

ARTICLE 3

In the last of three articles on tennis in Spain, LTA Master Performance and RPT European Professional coach Martin Baldrige discusses what he learned about the Spanish coaching system when he spent two weeks at the Sanchez-Casal Tennis Academy in Barcelona, and enrolled on its *Five-day Intensive Coaching course*.

INSIDE THE SPANISH COACHING SYSTEM

In my previous articles I described what I experienced when I attended the Academy, the players, the coaches, and the conclusions I reached on why Spain had produced so many great tennis players, Grand Slam champions and world No.1's.

I also discussed meeting *El Guru del Tenis* Pato Alvarez, Emilio Sanchez, Sergio Casal and Registro Profesional de Tenis (RPT) President Luis Mediero.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE:

I had not exactly arrived at the Academy by accident. In my book *So you want to win Wimbledon?* I describe the lives and upbringings of modern day Wimbledon champions, and what they and their parents did to get there.

One of the things I'd discovered when researching my book was that some Wimbledon champions, including the Williams sisters, Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi, were taught at a young age, by parents who had no tennis coaching experience whatsoever. These parents, and in Sampras' case his mentor Dr. Pete Fischer, learned tennis from reading books, watching players live or on TV and studying tennis videos, before at a later stage finding experienced coaches and Academies to help develop their children's game.

One of the things I discuss in my book is the importance of finding the best tennis environment to develop your game, and *Academia Sanchez-Casal* is today recognised as being one of the most famous and important tennis Academies in the world.

Anyone with a knowledge of British tennis, knows that Andy Murray trained at Sanchez-Casal before winning the US Open junior title in 2005 and then turning professional. I had once read an article by Andy's mother Judy, in which she stated that the coaches in Spain all did series of the same six or seven core drills.

To maintain my LTA coach license, I decided to take some courses offered by the Spanish coaching organisation, the RPT, in London. These courses were: *Spanish Teaching Tactics* and *Spanish Drills*, in which I learned these core drills. Soon after, I joined the RPT, and through their equivalency agreement with the Lawn Tennis Association, was awarded the qualification of RPT European Professional.

Having done these courses I realised that *anyone* could do these drills, which were done mostly out of a basket, and that you didn't need to be a LTA Level 5 Master Performance coach like myself, to be able to feed the ball the way the Spanish coaches did.

Surely I thought this can't be why the Spanish have produced all those Top-100 players. So, being of an inquiring nature and wanting to do some final research for my book, I decided to attend the Sanchez-Casal Academy, enrol on its *Five-day Intensive Coaching* course, and find out for myself how the Spanish coaches and system *really* works.

THE COURSE:

The course took place between 9.30am and 3pm - Monday to Friday. My fellow student, Luca Bonomi from Italy, and I were taught by course leader Danni Sorribas.

The level of detailed information we received during the week was far greater than I had received on the RPT courses in London. Danni, an Argentinean, had had his own Academy in Argentina and had also worked for the Argentinian Federation. He had been involved with the setting up of the Argentinian coaching system and had coached world No.8 Guillermo Cañas and world No.1 women's doubles player Paola Suarez, amongst others.

Danni had been at the Academy for over nine years and had delivered courses to as many as 400 people at a time, all over the world. Luca and I were lucky to have him and his assistant Alex Heredero to ourselves for the entire week.



PHOTO: WITH DANI SORRIBAS

THE BASIC DRILLS:

The basic drills of the Sanchez-Casal coaching system appear fairly straight forward at first. However, you don't really understand them until you see how they all fit together one after the other.

According to *the Manual* there are 11 Basic Drills. The Sanchez-Casal system splits the court into 3 zones. Zone 3 is roughly on or behind the baseline. Zone 2 is roughly between the baseline and the service line and Zone 1 is from roughly between the service line and the net.

The system starts with a series of closed drills in Zone 3, where patterns are repeated over and over again, with the coach doing single ball feeds from the basket, set against a background of a, *“Forward and Backward V-shape using the double-rhythm footwork pattern.”*

The key focus in these initial drills is that of, *“Aggressive Defence”*. Danni would often say, *“This a very important thing. We want to make sure that our opponent cannot attack us so we must make sure we hit the ball where they cannot hurt us.”*

The Sanchez-Casal course starts with Drill No.5, *“Deep = Short X”*, which I’ve heard some British coaches refer to as the *“X drill.”* It involves moving backwards to deal aggressively with a deep ball and then forwards to take care of a shorter one, firstly on the forehand side and then the backhand.

Drill No.6, *“Defensive Balance”* continues the theme of *“Aggressive Defence,”* with movement backwards to hit a quality deep shot followed by movement forwards to hit a shorter ball.

Drill No. 7, *“Approach & Volley”* combines Zones 3 and 2 with the emphasis once again on movement, balance, correct footwork and hitting the volley above net height.

Drill No.8, *“Top-Spin Volleys”* starts from the centre service line *“T”* but is actually intended to imitate backward movement at the baseline rather than to develop the drive-volley.

The emphasis in drill No.9, *“Normal Volleys”* is on effective movement to ensure the ball is contacted above net height and on balance.

Drill No.10, *“Defensive & Attack Balance”* combines drills from Zones 3, 2 and 1. It includes *“Aggressive Defence”* from behind the baseline, movement up to the short ball, volleying above the height of the net, following the line of the ball, then moving back for a smash before moving backwards and starting the whole sequence again.

Drill No.11, *“All the Exercises Together”* does just that, combining strokes and movement in Zones 3, 2 and 1.

I must admit I found it *really* difficult to understand these drills. Over the 30 years I’ve coached, I’ve usually either fed or hit balls to pupils, and then generally tried to work out what they were doing right or wrong, before telling them what I thought, and then if I’d identified a problem, trying to *fix* them. The idea of hitting gently fed balls in specific patterns is something I initially found very alien indeed.

Having learned Drills No’s 5 to 11, we were then introduced to Drills No.1, 2 and 3. These drills are *“Live”* with the player hitting ALL their shots towards the coach, who then

volleys the ball to different parts of the court, for the player to hit back to the coach over and over again.

In Drill No.1, *“3 times 20 balls”* the player starts from the middle of the baseline. A ball is fed deep to their forehand forcing them to *“Defend Aggressively,”* from behind the baseline, then a short ball is fed to the forehand to which the player runs and hits once again the ball to the coach, who then volleys the ball deep to the backhand, for the player to run back and *“Defend Aggressively”* with a deep backhand, before being brought forwards again by the coach to hit a short backhand, which is then followed by the coach hitting a volley deep to the forehand, and the whole sequence being repeated for up to 20 shots.

In Drill No.2, *“1 Bounce and 1 Volley”* the player starts from the middle of the service line, is fed a short ball to their forehand, which they hit cross-court, and then follow in to hit a backhand volley. They then are moved backwards to the service line where they hit a backhand groundshot cross-court, move forwards and across to a forehand volley, then are moved backwards to the service line to hit a forehand groundshot approach, from where the whole sequence is repeated. The feeding for this drill can be tricky!

Then finally in Drill No.3, *“1 Bounce and 2 Volleys”* the player starts from the middle of the service line, is fed a short ball to their forehand groundshot, which they hit cross-court, and then move forwards to a hit a backhand volley, then move across to a hit forehand volley, then move back diagonally to the service line to hit a backhand groundshot cross-court approach, then move back into the net for a forehand volley, then across for a backhand volley, and then move diagonally back to the service line to start the whole routine again with a forehand groundshot approach. The feeding for this *“Live”* drill requires excellent volleying skills from the coach.

After each drill there is the chance for the pupil to rest by picking up the balls (the better more motivated pupils will of course, sprint and pick up the balls as quickly as possible, so they get the chance to do them all over again A.S.A.P.).

ARE THESE DRILLS REALLY “THAT” BASIC?

Some, particularly non-Spanish, coaches don’t believe in these basket drills. *“They’re too easy, don’t follow the tactical rules of tennis and don’t get the player used to the weight or pace of the ball coming at them,”* are some of the comments I’ve heard from some experienced coaches around the world.

So what do they do then? Well as I said in Article 2 of my trip to Sanchez-Casal, Sergio Casal himself told me that when he and players like Emilio Sanchez were introduced by Pato Alvarez to the drills, they were more worn out by doing these drills in half an hour than when playing normally for two hours.

The drills do take a bit of getting used to, but are fantastic for physical conditioning and movement. Depending upon the age, ability and fitness levels of the players the number of balls hit during the drills can vary from 10 to 40 (they even have a 100 ball drill for the fitter players!) before a quick rest and then starting again with either the same drill or another.

If the feeding is done correctly, giving the player a chance to move fully into position to execute each shot, then players cannot help but develop tremendous amounts of footwork, balance and tennis specific physical fitness. Also because no pace is in the ball, players are forced to generate power through racquet-head speed, themselves.

These drills take time to learn and understand, and require disciplined, patient, knowledgeable and sensitive feeding to ensure their effectiveness.

COMPARISON TO REGULAR BASIC TRAINING AND COACHING STYLE:

In my two weeks at the Academy I saw very little hitting of balls up and down the middle of the court, or of cross-court hitting. If for example, players intend to try build up to, or keep a rally of 100 shots, how much benefit do they get, physically or technically by standing there knocking balls up and down the middle to each other counting at the shots to 100? – compared to the physical and technical benefits of doing say 50 shots of Sanchez-Casal Academy drills No.1, 2 or 3 for example?

I reckon that if you were to attach a heart rate monitor to players simply rallying backwards and forwards up and down the middle to 100 shots, that there would be little difference in their heart rates from that incurred by them jogging slowly around the court. However, if the same heart rate measurement were taken during the 50 shots of Drills No.1, 2 or 3, then I reckon their heart rates would have moved significantly higher, and what's more doing the drills would have helped produce a significant improvement in the player's movement, technique, balance and anaerobic fitness. But if you don't believe me – then why don't you go out and try it yourself!

(Incidentally, there are more effective ways to develop quality groundshots than just rallying up and down the middle and counting out to 100 shots. Why not try improving your, "*Rally Tempo*" by hitting balls up and down the middle from the baseline with a partner for 60 seconds, counting the number of shots you manage to hit during this time. Players like Roger Federer for example, manage without even trying to keep around 47 per minute when rallying with a quality practice partner. The record at the FCuk Tennis Academy in Chiswick, London is 53 per minute. The same measurement can also be taken during 30 seconds of quality cross-court groundshots.)

Other interesting comments during the course from Danni were that:

1. He encourages young players of for example eight years old, to start with an Eastern forehand grip. The problem he said, is that if they start with a semi-western, then they by the time they've reached ages ten to twelve, they will probably have developed a full-western grip, which he described as being, "*Tennis suicide*".
2. Movement to and away from the ball should generally be done in the double-rhythm footwork pattern and not cross-over steps (this follows Pato Alvarez's philosophy).
3. Almost all of the time beginner students should on the forehand, be instructed to hit the ball with a closed or neutral stance, as this helps produce much better balance and weight transfer in learning players.
4. When I asked him how he would teach topspin, he asked me how I would. I showed him my system, which he approved of. He then said that he taught the USPTR, Dennis Van der Meer way. He demonstrated this by rolling a ball with his racquet up, against and over the top of the net tape, and said that much of the Spanish system had been stolen from the USPTR! (He also then did a very scientific explanation of the various types of topspin utilised in different shots in different parts of the court.)
5. The serve, in his opinion, should be taught via the traditional hands up together, then down together, then up together start, rather than the more abbreviated starting style used by some South American and Spanish players such as Rafeal Nadal and America's Roddick.
6. Due to the large number of Italian immigrants, and British workmen imported to help build the country's railway system, in the last century, Argentinian culture, mentality and architecture, is more influenced by Italy and Britain, than by Spain. And one of the few things the Argentineans have in common with the Spanish is the language!

When not being taught by Danni I would go around the Academy and watch Pato Alvarez, Academy Director Antonio Hernandez and the other coaches doing their drills. Often they did the same ones we were taught. However, they also did quite a few drills, particularly out of the hand, which were not amongst the basic drills. I noticed also that these experienced coaches would vary the drills according to their player.

If one successfully passes the Sanchez-Casal *Five-day Intensive course*, candidates can elect to go on the *Monthly Coaching course* in which you spend another four weeks

shadowing the Academy coaches, before, if thought worthy, being allowed to teach the Academy's pupils.

I reckon though, that you would need at least one to three months training and experience, to have a thorough enough understanding of the drills, to be able to vary them according to the needs of the player before you. To do the live drills you would also require a reasonably good playing standard to be able to volley the ball to the different areas of the court, and a reasonable understanding of tennis to understand where to hit the ball to, based on where the player had hit the ball to you.

Many of the coaches at the Academy have spent their entire careers as players and then coaches at the Academy – so to them the drills to them are as familiar as putting on their shoes!

Even when you think you understand the drills, you'll see coaches introduce variations within them and you've got to then start and learn them all over again. And then when you finally think you've got them, guess what? - they change them again!

To learn the system in a week is just about impossible and these are only part of the reason for the success of the system – the other is the mentality which surrounds them.

I mentioned in my second article, *"The Reign of Spain"* that according Juan Rivas, Mental fitness coach at Sanchez-Casal, Spanish players, *"hit the ball in court, run a lot and fight."* And earlier in this article that according to Danni Sorribas, the Spanish system of coaching and playing is based on, *"Aggressive Defence."*

But there are other reasons and principles behind the success of the Spanish coaching system which are to be found in the system of drills, coaching and mentality of *El Guru del Tenis* William "Pato" Alvarez. These principles form the basis of the coaching system currently used by the Sanchez-Casal Academy, the RPT and most of the tennis schools and academies in Spain.

"PATO-LOGY" – THE TEACHINGS OF EL GURU DEL TENIS

In my second article I mentioned that I had bought Pato Alvarez's book from him and that he had pointed out its most important parts. I don't speak Spanish but managed to get hold of a translation of those important parts. Along with some of the basic principles introduced to me by Danni Sorribas on the Sanchez-Casal course, I list below MY Top-10 favourite, BASIC principles, of the Pato Alvarez and Spanish coaching system:

1. Tennis is a sport about errors. The one who makes fewer errors always wins.
2. Hit 80% of your first serves wide – in order to open up the court for the next shot.
3. Hit 80% of your returns of serve cross-court (unless your opponent serve-volleys) and never short to your opponent's forehand.

4. Unless you have a better backhand than forehand, cover 75% of the baseline with your forehand.
5. When you go to the net it is better to cover 75% of the shots with your backhand volley.
6. Your volleys are going to depend on the quality of your approach shots so don't go in behind any poor shots.
7. In tennis, one always has to try to take fewer steps than his opponent, so when you approach the net, your opponent should be running further to the passing shot than you have to run to get to the net to volley. (In Britain and the USA, coaches used to teach players to approach down the line and cover the net with their volleys to *"make the opponent pass you."* This is not the Spanish philosophy – their's is; whenever possible only go to the net to end the point with an above-the-net, put-away volley)
8. The serve is a way to start the point – not generally to finish it. Often the Spanish players will just *"kick"* the ball in to start the point and then just run, hit and fight.
9. The return of serve is another way to start the point. On the return of first serves, players usually try to just get the ball back deep, and on the second serve they tend again to go with, *"Aggressive defence"* and not take too many risks early on in the point.
10. According to Pato Alvarez, *"A player must be humble. Without humility it is not possible to become a good player as it is not possible to endure the anxiety and suffering of a difficult match."*

So is there a "typical" Spanish player? And do all the Spanish coaches really teach the same way?

Well it was interesting that when I attended Sanchez-Casal, the Academy held an ITF Grade 5 boy's and girl's 18-and-under tournament. Qualifying for both boy's and girl's consisted of 32 players, who were required to win 3 matches to qualify to the main draw.

In the boy's qualifying there were 19 Spaniards, three Brits, two Russians, two Italians and one player each from France, Germany, Poland, China, Mexico and India.

All four qualifiers to the main draw were Spanish.

In the girl's qualifying there were 21 Spanish, two Russians and one player each from Bulgaria, Latvia, Canada, Paraguay, France, Austria, Italy, Belarus and Britain. Three of the four qualifiers were Spanish, the odd one out coming from Belarus (trained and coached of course in Spain by a Spaniard!)

In the boy's main draw there were 15 Spaniards, three Italians, two Hungarians and one player each from Denmark, Russia, Thailand, Germany, Turkey, Switzerland, Britain, Belarus, Georgia, Kuwait, Kazakhstan and the USA.

Six of the boy's eight quarterfinalists were Spanish, three of the semi-finalists Spanish and the final won by Spain's Axel Alvarez Llamas in a third set tie-break against Switzerland's Alexander Ritschard.

In the girl's main draw there were nine Spaniards, two Romanians, two French, two Russians, two Swiss, two Dutch, two Serbians and one player each from the Ukraine, Latvia, the USA, India, Italy, Montenegro, Ireland, Britain Belarus, Portugal and Madagascar.

Interestingly in the girl's quarterfinals there were no Spaniards, and the tournament was won by France's Estelle Cascino, who beat Serbia's Violeta Jankovic in straight sets in the final.

The reason I mention this is two-fold. Firstly I got to see many of the Top-Spanish 17 and 18-and-under male players. One of the comments I heard though, was that many of the best Spaniards don't play junior ITF'S because they prefer to play Futures events, of which there are 42 annually in Spain, and where they can earn ranking points and prize money.

The second interesting point to make is the relatively poor showing of the Spanish girls. This is mirrored in the falling numbers of Spanish women in the world's Top-100 (5 at the end of 2010). In 2001 there were 11 Spanish women in the Top-100 but by 2007 that number had dropped to just 3. Luis Mediero puts this down to the fact that there are fewer girls interested in the sport because the Spaniards failed to capitalise on the success of Grand Slam winners Arantxa Sanchez Vicario and Conchita Martinez. Sanchez-Casal Academy coach Hector Ruiz stated that it's because Spanish girls have interests other than just tennis and that it's more expensive to become a woman professional player than a man, because the tournaments are more spread out.

A Spanish colleague of mine Ruben Rivero stated though that Sanchez Vicario and Martinez were very much "Tom-boys" at a younger age and were happy to copy the playing styles of their male tennis contemporaries.

However, my alarming opinion, is that the Spanish coaching system for teaching girls is fundamentally flawed, and that after a certain age boys and girls should be trained differently, due to the nature of how points are constructed and won on the women's tour compared to the men's.

If you look at my Top-10 basic principles of the Spanish coaching system then in my opinion, based on my training and experience, you immediately notice the inherent weaknesses of the system relative to women's professional tennis.

1. For women professional tennis players *Attack* is often the best form of *Defence*. For physical and then technical reasons, women tend not to be able to defend as well as men. If a woman doesn't move forwards and get in the first strike of a point, then they risk becoming exposed and not being able to get back into it.

Often, the best way for them to avoid making mistakes is to hit or attempt to hit winners. This they usually do by hitting hard, flat groundshots, low over the net. Male professional tennis players, due to their greater speed and strength, tend to defend better physically and then technically, utilising a variety of slice and topspin groundshots, often with large amounts of net clearance.

2. Women's tennis depends more on being more aggressive on the return of serve than the men's. For a woman, just starting the point by pushing a return of serve deep into court, will at professional level, probably lead to them losing the point within the first four shots of the rally.
3. In the women's game less than 50% or so of the serves are hit wide towards the tramlines – unlike the 80% suggested by the Spanish coaching system. By serving down the middle, less angles are created to be exploited by your opponent – this again goes against the basic Spanish teaching philosophy.
4. Yes tennis is a game which is lost by making errors, rather than won by hitting winners – but if all you do is push the ball in and run, and the other person smacks it hard into the corner and away from you, and if you don't run or defend well enough, then you're going to lose very quickly.
5. Finally, more women's main tour events are played on hard courts than on clay. The style of play which helps Spanish men achieve their high rankings through playing on slow clay, doesn't necessarily suit the women, who need to be able to win on faster hard surfaces.

One of the reasons for the split of Andy Murray from Pato Alvarez was that Pato wanted Andy to play almost exclusively on clay. Murray preferred, and had better results, on hard courts, so a difference of opinion, exacerbated by a knee injury and poor results, led to them parting ways.

But apart from that the Spanish system's brilliant - honestly!

