

Producing pros

Some of tennis's future stars are being groomed in El Prat.

Fans of the ancient sport of tennis—thought

by some to have its origins in classical Greece—do not have to travel so far in either distance or time to find the sport being played by some of the best young players in the world. Indeed, many of today's tennis stars can be found right here in Spain. The Spaniard in the spotlight this year is 20-year-old Rafael Nadal, second in the world to Switzerland's Roger Federer.

The Mallorcan youngster was groomed right here at home, and he's not the only one.

Spain has long had a reputation for producing top tennis players, and as a result, many other nationalities train here to take advantage of the country's resources. Young tennis hopefuls from all over the world fly to Spain, hoping to follow in the footsteps of former world number one players such as Manuel Santana, who became the first Spaniard to reach the top spot in 1966, followed by Arantxa Sánchez Vicario on the women's side in 1995, Carlos Moyá in 1999, and Juan Carlos Ferrero in 2003. It is in places like the Academia Sánchez-Casal, snuggled cosily behind a farm just across from El Prat airport, and itself run by the former world number-one doubles team, Emilio Sánchez Vicario (Arantxa Sánchez Vicario's brother) and Sergio Casal, where these international hopefuls hone their skills, hoping to taste the success previously enjoyed by the academy's founders. The academy boasts of having trained the up-and-coming British tennis sensation, Andy Murray, and one of the world top 10 females, Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova.

The Sánchez-Casal Academy first opened its courts in 1999, and is now considered one of the best tennis academies in Europe, according to its founders. After retiring from the professional circuit, Emilio Sánchez Vicario pursued his idea for a prestigious tennis academy where players would have the opportunity to practise on all types of surfaces. Thus, the academy has 27 courts, 10 of which are clay. What makes this academy different, though, is the on-campus American high school where young teenagers can continue their studies while training to play professionally. "In Europe in the past, the system didn't allow you to do both tennis and get an education," Sánchez Vicario explained. "As a teenager, I saw a lot of players my age give up school, and afterwards they didn't make it and couldn't get a job. I could see that this kind of academy was really needed."

To implement this idea, Schiller International School opened its doors beside the courts and provides an education for the tennis teens training in the club. Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova was one of the first players to join the academy, and she stormed into the headlines in 2004 after winning the US Open singles title, aged only 19. She came here seven years ago. "In Russia, you can't grow past a certain level," she told *Metropolitan*. "The training here is very different. Now, I live in Spain for the tennis, but go to Russia for time off."

The philosophy behind the coaching in the academy is deceptively simple. The coaches try to "develop the player in all areas of the court and they work a lot on positioning and movement,"

Sánchez-Vicario explained. "The key to developing the players is to understand them perfectly. If you lose a match and someone explains to you why you lost it, then you have something to work towards."

It was with just this type of guidance that Scotland's Andy Murray was able to make it in the tennis world. He first became known two years ago when, aged 17, he won the US Open Boy's title. The British have always loved their tennis and have long lamented the lack of a good home player who would be capable of winning Wimbledon: thus, they welcomed young Murray like they would the prodigal son, giving him the Young Sports Personality of the Year award and showering him with media attention. Murray began playing senior tournaments in 2005, when he was ranked 407th in the world. In Cincinnati's 2006 ATP tournament, held in August, Murray beat Roger Federer. He has one ATP tour title under his belt and, despite his fiery temper on court, is more popular than ever. When Sánchez Vicario first played against Murray, he recognised the Scot's talent immediately. "Every time I tried to force him to the edges of the court, he was always able to return with a good angle, and that is a reflex that you can't be taught—you either have it or you don't." Sánchez-Vicario, however, was wary of all the media attention the teenager has been receiving, and believes that there is too much pressure on the 19 year old. "Murray earned a lot of money without actually winning any big tournaments, and that is a double-edged sword," Sánchez-Vicario warned. "He has to do the right things in his tennis if he is to justify all this interest."

Whether Murray fades into the background or makes it front stage is something still left to be seen, but the British public at least will be watching and waiting hopefully. This year, Svetlana Kuznetsova has won WTA singles' titles in Bali and China, and in June she was the loser in the French Open finals. Sánchez Vicario said he originally noticed the Russian because "the noise of the ball was something that impressed me. She hit it really hard, and I knew she was going to be unbelievable."

Kuznetsova says that she was lucky. "My parents taught me from a very young age the meaning of hard work.

"I would really love to win Roland Garros, but saying that just puts too much pressure on you. There is a huge amount of pressure on professionals and you have to learn to listen to yourself. When I play, I enjoy every day, and I believe that if I do my best every day, I'll do well."

Throw a stone, or a tennis ball, in the academy and you'll hit a Sánchez-Casal protégé desperately trying to follow Kuznetsova's advice.

Calum Gee is a 15 year old from Scotland who won the Scottish Indoor Junior Championships in February this year. Mike Vermeer, 14, from Luxembourg, and Bas van Stigt, also 14, from Holland, are some other tennis teens who are both ranked as the number-one junior players in their home countries, but have decided to come to Barcelona to take the next step in their career. All of these tennis teens know the value of hard work, and it seems that this is the key to success. As Kuznetsova says, it is generally the ones who "do their best every day" who achieve the best results. All three of the above kids are not only top junior players, but they also regularly appear on the Honor Roll of Schiller International School.

"The skills you need to be a good athlete are the same as the skills you need to be a good student: you must be focused, disciplined and motivated," said Michael Smith, Schiller's principal.

With such qualities, the Academy's professionals can be confident they have prepared these youngsters for success on or off the courts, and provided them with the skills necessary to take advantage of opportunities wherever they are presented.

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