

THE SANCHEZ-CASAL TENNIS ACADEMY

In his book, *So you want to win Wimbledon?* LTA Master Performance and RPT European Professional coach Martin Baldrige discusses what it takes to become a successful professional tennis player, with the potential to one day go on and play at, and perhaps even win Wimbledon!

In the first of three articles on tennis in Spain, he describes what he experienced during a two-week visit to the Sanchez-Casal Academy in Barcelona, which was recently named the world's best tennis Academy.

THE MAKING OF ANDY MURRAY

In 2002 age 15, Andy Murray left Britain to attend *Academia Sanchez-Casal* where he trained for the next two-and-a-half years, before going on to win the 2005 US Open junior title and then turning professional.



Formed in 1998 by two-time Grand Slam doubles champions Emilio Sanchez Vicario and Sergio Casal, the Academy has around 130 full-time students, of which 60% are boys and 40% girls, age 10 upwards, from all over the world.

Along with Andy Murray, 2008 ITF world No.1, Wimbledon and US junior champion Grigor Dimitrov also trained there. Two-time Grand Slam singles champion Svetlana Kuznetsova spent 10 years at the Academy. Former world No.1's Aranxta Sanchez Vicario, Martina Navratilova, Martina Hingis and Ana Ivanovic have all trained there, as have former world No.5 Daniella Hantuchova and No.10 Flavia Pannetta.

FACILITIES:

Located close to Barcelona airport the Academy's facilities include 36 tennis courts, of which 22 are clay, 12 hard, and two a synthetic carpet, on which mini tennis is sometimes played. Other on-site facilities include a gym, several other fitness areas and a swimming pool.



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Arriving at the Academy in mid-morning, I was immediately struck by the high level of players – and the number of them. As I walked around I was truly shocked but impressed by what I saw going on. I watched players of various nationalities, all working incredibly hard with tremendous focus. Though the coaches worked the players hard, none of them seemed to complain.

Along with the younger coaches, I also saw a number of older coaches feeding balls out of baskets to the players. One in particular caught my eye. This guy could hardly walk, never mind coach! The young player he was working with was running around mercilessly smacking balls at him. But this older coach, wearing a cap and large-rimmed glasses, stood there hitting mostly backhand volleys, with no backswing whatever, back to the player – and never missing.

ANTONIO HERNANDEZ AND HECTOR RUIZ

On my second day at the Academy I got to the courts at 7.45am and watched more than 50 players, running round the courts and then hitting balls as the sun was still rising. Once again I was amazed by the level of disciplined, focused training of the players and the enthusiasm and noise generated by the coaches.

A few hours later whilst walking around the courts, I spotted a tall athletic looking girl playing points against an oriental-looking older boy. The boy played really aggressively and was followed around by two Academy coaches who gave him instructions between points and at changeovers.

On a chair in the corner of the court sat another slightly older coach who gave the occasional instruction to the girl. I went and stood outside the court near to him and through the fence asked him

“Where is the girl from?”

“The Ukraine,” he replied.

“How old is she?” I asked

“Sixteen,” he replied, and drew out the numbers with his finger.

“One, six – sixteen”.

“Thank you,” I said, and added,

“And what is your name please?”

“Antonio Hernandez,” he replied.

I spent the following few hours walking around the courts watching what was going on VERY closely.

On one of the hard courts a Spanish looking girl was being trained by a very fit looking Spanish coach. I sat and watched what was probably the hardest training session I’d ever seen in my life.

Groundshots were hit for an-hour-and-a-half. Some of the feeding being done by hand, some from the basket, but the majority was spent hitting full-on, up and down, firstly the middle of the court, and then from side to side. All the time the coach was shouting instructions at the girl who sometimes looked on the verge of tears. Being the kind-hearted soul I am, I actually felt sorry for her.

Then serves were done for around half an hour before followed a very intense volley-smash drill. In for a backhand volley, back for a smash, in for a forehand volley, back for the smash. They did this drill over and over again for around 30 minutes with the coach giving instructions throughout. Sometimes the girl looked completely exhausted – but not once did she complain. After a couple of hours I finally decided to move on.

The next day I passed the same coach on the way to the courts. I introduced myself and told him I was writing a book on tennis and doing some research on tennis academies.

I said to him,

“Hi, what’s your name?”

“Hector Ruiz,” he replied.

“Who is the girl you were working with yesterday?” I asked.

“A Russian,” he replied.

“Oh I thought she looked Spanish,” I said

“Yes she looks it but no she’s from Russia,” he said.

“And you work with her full-time?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“What’s her ranking?” I asked.

“About five hundred,” he said.

“You play very well, did you play ATP?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“And what ranking were you?” I asked.

“Two hundred and five,” he replied.

“You are very hard on the girl,” I told him smiling.

“Yes, but is necessary.” He said smiling. We shook hands and walked on.

GENERAL STUDENT DAY/WEEK:

Depending upon the type of educational programme in which the students are enrolled, they tend to spend their day hurrying between the tennis courts, gym, fitness centres and class room – though I must admit they still seemed to manage to squeeze a lot of social, fun-time into their schedules!



PHOTO: A TYPICAL TRAINING SESSION

In his 2009 autobiography *Coming of Age*, Andy Murray stated that his Monday to Friday training schedule whilst at the Academy was: 9am-noon: on-court tennis training, noon to 1pm: fitness training, 1pm-2pm: lunch, 2pm-4pm: school, 4.30pm-6pm: more tennis, 6pm-8pm: more school.

His schedule was four-and-a-half hour’s tennis and one hour’s fitness training every day.

Depending on how he felt he would usually practice on a Saturday morning, and if not playing a tournament, take the rest of the weekend off. His average weekly training schedule at the Academy was around 25 hours on court, and five hours fitness training. Added to this were 20 hours per week of school work. The schedule has changed little since Murray left in 2007.

EL GURU DEL TENNIS

The next afternoon I was at reception trying to buy some stamps. Suddenly that older coach with the large-rimmed glasses, who I'd been watching the previous day approached me.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I replied. "How are you doing?"

"Good thanks," he said. "I am Pato Alvarez."

"Pato Alvarez," I said. "That's brilliant - you used to coach Andy Murray!"

"Yes that's right. I was with Andy a few weeks ago in America, he called me and I went to see him. Please wait here and I'll show you."

A few minutes later he returned carrying a book and some papers.

"This is my book," he said. "Is fifteen Euros."

I opened it and said, "But it's in Spanish and I don't speak Spanish. You should get it translated into English."

"I've sold fifty seven thousand copies," he said. "I've got plenty of money so I don't need to."

He then showed me the papers which were all written in English and told me, "I taught more than 50 players who made it into the Top-50. I make all the players good - I never miss."

"I know," I replied. "You are El Guru del Tennis."

I touched him gently on the shoulder and told him, "It's such an honour to meet you, could we go somewhere and talk?"

"Yeah of course," he said.

We moved to the cafe where he got me a coffee.

"What was it like to work with Andy Murray?" I asked.

"Was easy," he replied.

"Yes but some people say he's very difficult to work with," I replied.

"Yes but for me was easy," he said.

I then pulled out of my bag a copy of Andy Murray's 2009 updated autobiography, *Coming of Age*.

"Andy talks about you in his book," I said.

"What he say?" asked Pato.

I opened the pages relating to Alvarez and handed him the book.

"Is ok," he said, without really reading it.

I said, "He finished with Maclagan."

"I know," he said. "He called me and I went to see him in America."

I said to him, "I'm writing a book too. It's all about what it takes to become a great tennis player. Maybe we should write a book together?"

Pato just grinned and shrugged his shoulders.



PHOTO: WITH PATO ALVAREZ

Several years ago Alvarez had heart surgery and that is one of the reasons why he tends not to move around the court too much anymore. The coaches at Sanchez-Casal think of him as a father and treat him like a god.

COACHING STAFF:



PHOTO: LEFT TO RIGHT, ANGEL GIMENEZ, ANTONIO HERNANDEZ, ME AND SERGIO CASAL

The Academy's coaching staff is headed by former world No.7 Emilio Sanchez Vicario and No.31 Sergio Casal themselves. Academy Director Antonio Hernandez was the coach to four-time Grand Slam champion and world number one, Arantxa Sanchez Vicario. Men's Technical Director is former Spanish Davis Cup player and world No.42 Angel Gimenez and Women's Technical Director is Stefan Ortega - former coach to Kuznetsova.

Beneath them a team of some 20 coaches, many of whom were Top-500 ATP ranked players, work closely with each other and the players. Each coach works with groups of between four and six players usually of the same sex, with ages within the groups varying greatly from 10 upwards. At any one time up to five Academy coaches are on the road travelling to tournaments around the world with their assigned players.

THE WORK ETHIC

The next day my alarm went off at 7.00am. After a few minutes I got up and looked out my window (I was staying in my motor home), across to the Academy. A light was shining. Oh dear I thought - they've started without me!

Off I went to the courts and to the one on which Antonio Hernandez worked mostly. There under floodlights was someone I later found out to be Russian, practicing his serve at 7.30 in the morning - before the sun had even risen! Shortly afterwards Hernandez appeared and soon after along came the rest of the coaches.

Around 11am I sat and watched Hector Ruiz coaching the Russian girl – a similar session to the previous day took place lasting more than three hours!

Tracy Baez, the mother of one of the American students at the Academy, told me later that one of the things she'd noticed was that back in the USA, coaches would often work with a player for an hour or so, then take a break, then work for another hour, then take another break, and then play again later in the day.

She said though, that the Spanish coaches would often work with players for up to three hours at a time, break and then play again for a couple of hours later in the day. She told me that she'd actually seen one player play up to ten hours in one day!

She explained that the Spanish believed that if you had to play a match, which could often last more than three hours, you needed to be able to train for three hours or more at a time.

This reminded me of what I'd once heard Tim Henman say of Roger Federer, that Federer would at Masters events often book a practice court for four consecutive hours, because he knew that was how long he would probably have to play matches for.

EDUCATION:

Education at the Academy is provided on-site by the Schiller International School, which is based on the American high school system. The School's major objective is to prepare students for admission into US universities. Some students though, complete their studies via online study programmes.

According to Emilio Sanchez Vicario the philosophy of the Academy is to, *"Develop successful young people in all aspects of life, using tennis and education as the vehicle for personal development."*



PHOTO: ENTRANCE TO THE SCHILLER INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL – LITERALLY RIGHT NEXT TO THE TENNIS COURTS!

Due to the exceptionally high academic standard of the school, and the attraction of studying and living in one of the world's liveliest cities, some students attend the Academy simply to study. They follow a restricted tennis programme of less than five hours tennis and several gym sessions per week.

INTRODUCTION TO SERGIO CASAL

The following day I got to the courts at 7.15am where, as per usual, Antonio Hernandez was already busy feeding balls to the Russian boy. The coaches arrived soon after and all politely said, "Good morning" to me as they wheeled their baskets of balls past.

As part of the Academy's *Five-day Intensive Coaching course*, which I was also enrolled on, I met video-analysis manager Ferran Tost. Having explained how the video system worked, he also described the Academy's approach to developing not just the player but the person.

"Not many of the players who train here will make it to professional level," he said. "We try not just to develop top tennis players but also great people. One of our proudest moments at the Academy, was when one of our boys gained a scholarship to Harvard. Another of our pupils now works high up in Nike.

One of Andy Murray's best friends Danny Vallverdu, and his sister, both graduated from here and went to the University of Miami on full-scholarships."

At the end of his presentation Ferran asked me if I had any questions. I told him I had met Pato Alvarez who told me that *he* was the reason why tennis had really taken off in Spain.

“Yes it’s true,” said Ferran. “Pato invented the system and Emilio modernised it. Have you met Emilio?”

“Not yet,” I replied.

“No problem,” said Ferran. “He’s probably having lunch – let’s go and find him.”

Across we went to the restaurant. Emilio wasn’t there. But Sergio Casal was.

Ferran introduced us and I shook hands with Sergio.

“Hi Sergio, I’m writing a book on tennis and what it takes to become a great player,” I explained. “I’m also hoping to write an article on the Academy and why Andy Murray chose to come here.”

I showed Sergio a copy of my book and said, “Many people think that all the Spanish coaches work on is groundshots, that they do nothing on serve and don’t give any technical information. I’ve been here for five days and have seen lots of work on serving, lots of full points being played and coaches giving out non-stop technical advice during sessions.”

“Ok,” Sergio replied. “I’ll check my schedule and try to arrange a meeting.”

At 6pm Antonio Hernandez was still out there - coaching a young Russian girl. I sat down by his court to watch and a few minutes later Hector Ruiz walked by.

“How’s it going Martin?” he asked me.

“Ok,” I replied. “Look, here’s my book.”

Hector sat down next to me, and for the next hour we discussed tennis, my book, and his life. He told me he’d been at the Academy since he was nine years old and had played a lot with Andy Murray there. Despite his tough on-court style, Hector was actually very pleasant and humble.

I asked him, “Why do you think Spain has more Top-100 ranked men than women?”

He said, “Maybe it’s because Spanish girls have other things to do than just play tennis. It’s more difficult and expensive to play women’s tournaments because they are more spread out. Two tournaments here, then another two, far away. Spanish people don’t have too much money. For the men it’s easier because the tournaments are more close together.”



PHOTO: WITH HECTOR RUIZ

COMPETITION:

A healthy level of internal competition exists within the Academy with challenge matches and mini-sets being played on a daily basis. ITF, Tennis Europe, national and other junior events are held there, and at other local venues, throughout the year. A multitude of men's and women's ITF Futures tournaments are also available in the Barcelona area.

ORIGINS OF THE ACADEMY:

The next morning there seemed to be an even higher level of enthusiasm in the air as the players arrived on the courts to begin early morning training. The Academy was hosting a Grade 5 ITF boys' and girls' 18-and-under tournament later in the week, and today began a pre-qualifying tournament for the Academy's players, the winners of which would have the opportunity to receive wildcards into either the ITF's qualifying or main draw.

That afternoon I bumped into Sergio Casal.



PHOTO: WITH SERGIO CASAL

"This place is fantastic," I said. "When can we meet up to discuss my book and the Academy?"

"How about now," he replied.

Sergio got me a coffee and we sat down outside to talk.

"I want to ask you a personal question," I said. "Why is it that you were only ranked No.3 in the world in doubles whereas Emilio was ranked one? You played

together all the time throughout your career and won the French and US Opens together.”

Sergio smiled and said, “It was because I had to have surgery on my wrist and Emilio won more points playing with other players when I was out,” he replied.

“Okay, so tell me why did you start the Academy?” I said.

Sergio replied, “Well when me and Emilio were playing we thought about what we were going to do when we finished. In Spain it’s really hard to combine school with tennis. My two daughters, for example, they go to school at nine in the morning and don’t come back till after six at night.

It’s impossible to really play a lot of hours tennis and go to school – so we wanted to have an Academy where you could do both.”

“So it’s not just about producing professional tennis players then? I mean, the number of players who go on to make it as professionals is really small,” I said.

“Exactly,” he replied.

I thanked Sergio for his time.

“No problem,” he said. “I hope you have good luck with your book.”

THE TRAINING COURSE



PHOTO: FELLOW STUDENT LUCA BONOMI, DANNI SORRIBAS, ME AND DANNI’S ASSISTANT ALEX HEREDERO

The Academy’s *Five-day Intensive Coaching course* is led by Argentinian Danni Sorribas. Age 51, Danni has worked at the Academy for over nine years. He previously had his own tennis Academy in Argentina and along with working for the Argentine Tennis Federation had coached players including former Top-10 player Guillermo Cañas and world No.1 women’s doubles player Paola Suarez.

The great thing about the course is that along with learning the basics of its coaching system, me and fellow student Italian Luca Bonomi, also got to meet all the key members of the Academy staff. These included the mental training coach, the Academy physiotherapist, the competitions and schedules organiser, one of the fitness coaches and the Director of the Schiller International school.

As the course progressed, a clearer picture of how the Academy works began to emerge. The best way to describe how it operates is that it is almost like a colony of ants or bees, with every department working closely with the others to ensure the most efficient and effective way for the students.

Antonio Hernandez and Angel Gimenez handle the day to day organisation of the coaches and staff with regular meetings being held with all key members of staff.

Every day I watched Sergio Casal and Antonio Hernandez patrolling the courts, talking animatedly together.

There seems very little ego within the Academy, everyone works hard and no one person is more important than the other. With this level of teamwork, commitment and knowledge, no wonder Sanchez-Casal's was recently quoted in the *Times* and *Wall Street Journal* as being the world's No.1 tennis Academy.

CONCLUSION:

During my two weeks at the Academy I learned much about the workings of its pupils, coaches and staff. I met a lot of very dedicated players, parents and coaches, studied the Sanchez-Casal coaching system, learned more about the junior tennis scene in the USA and Argentina, and watched a very high standard Grade 5 junior ITF, in which many of Spain's top juniors were competing.

I met Andy Murray's former coach, *El Guru del Tennis* Pato Alvarez, got to speak to Sergio Casal, Emilio Sanchez and Luis Mediero, founder and President of the Registro Profesional de Tennis (RPT). I also met Jim Loehr, the world's most pre-eminent sports psychologist, who was conducting a three-day Mental Toughness certification course on behalf of the Human Performance Institute at the Academy. And I also got to discuss tennis related issues with high level Spanish coaches enrolled on the Mental Toughness and three-day Sanchez-Casal/RPT Coach courses - not a bad two weeks!

Hardly surprisingly I've got to say that I thoroughly enjoyed my time visiting the Sanchez-Casal Academy and that it was a real eye-opener. I met great people, saw great coaches, experienced a great work ethic, and most of all, a phenomenally high standard of tennis - no wonder Andy Murray improved so much when he went there!

Don't miss my next article, *The Reign of Spain* and the reasons behind Spain's tennis success.

