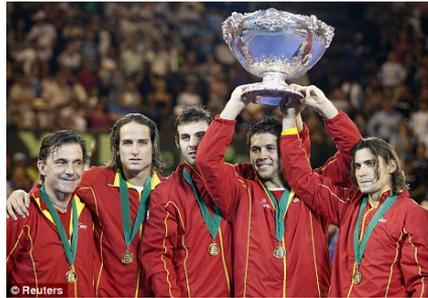


In the second of three articles on Spanish tennis written during a two-week visit to the Sanchez-Casal Tennis Academy in Barcelona, LTA Master Performance and RPT European professional coach, Martin Baldrige author of the book, *So you want to win Wimbledon?* discusses why Spain has become one of the world's tennis superpowers.

THE REIGN OF SPAIN

PHOTO: SPAIN 2008 DAVIS CUP CHAMPIONS



A WORLD NUMBER ONE EVERY FIVE YEARS

In the 1960s and '70s Spaniards Manuel Santana and Manuel Orantes won five Grand Slam singles titles between them. However, between Orantes winning the US Open in 1975 and Sergi Bruguera the first of his two consecutive French Opens in 1993, Spain produced no Grand Slam champions. Its highest ranked players during this time were Jose Higuera, who reached world No.6 in 1983, and Juan Aguilera who was world No.7 in 1984.

In the last twenty years though, Spain has produced a world number one every five years. Emilio Sanchez Vicario became the first to do so when in April 1989, he achieved the world number one doubles ranking, having won the 1988 French and US Opens with Andres Gomez and Sergio Casal respectively. He again won the French Open with Casal in 1990.

PHOTO: EMILIO SANCHEZ AND SERGIO CASAL



Emilio's sister Arantxa Sanchez Vicario, reached the world No.1 singles position in February 1995, won the French Open in 1989, 1994 and 1998, and the US Open in 1994. Conchita Martinez was Wimbledon champion in 1994 and world No.2 in October 1995.

Before 1991, Spain's women had never won the Federation Cup. But between 1991 and 1998, led by Sanchez Vicario and Martinez, it won the Cup five times.

PHOTO: SANCHEZ-VICARIO AND MARTINEZ WITH THE FEDERATION CUP



Carlos Moya won the 1998 French Open and became world No.1 in March 1999. Juan Carlos Ferrero won the 2003 French open and reached world No.1 in September 2003. Albert Costa won the French Open in 2002, and Alex Corretja twice lost in the French Open final, and reached world No.2 in February 1999. Nine-time Grand Slam winner, and 2008 and 2010 Wimbledon champion Rafael Nadal, first reached world No.1 in August 2008.

For more than a decade Spanish men have usually comprised up to a quarter of the world's Top-20 and anywhere between 10 and 17 of the world's Top-100. Prior to 2000 Spain had not won the Davis Cup, but since then has won it four times.

So what led to Spain's transformation from second class tennis nation to one of the world's tennis Superpowers? This was the question I hoped to answer when I visited the Sanchez-Casal Academy in Barcelona.

THE WEATHER

Many people would have you believe that one of the main reasons why Spain produces so many great tennis players is due to its climate. And they're right! - with more than 320 days of sunshine per year, there's little need to build or use expensive indoor facilities when in Spain, people can play literally, all day every day outside, usually on red clay courts but in many places hard courts too.

COMPETITION

Another of the reasons for Spain's tennis success is its abundance of competitive opportunities. More than 80 men's and women's professional level, Futures, Challenger, and main tour events are played in Spain every year. These range from \$10,000 events to the ATP/WTA tournaments at Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and Marbella.

There are hundreds of tournaments for juniors in all age groups and the chance for them to compete against adults in Open categories too. There are also a healthy supply of Tennis Europe, 16 and 14-and-under, and ITF 18-and-under events.

For coaches there are more than 1000 tennis schools to work at throughout the country and over 100 competition teams.

VISITING SANCHEZ-CASAL:

In my previous article about my visit to Sanchez-Casal I described what I found there and how I met several of the leading figures in Spanish tennis including William “Pato” Alvarez, Sergio Casal, Emilio Sanchez and Luis Mediero.

PATO ALVAREZ – EL GURU DEL TENNIS:

On my second day at the Academy I had met Pato Alvarez, the only coach ever to have been inducted into the tennis Hall of Fame and who personally coached more than 50 Top-50 players, including Andy Murray.

In a meeting with Pato I asked him, “Part of the reason I’m here is to find out why Spain has produced so many top tennis players.”

“Is because of me,” he said. “I trained all the players - all the coaches worked under me.”

I told him, “I know that you invented the drills that the coaches do here.”

“Yes is true – I am the reason!” He replied.

I thought to myself is this guy *really* the reason why tennis took off in Spain or was he just completely “Loco”?



PHOTO: WITH SERGIO CASAL

In a later meeting with Sergio Casal I told him that I had met Pato and he had told me that *he* was the reason why tennis really took off in Spain.

“Is he crazy?” I asked him.

“No,” Sergio laughed and replied. “In about 1980 when I was about 18 or 19, I was about the fifth best player in Spain in under 21’s. Pato worked for the Federation and he told them that me and some others, although we weren’t the best, had the most potential, and that they should choose us guys who worked harder, for the national teams, instead of the best guys who liked a drink and to chase girls. The Federation didn’t believe him but they let him.

At first we thought he was crazy. He came with these plastic bags full of tennis balls - six or seven of them. He did these drills which made you more tired in half an hour than playing normally for two hours. Before he came we would do normal things, hit in threes, two-on-ones, things like that. Within six months of him working with us we were beating the guys who were above us before.

He was unbelievable. He would make us play on Christmas day. We played early in the morning, we played late at night. He never took a day off. We didn’t pay him anything. He said, “You pay me when you make it as professionals.”

He would take us to tournaments really early in the morning to practice and say, “Wait, the best players will be here soon and they’ll need people like you to play with.” We thought he was mad, no way would the top players want to play with us. But soon people like Jimmy Connors would come and Pato would say to them, “You need someone to play with? - these guys will play with you.” We got to hit with him and the next day Connors would come early in the morning and ask Pato if he could hit with us, me and Emilio? - it was amazing.

Me, Emilio, Antonio Hernandez we all grew up with this. And now he’s still with us. It’s amazing he’s nearly 75 years old. One day he had a heart attack. The next day he says, “I’m fine I’ll come and work.” We said, “No – you need to rest!”

Later that afternoon I spotted Alvarez sitting on a bench watching Academy Director Antonio Hernandez teaching a Russian girl. I went and sat next to him and said,

“Hi Pato, it really is an honour to have met you.” He just smiled.

“I want to buy your book. And because of you I’ll learn to speak Spanish!”

I opened my wallet, pulled out a twenty euro note and said to him,

“Here you are.”

“Oh thank you,” he replied.

He gave me change and off we went to the club house where he wrote a personal message to me in his book, pointed out the parts which he thought were most important, and gave me some extra articles written in English.



PHOTO: WITH PATO ALVAREZ AND HIS BOOK

That evening I googled Pato but could find very little information about him. There really is not much known about him outside of Spain. However, when you research the Spanish players, he appears all the time. Emilio Sanchez and Sergio Casal both name him as their coach, along with the long list of players Pato mentions in his book.

William “Pato” Alvarez is a 75-year-old Colombian who in the 1960s reached the world’s Top- 10, and had wins over Rod Laver and Roy Emerson. After retiring from the tour he coached players ranging from Emilio Sanchez and Sergio Casal to Andy Murray and Ilie Nastase.

Andy Murray said of him, “He taught me a lot..... he has a lot of experience and is one of the best coaches in the world.”

Alvarez invented a system of drills, which he believed to be essential to help improve players, and many of the top Spanish players trained under him. This system was modernised by Emilio Sanchez Vicario and Registro Profesional de Tennis (RPT) founder and President Luis Mediero.

In Pato’s book there is a quote about him from former ITF President Philippe Chatrier who said, *“Spain had the best luck in the world in finding the one they called The Vagabond of tennis and the Bandit of tennis.”*

According to Alvarez the reasons for Spain’s tennis success are:

1. Good coaches.
2. Good weather.
3. The amount of clubs there are.

During my stay at the Academy I learned a lot about the Spanish system of coaching which I describe in more detail in my next article. However, this system of drills and coaching is only part of the reason for Spain's success.

WORK ETHIC AND MENTALITY

Perhaps the biggest reason why Spain has produced all those Top-100 ranked players, Grand Slam champions and world No.1's, is their innate ability to hard work and fight.

In a meeting with Sanchez-Casal Academy, Mental Training coach Joan Ribas, I asked him why he thought Spain had produced so many great players.

"Well I think that any country where you have a lot of people who play tennis, say for example in Russia or the United States, you are going to get some good players," he replied. "Spanish players though, hit the ball in and run a lot. We are used to fighting and working hard.

"What about Nadal?" I asked.

"Well I have a saying," he replied. "Easy life - easy play," Nadal's life is so simple and the Nadal clan, his family, really helped to maintain that."

"So is that the secret," I asked. "Work hard and make things simple and uncomplicated."

"Maybe, I think it's just the way we are," replied Ribas.

Another day whilst watching the junior ITF Grade 5 event at the Academy, I noticed a familiar face from my native northeast England - Dan Kiernan, former British No.1 doubles player who played at Wimbledon many times and played top collegiate tennis in the USA at Louisiana State University.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked me.

"I'm doing some research for a book I'm writing and taking a Spanish coaching course," I replied. "And you, what are you doing here?"

"Well I've got an Academy near Marbella and some of my players are playing here," he replied. "So what do you think of the place?"

"It's awesome," I said. "A real culture shock, everyone here seems to work incredibly hard. The coaches are great, and all play really well. I got to meet Pato Alvarez - Andy Murray's coach, and have met Emilio Sanchez Vicario and Sergio Casal as well. The thing about this place is that they have such a work ethic and no one seems to winge on or complain - they just seem to get on with it."

“Yeah,” said Dan “It’s amazing here in Spain. In Marbella I sometimes take the players to see Fernando Gil, who coached Borg for a while, and is one of the most respected coaches in Spain. He says you British coaches are the best in the world. You have a drill for everything, whereas here in Spain we only have four drills. One where you stand in the corner at the baseline, another where you stand in the other corner, then one where you stand at one side up at the net and feed balls and then another where you stand at the other side.”

“Well,” I said. “Here it’s a bit more complicated than that. I’ve seen lots of drills done here, and within the drills, and depending on what the player’s like, subtle variations within them.”

“Another thing I’ve learned here is that the drills are one thing, but the major reason behind the success of the players is their mentality. If you’re American, your goal is probably to get a scholarship to a good university. However, if you’re Spanish the goal is to get into the Top-10 in the world!

They all seem so humble, the coaches as well, there’s no jealousy, no thinking they’re the big “I am”. They just work hard and fight with their opponents on court – not off!”

PHOTO: DAN KIERNAN



Find out more about Dan’s Academy at www.sototennis.com

CONCLUSION:

After two weeks in Spain I came to the following conclusions about why Spain produced all these great players:

- 1. The climate allows them to play all-year round outside.**
- 2. In Pato Alvarez they had an extremely strong-willed, charismatic and visionary Guru del Tenis. He instilled an incredible work ethic and encouraged a humbleness and belief amongst the players.**
- 3. His system of drills formed the basis of a coaching system which works brilliantly in Spain.**
- 4. There are plenty of competitive opportunities at all levels.**

5. There is an extremely high level of expectation amongst the players. Their goal is to reach the world's Top-10 players and they have many outstanding role models to look up to and learn from.
6. They have a culture where working hard and fighting on court leads to outstanding results.

PHOTO: LUIS MEDIERO AND EMILIO SANCHEZ VICARIO



Don't miss my next article on the Sanchez-Casal and RPT coaching systems.