

## **TONI NADAL INTERVIEW – FRENCH TENNIS MAGAZINE**

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In a way – and this is not to put him down – he's part of the scenery: Toni is essential in the landscape of world tennis. Everybody obviously knows the uncle and trainer of the world n°1 but what do we really know about the man, who is rarely seen without a cap as if it's a protection and who has the debonair style of a tennis "professor" we'd all like to have? Not much. So, for once we'd like to listen to a trainer – and not just any trainer! – to decode with him the mechanisms that have allowed him to, stone by stone, build one of the biggest phenomena in the history of the sport. By applying a healthy discourse that has education and work as the lead motives, "uncle Toni" takes us along with him on the path to the incredible destiny of the Nadals. Through this interview, we gradually acquire a better understanding of how Rafa became Rafa....

**Tennis Magazine: Toni, everybody knows you as the uncle and coach of Rafael Nadal but they know less about your own background. You've celebrated your 50th birthday this year (T.M.: he was born on February 17, 1960 in Manacor). Could you briefly describe this half-century?**

Toni Nadal: What can I say (smiles)? Like everybody in the family, I was born in Mallorca and I still live there, in Porto Cristo I have three children, one girl and two boys aged 9, 7 and 6. I was the second-born in the family after Sebastian, father of Rafael. I have two other brothers (T.M.: one of which is Miguel Angel, former professional football player at FC Barcelona) and a sister, quite a bit younger. As you know, we are a very sports-minded family but I was the first to play tennis. I tried a lot of sports, including football of course, but also swimming, table tennis (ping pong) which is the sport in which I managed quite well since I was the junior champion of the Balearic Islands. From the age of 14, I started playing tennis.

**T.M.: What triggered your interest in the sport?**

Toni: In 1972, I was able to go to the Masters that took place in Barcelona. That year, I saw Ilie Nastase win and he became my idol. So, I started to play in the Tennis Club of Manacor, Rafa's current club and I've been a member since 1974.

**T.M.: Quickly, you reached a very good level, by the way...**

Toni: Let's not exaggerate. Let's say that I had a good regional or national level. I reached group A in the 2nd Spanish category (T.M.: Still, this category grouped the 30 best Spanish players). After that, I no longer disputed a lot of tournaments because I was also studying in Barcelona. I followed law studies because that's what my father wanted and also history because that interested me more. In a broader perspective, I wasn't very passionate about those studies. I couldn't see myself getting a job in it because I could quickly see that I didn't have the potential.

**T.M.: What sort of player were you?**

Toni: I had the same style as José Higuera (smiles). I made very few mistakes and I was physically good. The problem was that I did not have a strong shot. I lacked aggressiveness. My backhand was correct but my forehand wasn't very good.

**T.M.: How did you earn a living before becoming Rafa's coach?**

Toni: I was interested in sports so I ended up getting a trainer's degree and I started to teach in the club in Manacor. Before becoming a pro, my brother Miguel was in that club as well and he was very good at it because he became the junior champion of the Balearic Islands. There were quite a few very good juniors. Our tennis school has an excellent quality, it's one of the best on the Balearic Islands.

**T.M. And then, Rafa came...**

Toni: Rafa was a very good youngster amongst others. I first started to train him in the tennis school where he started in 1990 at the age of 4. It's only a couple of years later so it seems, in 1996 or in 1997, that I started to focus only on training Rafa. But that was not because we had decided that he would become a professional player. It was too early for that. It was a decision made because it was easier that way. Rafa started to play in a lot of tournaments and he needed somebody to accompany him. Rafa's dad preferred me to do that and he also backed it financially.

**T.M.: So, you took charge of little Rafa and perhaps, you made the most important decision of his life: to let him play with his left hand whereas he's a natural right-hander.**

Toni: No! That's a legend... But it's really not the truth. At the start, he played with two hands but using one hand to direct. I had the impression that he was stronger on his left side than on his right side. So, I figured that he was left-handed; it's as simple as that. Besides, even if he ate with his right hand, he also played football with his left foot. However, at no point did I tell him: "He needs to play with his left hand because that way, he will be much stronger." However, since I'm not completely stupid, I simply advised him to use his strongest hand. That's it. Besides, I don't think that it's that much more advantageous to be left-handed. Just look at the world's best players: there are not many of them there. No, the only thing I did advise Rafa was that at the age of 10, he needed to stop playing his forehand with two hands because no top player had a two-handed forehand and I couldn't imagine my nephew being the first. So, this is all there is to this story. Would Rafa be as strong now if he used his right hand? That's something we don't know and we will never know.

**T.M. So, when you started to train only with Rafa, was your first job a huge technical task?**

Toni: No, not really. If you want to work in a healthy way with somebody, the first task is to make him responsible. Even as a kid, Rafa had to be the master of his own tennis decisions. After that, my philosophy as a coach is not to tell a player: "you have to hit that ball this or that way because that's the way that shot is played." That's wrong and you can see how so many players have so many different techniques. I will rather tell a player: "It doesn't matter how you take that ball, but you need to hit it there with this speed and that sort of effect." What I mean is that you have to look beyond technique. First of all, you need to know and understand the game. In fact, the work is mostly done on a mental decision-making way. With Rafa, I always set him short term goals. Every day, he needed to be better than the previous one. That's more important than technique. So, I obviously worked a lot on pure technique as well because otherwise, you wouldn't be a coach!

**T.M.: Do you still use the same training methods now with Rafa?**

Toni: yes. But after all, you need to adapt your philosophy to the type of player you're working with. If I was training Federer, I would probably do more technical work because his game depends a lot on technique and you need to maintain that. Federer is not the sort of player to do leg work (running) all day long.

**T.M. Would you love to train Federer?**

Toni: No, that's not what I wanted to say (smiles). You know, when Rafa retires, I don't think that I could train another player. It would be difficult. I think that I'll go back to training youngsters.

**T.M. Rafa's game is more characteristic game than others, less academic. Is that due to the fact that you gave him more freedom on a technical level?**

Toni: Hard to say. Rafa has a very thorough foundation on a technical level. As time passed, he has developed his own game and indeed, it's a lot different than the game style of others. Since we played a lot on clay, I focused on his forehand, his topspin and his consistency. For me, those were the three most important points.

**T.M. Another point that is without a doubt at least as important for you as a trainer but also as his uncle is the upbringing. Today, people applaud him specifically for his perfect upbringing.**

Toni: Yes, that's true. It's been essential for two reasons. Firstly, it's a lot easier to work with somebody who has an exemplary behaviour. Secondly, like you said, it's because Rafa is my nephew. I didn't want people to have a bad image of him. Having said that, I didn't do much work in this department. Rafa has always been an easy boy. I don't remember him misbehaving on a court once; he has never broken a racquet in his life. Generally speaking, I think that people neglect the upbringing all too often. I remember what Ricardo Piatti, trainer of Ivan Ljubicic, once said during a colloquium in Italy: "the problem today is that if you ask a father if he'd prefer to see his son to become the Roland Garros champion rather than a well brought up kid, he's pick the first option." Besides, it's easier to win Roland Garros if you have a good upbringing because that implies that you have discipline, that you can listen and that you can accept your mistakes.

**T.M.: Is it true that when he was a kid, you made your nephew believe that you had magical powers?**

Toni: Yes (smiles). Rafa was the little boy in the family and everybody always had so much fun with him. As a joke, I made him believe all sorts of things: that I was a star at AC Milan, that I had won the Tour de France five times with a moped (laughs)...Indeed, I also told him that I had magical powers. One day, he must have been about 7 or 8, we lacked a player in the 12-year group to compete in a team event. I took him along with us and to reassure him, I told him that he didn't need to worry if the match if went badly because I have the ability to make it rain. It was winter. So, when the match got tight at the start, it started to rain and then, Rafa turned to me and said: "It's alright, you can make it stop now, I'm going to win!" Another time, we were watching a match of Ivan Lendl on tv. It was a replay of an older match during which Lendl retired. Rafa didn't know that. So, at the exact moment when Lendl retired, I told him: "Alright, I'm going to make Lendl lose." He couldn't believe his eyes. I have a lot of examples like that.

**T.M.: When you think back to those moments and you look at him now with his incredible achievements, isn't it you who can't believe your eyes now?**

Toni: I am surprised by his career, yes. Because I look around us and I see a lot of players who are just as good as he is: Murray, Djokovic, Gasquet, for example...These are players who perhaps have an easier touch of the ball. And yet, Rafa has by far the best career. So, you ask me whether I'm surprised. Yes, I am. I'll go even further, I don't understand it.

**T.M.: But don't you think that Rafa has something more than the others in this regard?**

Toni: Perhaps so, yes. He has an incredible game intensity and a good mentality. I think that he has a better mental control than the others.

**T.M.: At the start of his career, a lot of people said: "his game is too intense, it won't last..."**

Toni: (interrupts) But a lot of people talk without understanding what they're talking about.

**T.M.: So, you don't share this opinion?**

Toni: No. You basically need to understand one thing. When he arrived on tour, he was very young and not really ready for all of it. He made his debut among the 200 best players of the world at the end of 2002 and we didn't foresee that to happen this quickly. However, suddenly, he needed to step it up to keep up with the tour. All year long, Rafa had to play against adults whereas he was just a boy. In those circumstances, the only thing he could do on court was to run and to run everywhere. It's true that in the beginning of his career, he did nothing but that. However, this is the image that has stuck with him often without people noticing that gradually, his game was evolving. Today, if you really look at him, he doesn't run any more than the other players on court. So, it's true that his forehand is not as fast as Söderling's because he has learned to play with more topspin. However, just look at the last Roland Garros final and you will see that Rafa ran much less than Söderling. Same when you look at the semi-final in Wimbledon against Murray but in a different context. That must mean that his tennis is good, no? If Rafa had started out on tour later than he has, when he was already fully formed, people would surely not have said this about him.

**T.M. What about the future? Will you work on evolving his game some more?**

Toni: (thinks). The most important thing is to make sure that you do something better than how you did it on the previous day. Because if you stop improving, you're dead. So, rather than evolving, I would call it improvement.

**T.M.: Does it make you sad that people talk more about his physique and his mental ability than about his technique and his talent?**

Toni: Today, people want to talk about everything but without going deeper into the matter. You need to look at things more carefully and with more objectivity. Certain people have said that Rafa doesn't have a very good technique. But what is that, technique? Is it hitting the ball very hard and with a beautiful movement but once out of every two hits, it lands outside the court? Is it to have a very good forehand, a very good serve but no backhand? No. For me, technique is about being able to place the ball wherever you want it to land with no matter what shot. *This is what Rafa can do.* So, perhaps he doesn't have the same technique as Federer, but he does have an excellent

technique. A good forehand, a good backhand that he can slice, a correct volley...He has a hand that allows him to do a lot of things.

**T.M. Basically, don't you have the impression that Rafa's talent is often underestimated?**

Toni: I don't know. People can think whatever they want anyway. It's not a problem for me. I do think that they overestimate his physique. If you compare him with French players like Monfils or Tsonga, I'd say that they have a better physique, they're more strongly built. They say that Rafa is always there to hit the ball but I think that this has more to do with his excellent anticipation skills and a very good perception of the game.

**T.M. You say that you don't attach a lot of importance to what others say about Rafa. However, you were affected last year with how they whistled at Rafa in Roland Garros...(note: in 2009, the year of his first (and so far only) defeat in the 1/8 final against Robin Söderling, the public firmly supported the Swede)**

Toni: I'm not saying that I don't attach a lot of importance to it, I'm saying that people are entitled to think whatever they want. I think that the Roland Garros public was very incorrect that day. In sports, it's good to cheer for somebody's victory but it's not normal to wish defeat on somebody else. I've often repeated it to my nephew, who is a keen supporter of Real Madrid as you know, that I understand that he wants Real to win but I always told him that he should not wish defeat on Barcelona. I know that a lot of fans are like that but I think it's a rather dumb way of going about it. Anyway, we're not brought up like that in our family, that's not what we've been taught. It's for that reason that I was shocked by the way the Parisian public acted and even more so for three reasons: Firstly because Rafa has always been a very correct player, secondly because he was the defending Roland Garros champion and thirdly, because he's given a lot to that public by giving many autographs and such. So, to support Söderling, yes. No problem. But to whistle at Rafa, no.

**T.M.: Have you forgiven the Parisian public these days?**

Toni: I don't have to forgive them for anything. This is my opinion on what happened, that's all. This year, things were better, much better.

**T.M.: How far do you see Rafa going from this point on?**

Toni: I have no idea. If he happens to win no more tournaments, we're not going to make a projection about it. Our only goal is to play well, to improve ourselves. That's the best way to reach serenity: to do the things as best as you can. Rafa has the opportunity to do professionally something he loves above all else. It's up to him to do his best and that's easier to do when you love what you're doing. Beyond that, we're not focused on accumulating Grand Slam tournaments because that's not entirely up to us. You have other players to deal with. The work we put in it is the only thing that depends totally on us.

**T.M. Do you think that Rafa will be able to play until he's 35 for instance?**

Toni: No, I don't think so. A lot of people predicted him to have a short career and this career is already going strong for 8 years now. But anyway, you have to consider that he started on tour when he was very young and I think that by the age of 27 or 28, fatigue will start to set in. We'll see.

**T.M. How do you explain that you Nadals have such strong minds?**

Toni: I think that a lot has to do with upbringing. One of the key elements that's instilled on us is that in life, you have to face difficulties head-on. You can't think like a child that everything is beautiful. There will always be problems and you need to take them on. In tennis, like in life, you have to accept your mistakes, realize that you have to learn a lot in order to do less and you have to put in the necessary work to get there. This is what we've always done with Rafa. From when he was little, I made it so that things didn't always go smoothly. So, unlike other kids today, he has learned that things don't always happen the easy way, not right away. We had to deal with a lot of problems together like his serve which was really not good at the start. That's a key ingredient in sports, no? Tennis means hitting the ball back and forth over the net, there is no other signification. However, tennis becomes a passion when you measure the mental effort it requires, when you sum up all the difficulties you've encountered and when you gradually, step by step, start to rise above these obstacles. This is a good summary of Rafa's career. Whatever happens in the future, I can assure you that he'll leave a happy and satisfied man with all that he has accomplished.