

Nothing is free, just ask Nadal



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In times as difficult as the present, Rafa's example is clear: the conditions don't matter, the opponent doesn't matter and complaining is useless. Effort can conquer all.

Rafa Nadal is a true champion. It is not a question of talent, although he obviously has that. Many are born with skills, but few prepare themselves as conscientiously as he has to reach

the highest of highs. And even fewer fight as hard as he does when up against the ropes.

Nadal, one of the world's top-ranked tennis players, is an example to follow. An example, now more than ever, for Spain, its companies and its workers.

For an [IESE case study](#), [Santiago Álvarez de Mon](#), a professor who specializes in leadership and people management, conducts an in-depth interview with Nadal and his entourage.

The result is a set of encounters that reveals the path traveled by this young man from Mallorca, and how much we can learn from it.

The beginnings

Rafael Nadal Parera was born in Manacor, Mallorca, on June 3, 1986, into a tight-knit family. His grandparents had created very strong ties and, in fact, many family members are in business together.

It was also a family with sports running through its veins: Rafa's uncle, Miquel Àngel Nadal, was among soccer's elite.

One day, when Rafa was three, his father took him to see another uncle, Toni Nadal, a coach at the Manacor tennis club.

"Grab the racket. Let's see if you can hit it," they encouraged him.

And the little boy hit the ball effortlessly. Toni was amazed, and that's how it all began. The boy had talent.

A word about talent: Here we're not talking about natural ability, insists his uncle and coach. Many young people have natural abilities but never become star players. "They're just not strong enough mentally," he says.

By talent, he means the capacity to learn and perfect a skill. It involves not only taking the first steps, but also having the desire to see it through to the end and go all the way with it.

When Rafa became the Spanish champion at age 10, Toni Nadal gave him this wakeup call: He presented him with a list of the last 25 players who had won the same tournament. Nadal recognized only one name: Àlex Corretja. The rest — to prove his point — had gone no further.

A solid base

Rafa's parents made great efforts to ensure his education, although juggling books and tennis rackets meant extremely long days lasting from 8 in the morning till 11 at night.

Completing high school was not easy for the young athlete. At crucial moments, studies coincided with tournaments as important as the Roland Garros Junior.

The family contemplated a move to Barcelona to be near the Centro de Alto Rendimiento sports center in Sant Cugat, a veritable factory for elite Spanish tennis. But in the end they decided to remain in Palma. They wanted him to stay near the family.

On the sports side, the training sessions given by his uncle Toni are based on effort, pure and simple. He believes that success comes at age 7 or 8, not at 20. He has always demanded the utmost from his player, despite that modus operandi sometimes leading to excessive tension or sending Rafa home worn out. Typically the sessions lasted from three hours between tournaments to nearly all-day affairs during the preseason.

He has prepared him for the hard times, the frustration and, above all, the perseverance. Toni has never tolerated excuses.

For instance, in a match against the American player James Blake, Rafa complained that the balls were not lively enough. Toni responded: "Lose. Go home. Quit your complaining."

Nadal lost, but the following week he won a tournament playing with those same balls. This is no place for excuses, because the opponent plays under the same conditions.

Another thing: no one will ever see Rafa throw his racket to the ground, since he knows how expensive they are and that many people can't afford to buy one.

Nor have they allowed him to become complacent. Even after important victories, such as his first Roland Garros, Toni has always required that he scrutinize the weak points of his game. No matter how successful, there is always scope for constructive criticism.

The growing team

As with any other business, Rafa's entourage has grown steadily with the arrival of every new triumph and challenge. It has gone from a core group of two people — just him and his uncle — to a team of seven: player, coach, manager, physical therapist, personal trainer, press

agent and assistant coach.

This expansion happened gradually, within an atmosphere of proximity. His manager, Carlos Costa, has worked with them since Nadal was 14 years old. Both the physical therapist and personal trainer are trusted individuals from the same Mallorca area, professionals who did not previously rub shoulders with the elite. In other words, they have not set out to snare world-famous personalities.

Nor has the team grown for the sake of growing. The press agent arrived when it had already become impossible to attend to all the media. And the assistant coach came on board because Toni, tired of all the travel, wanted to spend more time with his family.

Each member has a discrete function, although this is tacitly understood, without any formally defined roles.

Furthermore, the decision-making process has been enhanced: the athlete now has more points of view to draw from.

But this natural development has not altered the basic order of things. The team knows where success comes from: the constant work put in by Rafa, who has been groomed by his uncle for more than 15 years. Much depends on his own effort and his desire to learn.

Right now, the star player has been working for months to improve his serve, yet his uncle still considers his progress to be insufficient. Just as companies know that innovation is vital in order to move forward, Nadal knows that if he does not improve, his opponents will catch up. He himself managed to temporarily dethrone Roger Federer, considered the most skilled player on the circuit.

In times as difficult as the present, Rafa's example is clear: the conditions don't matter, the opponent doesn't matter and complaining is useless. Effort can conquer all, and difficulties are out there to be overcome: either you defeat them or they defeat you.

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