

# The USPTA Advantage Interview: Emilio Sánchez

By Luis Mediero

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Sánchez counsels Rafael Nadal

The tremendous success of Spanish tennis cannot be explained with one simple explanation. It has been a combination of many important factors: great weather that permits players to play outdoors and on clay year round, numerous clubs with tennis schools and an assortment of multi-level tournaments, the involvement of many ex-players in coaching at the club and academy level, as well as the fact that Spain has produced many of the world's top players in the past twenty years who can be used as models for the new players. Players such as Carlos Moya, Juan Carlos Ferrero and Rafael Nadal serve as a strong testament to where Spanish tennis has been and will continue to go into the future.

The academy in Barcelona began almost 10 years ago, and it has been a great success ever since. There is a player development program that is working very well, they have begun to work closely with the *Registro Profesional de Tenis* (RPT) for the accreditation of their coaches, and when the USPTA is interested in their player development and really believes the academy can help American tennis, it is a very gratifying and rewarding experience. A validation, if you may, of their successful method of training many junior and professional players. The fervent hope is that the academy can assist to develop American tennis by bringing in new players and some fresh air to the teaching world in conjunction with the tremendous support from both the RPT and USPTA.

These qualities are no longer confined to Spain. Player development with a distinctly Spanish flavor has come to Southwest Florida in the form of the Sánchez-Casal Academy, which opened in June at the Naples Tennis Club and Resort in Naples, Florida. The Naples complex features 37 clay courts, one hard court and several coaches who have worked at the Barcelona branch of the Academy. Working with what they characterize as one shared vision, top competition combined with intensive training and personalized coaching, produces a player's best tennis.

Spanish Davis Cup captain Emilio Sánchez, older brother of Hall of Famer Arantxa Sánchez-Vicario, and his partner Sergio Casal, have established their training center as one of the elite academies in Europe. In recent years, the academy claims to have

trained as many or more 50 top players than the U.S. has produced in the same period. There are currently seven American men ranked in the top 100 and Sánchez believes his academy can help improve those numbers.

"The United States has not produced many male or female top 100 tour players in recent years," Sanchez said. "We hope to help America maintain itself as a tour leader along with countries such as Spain, Russia, Argentina and the upcoming Chinese."

At the professional level, the American struggles on clay have been well chronicled. The surface has been a sink hole for many American pros, who grew up learning to play on faster hard courts where power and pace are key components to success. Sánchez believes Americans can benefit by responding to the demands clay courts place on players.

"In my opinion, learning to play the game on clay does give you advantages that I think can be a big advantage in today's tennis," Sanchez said. "The guys who grew up on clay have a much bigger advantage because they have more knowledge and experience in actually constructing points, they have more patience, they understand what shots to play, how to use spins, and how to put points together. As the game becomes faster and players adjust to the faster pace these are all very important skills because it is very difficult to just serve someone off the court now — you have to know how to build a point."

In this interview, the Davis Cup captain discusses his philosophy of player development, examines reasons why Spain has been more successful than the US in developing top players in recent years and gives his opinion in case the US and Spain play a hypothetical semi-final in this year's Davis Cup.

**LM:** Why did you decide to establish a new branch of Sánchez-Casal in Naples?

**Emilio Sánchez:** The deal came about because we wanted to do something abroad and the best place to do it was where the best academies in the world are located - the United States. The US has the biggest potential in terms of both tennis and studies for juniors because the college level is so good in America. Our main focus was in providing players the best possibility to study and play tennis at the same time, and we think the US is the best place to do that. We had a couple of offers from places in California and we looked at a few different places. Then the possibility of doing something in Naples came up from the club. They were very keen on doing something big with us and we liked their facility quite a bit. We didn't open the academy there until June 2007 and the response from the kids has been very good. We're looking forward to the future in Naples: we really believe we have a great opportunity there.

**LM:** There are twelve Spanish men in the top 100, including four in the top 20. The US, a much larger country with a much greater population, only has seven top-100 ranked men with Roddick and Blake the only Americans in the top 20. What are the biggest reasons for that disparity? Is it the way Americans train?

**Emilio Sánchez:** In my opinion, learning to play the game on clay does give you advantages that I think can be a big advantage in today's tennis. In my time as a player, 20 years ago, you still had more specialists and guys who were more strictly fast-surface players. If you see the tournaments today on the faster surfaces basically everybody is playing the same type of tennis. The guys who grew up on clay have a much bigger advantage because as you say they have more knowledge and experience in actually constructing points, they have more patience, they understand

what shots to play, how to use spins, and how to put points together. As the game becomes faster and players adjust to the faster pace these are all very important skills because it is very difficult to just serve someone off the court now — you have to know how to build a point.

**LM:** Kuznetsova, Murray, Hantuchova are among the players who have trained at the Sánchez-Casal Academy in Spain. What kind of competitive culture do you aspire to create in Naples?

**Emilio Sánchez:** We have worked with all of the players you name, but it's important to know we also have players at all levels — not only at the really high, elite levels, but at the junior levels as well. If a player comes to us at a medium under-14 level of play, this player will get the kind of professional treatment a top elite player would receive if the player is willing to put in the hard work necessary. I can tell you the secret to improving as a tennis player is really not a big secret at all: the secret is to work as hard as you can work in a professional setting with top coaches and to have a high level of practice and competition. Competition and intensive training together are the best way to develop tennis players. If, for instance, you have a talented junior player and you keep him at the academy practicing at that level without competing at a higher level, then you're not teaching and challenging him how to succeed and reach his highest level. So it's very important to have the right people, experienced coaches who know how to train a player and how to create a productive program for that player.

**LM:** When you see a junior player, what are you looking for in assessing if that player can someday be a pro? Are you looking at athletic ability? Stroke production? If I came to you at 14 and said "Emilio, I want to be a top 100 player" do you encourage that goal no matter how limited I may be physically or technically or are you up front with the players in terms of what their potential truly is?

**Emilio Sánchez:** Every kid who is playing wants to be a pro. The main problem is that the spots available are very, very few. Because in tennis you only have 100 top pros and these 100 pros don't change every year. So, it's not like you have 100 opportunities every year to be a top 100 player because many of these guys can have careers lasting seven to ten years and only a few guys slip, get injured or retire. So you may have five spots open up in the top 100 every year. Think about that for a minute. You're talking about maybe five spots for all the young players in the world, for all of the academies, for all of the federations all over the world. That's not a lot of opportunity and for that reason tennis is a very, very demanding sport because the opportunities are so very few. So, for us it is important that the kids who arrive don't make it as their main goal to be a top professional. It's good to set high standards, and we encourage that, but their main goal should be to learn and create the best opportunities for their future where they can combine school and tennis together. If they break through and make it as pros that is great, but if they get a college scholarship or pursue a future as a coach those are also valuable goals for us as well. The idea is to learn the game completely and to put tennis and school together for the future. To answer your question about what we look for: when they come to us we spend time with the player and we analyze completely their strengths, their weaknesses, their mind set and their goals. We try to build a pattern of play as a foundation based on what they do well and that can take time. For example, you see many, many kids who have very good technique and are good athletes, but then you put those kids in a match and they don't know how to put together their skills and their strengths. Teaching players to use their skills to the best of their ability in matches can be a very slow process. From the ages of 13 or 14 to 18 the players should be learning to know their game and use their skills in matches. I think that's the most difficult thing because most of the time in tennis

when you're losing matches you're consumed with winning them rather than improving and at that age you have to understand that learning to make the best use of your skills and maximizing your game is what is important.

**LM:** In the past, we've seen great clay-court players such as Thomas Muster, Sergi Bruguera, and Albert Costa struggle sometimes to translate that success to other surfaces and others such as Guga and Moya, who have had some of their best results on clay, have been able to adjust to other surfaces. Why has Nadal, at such a young age and relatively so early in his career, been able to adapt, reach the Wimbledon final and come within a set of becoming the first man since Borg to win Roland Garros and Wimbledon in the same season?

**Emilio Sánchez:** First of all, the speed of the surfaces has helped a bit in that even indoor courts, with the exception of Davis Cup where you can get some very fast carpet courts, are not really, really as fast as they were. Even the grass courts are not as fast as they were and the bounce is not as low as it was years ago. The reason why you see Nadal succeed on other surfaces like winning at Indian Wells and going to the Wimbledon final, in my opinion, is because Nadal really has this strong inner drive where he really wants to achieve - he wants to be a better tennis player and be number one. And you've seen how he has improved his serve, the work he has done on his volley and slice backhand since he first came on the tour. The same is true of David Ferrer. With Ferrer, the process of maturing was later than Nadal because Ferrer has really made his move as a top player the past two years and he's 25 so he's older than a Nadal or Djokovic and he matured later. However, he is an incredibly hard worker, he is in fantastic physical shape, and he really loves tennis. So, in these past two years he has improved so much. Before, when Ferrer was playing he was not as aggressive as the Ferrer you saw make it to the U.S. Open semifinals or the Shanghai final this year. He has worked to add the new tools to his game, and he knows how to use these tools. From where I sit, you can see what tools a young player has but only through the course of a career can you see how much desire that player has and how hard that player is willing to work. In my opinion, that can make the difference because a player can find a way if they are willing to work hard. For example, in David's case maybe at a younger age he did not have as much physical talent when he was really young. If you saw him when he was a junior, you would not think "this kid can be a top five player in the world." But what David did was dedicate himself to working and working and working and working and he finally found his way to where he is today and he is an incredible player. To answer your question about player development: it is very important how you train and prepare the junior players to advance to tournaments. We have a player from Bulgaria named Grigor Dimitrov at our academy now. He already won the Orange Bowl [won the 16s Orange Bowl in 2006] and he's still young at 16. Now when he came to us, we told him "You've got to start playing with the pros so you can improve your level and adjust to that level." Maybe he thought he was too young or not yet ready, but these last two week he's played futures tournaments in Spain and he's won a couple of matches. So when you see a player who has incredible talent, and we believe Dimitrov has talent, he probably could have made it anyway even staying in Bulgaria or maybe not. But he has more chance to make it, in my opinion, here with us getting the professional treatment from coaches, being around great players and seeing what it takes to work and playing against better competition. That makes you better. The great players are talented, yes, but the great players are the hard workers too and they are the ones who have the right people around them helping them.

**LM:** The USTA has partnered with the Evert Academy in opening an 18,000-square foot facility that will serve as a national headquarters for national development. Have

you met with the USTA about possibly partnering with the Sánchez-Casal Academy for a player development program? If so, what has their response been?

**Emilio Sánchez:** We had a visit about a year ago from the USTA and Paul Roetert and Jay Berger came to Barcelona to meet with us. We discussed some things and I believe they were impressed with the personal approach we have and how intensive our academy is for the players. I think it will be good for the USTA in moving from Key Biscayne to Evert's Academy and that should help the players because if you take the best players and isolate them, then they're not going to improve. When they met us, they said we could maybe collaborate in the future, but they never came back to us. It was very disappointing because I believe that such a large organization as the USTA should work with all of the best academies, not be restricted to just one. You don't need to be a genius to understand that player development in the US is not going well, but after meeting their director, he can understand the reason why. His comment was, "we can see that here everybody works really hard."

On the other side, I'm very proud and honored to be part of the player development committee from the USPTA, to share the room with some of the greatest like Groopel, Macy, Loher, Echevery, Bollettieri, Heckler and Mediero. It was a great experience and they were really keen in pursuing all of the ideas we discussed regarding American tennis. This is the way USTA should operate as I suppose that they want to listen because they're the first ones interested in keeping tennis levels high. If the tennis level declines, their reputation declines as well, so they'll try to improve. Some of the others don't think this way because the USTA is more powerful on the economic side, and they don't depend on player development results. They solved raising more money but not on working on the fundamentals. We need to do the following to improve the overall game of tennis for the future:

- 1) Promote more clubs with tennis schools and tournaments
- 2) Help raise the competition level at clubs
- 3) Create a new player development program in coordination with all institutions and academies
- 4) Work in all geographic areas – don't focus only on Florida and California
- 5) Collaborate with Academies and/or competition coaches
- 6/ Use all of our resources to improve the game

If they work diligently in all of these matters, they will gradually develop more players who can take a shot at the top 100. The US used to have 50 of the top 100 in the 1980s, but it has continued to drop since then.

**LM:** Maybe in 2008 Spain and the US could play again in the semi-finals. Last year, Spain lost, but how do you see your chances this year?

**Emilio Sánchez:** Well, the US is the defending champion, so they are confident, but it is a very demanding schedule and they had the support of Roddick and Blake. Hopefully they will maintain the same drive and determination, and we both can win and get the chance to play again each other – this time in Spain on very slow clay. We are looking forward to that after last year's hard loss.

**LM:** Last question - what can the academy at Naples offer to the USPTA members?

**Emilio Sánchez:** We can promise that the players that come will have the most successful player development program from Europe in the US today. In the event the members want to come with their students, we can offer some specific weeks of coaching with us. We will conduct a conference on Spanish tennis together with the RPT and the USPTA on November 27-29, 2008.

You can check all of our programs at our web site [www.sanchez-casal.com](http://www.sanchez-casal.com)

We will also have some special programs for Easter, Spring Break, Orange Bowl, etc. We are able to personalize any training program based on the requirements from the USPTA membership or any of their groups.

Naples is a beautiful place, a great club and a great place for us to have our academy. So, we are looking forward to our work there. When people come to our academy they will be taken care of in a very personal and professional way. We have eight or nine coaches who played Davis Cup in the past, who have knowledge and experience in tennis and we're looking forward to doing great and positive things in Naples.