the tennis world. That's why I forbade him to ever throw his racquet to the ground during a match; why I always insisted on the need to put on a "good face" when he was playing - calm and serious, not angry or irritated; why it was always important to be sporting and gracious to your opponent, in victory and defeat. What is not acceptable is that people who have had it all in life should behave coarsely with other people. No, the higher you are, the greater your duty to treat people with respect... I always say it is more important to be a good person than a good player."*

*Toni says the reason why Rafa made it to the top is that, "It's all in his head, in your attitude, in wanting more, in enduring more than your rival."*

*The Wimbledon final of 2008, at four hours and forty-eight minutes was the longest in the tournament's 131-year history. Sebastian though put his own perspective on things saying, "It was a great moment when we saw him take the Wimbledon trophy in his hands, but when you pause to reflect upon it all, it's not that much more special than when they give your child a diploma after graduating from college. Every family has its moments of joy. The day after Rafa won Wimbledon, once the excitement and the media attention had quieted down, I didn't feel any greater satisfaction than I know I will, for example, the day my daughter gets her university degree. Because, in the end, what you want is for your children to be happy and well."*

*One of my favourite parts in the book is the pep talk Toni gave Rafa shortly before the final of the 2009 Australian Open. Rafa had finally overcome Fernando Verdasco after five and a quarter hours in the semi-finals two days previously. The match had taken so much out of Rafa that he was hardly able to rise out of his bed the next day. However, after his physio's and doctor's best efforts to prepare him, up stepped uncle Toni to deliver a speech which Henry V would have struggled to better.*

*He said to his nephew, "Look, it's five thirty now, and when you go on court at seven thirty I assure you you won't be feeling any better. You'll probably be feeling worse. So it's up to you whether you rise above your pain and the exhaustion and summon up the desire you need to win."*

*"Toni I'm sorry I can't see it, I just can't," replied Rafa.*

*"Don't say you can't because anybody who digs deep enough can always find the motivation they need for anything. In war, people do things that appear to*

*be impossible. Just imagine if there were a guy sitting pointing a gun at you, telling you that if you didn't run, and keep running, he'd shoot you. I bet you'd run. So, come on! It's up to you to find the motivation to win. This is your big chance. Bad as you might be feeling now it's likely you'll never have as good a chance of winning the Australian Open as you do today. And even if there's only a one percent chance of you winning this match, well, then, you have to squeeze every last drop out of that one percent. Remember that phrase of Barack Obama - "Yes we can!" At every changeover repeat it to yourself, because you know what? The truth is you can do it. What you can never allow yourself is to fail because of a loss of will. You can lose because your rival played better, but you can't lose because you failed to give it your best. That would be a crime. But you won't do that, I know it. Because you always do your best and today will be no exception. You can, Rafael! You really can!"*

And Rafa did!

Rafa describes how after the Australian Open win against Federer his father told him of his parent's marital problem, which ultimately led them to divorce.

The loss of the stable family environment led to him become depressed and unable to cope. This, he and Forcades believe, caused a psychosomatic effect, which led to the knee problems that prevented him defending his titles at Roland Garros and Wimbledon.

Later that year though, with Toni's encouragement, and seeing that his parent's separation had not been acrimonious, Rafa regained his health and focus, leading him to regain his world number one position, and winning Wimbledon and the US Open.

For any Nadal fan this book is a must. However, for all tennis players and parents there are lessons to be learned from a book, which really is Rafa's Story.

**MARTIN BALDRIDGE**

**So you want to win Wimbledon? – Second edition out October 2011**