

## ***The Best High Performance Tennis Academies In Europe...Reflections On A Coaches Tour Of Europe***

**This article has been adapted from Kovacs Institute, but we thought iTPA members would find it useful.**

Over the last two years the Kovacs Institute has been fortunate to evaluate nearly two dozen of the top junior development tennis training environments. In 2022 it was going to major academies, training centers and visiting with top coaches in Florida. In 2023 it was evaluating the top training environments in Spain, France and Italy. The 2023 trip included nearly 20 top junior development coaches who work daily developing young talent from 6-18 years of age. The main goals of the tour were:

- 1) To learn from some of the best tennis coaches, tennis teachers and academies across the spectrum of elite level junior tennis development.
- 2) To better understand the level of the best junior players in the world at the various stages along the junior development pathway.
- 3) Look for commonalities among the best coaches and why they have been successful for multiple decades.

We were lucky enough to have Jose Higuera former Top 10 player and even more well known for his coaching (Courier, Sampras, Chang, Federer among others - including Director of Coaching for the United States Tennis Association) with us during our time in Spain. Having one of the legends of Spanish tennis as part of the learning experience was exceptional. It provided all of us with some great background, history and unique knowledge. It was clear how much respect and admiration the younger coaches had for one of the elder statesman of Spanish tennis. The informal coaching education that happened in Spain over the past 40 years was very clear. All the coaches had slight variations in emphasis, but all had very similar focus on the big picture areas. Increasing movement qualities on court, effectively absorbing the ball, taking time away from your opponent and giving yourself time via better court position, the need for shot tolerance or discipline in playing the right ball at the right time. Learning and training to move in diagonal patterns. The importance of running, the importance of embracing the concept of “suffering” while also the pure passion and enjoyment of the players and more importantly the coaches. Simple standards and accountability is a major aspect. Success leaves clues and it is clear why the country of Spain has had so much success at the highest levels of the game. The culture and environment was seen at all the clubs we visited. Whether they were large or small they had a lot of similarities.

## REAL CLUB DE TENNIS BARCELONA

<https://www.rctb1899.es/>

One of the oldest tennis clubs in Europe with a great tradition. The club was established in 1899. The facility has 18 claycourts and indoor court, a full fitness center and has over 2000 members. It is the home to the ATP 500 Barcelona Open which Rafa Nadal has won the 12 times. It was the first tennis school in Spain. Legends like Manolo Santana, Andres Gimeno, Manolo Orantes and Jose Higuera started as ball boys at the club and developed into world champions. Other Spanish players like Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, Conchita Martinez, Sergi Bruguera, Carlos Costa, Alex Corretja, Carlos Moya, Juan Carlos Ferrero, Tommy Robredo all trained for significant periods of their career at the club.

It was fantastic to have Jose Higuera with us at this club. Jose grew up as a ball boy at the club and he described how he was provided room and board at the club in return for being a ball boy for the members and this allowed him to play tennis every day. He mentioned this was how nearly all the great Spanish players were developed back in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. It was fantastic to see how they run a club with 2000 members and over 700 junior players. It was the antithesis to many of the clubs/academies that are more boutique and only focused on high performance. So it was great to see how they made it all work with over 50 coaches. They also had a second club which they had courts in the afternoon/evening for the juniors. We had the opportunity to watch a playing lesson by Tommy Robredo (former Top 10 player) who was working with a good Spanish junior (the son of former pro Julian Alonso). Tommy grew up at the club and now is a club ambassador and "Technical Director." He spends about 5-10 days per month at the club and it is just great how he gives back to the club and his passion and excitement for coaching is clear. He was also very interested to learn from us. He asked a number of questions and it was very clear why he was so successful as a player and will definitely become a great coach as well.

It was very useful to see a very large club and how they made it all work with limited courts and a lot of recreational/participation level players. They have about 25 players that are looking to play at a high collegiate level or professionally. Even though the vast amount of players were not going to play tennis at an international level, it was still very refreshing to see how well they moved, the energy the players brought to the courts, the vibe was strong and the coaches were engaged and excited about the development process.





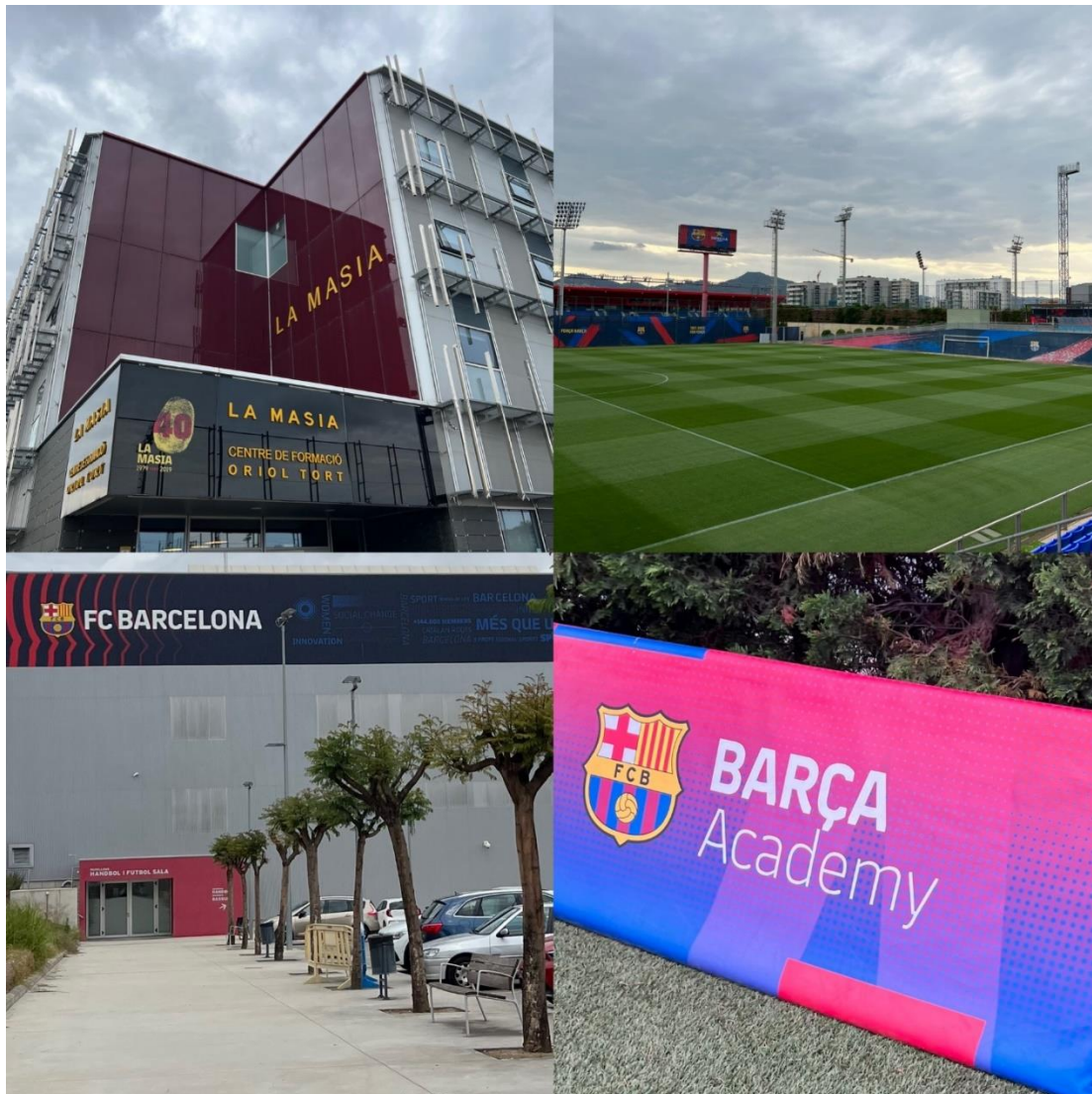
FC BARCELONA

<https://www.fcbarcelona.com/en/>

<https://barcaacademy.fcbarcelona.com/en/>

One of the benefits of professional development was to learn from other sports. One of the most famous development models in the world is FC Barcelona. The FC Barcelona brand has multiple sports on campus. Football (Soccer), Women's Football (Soccer), Basketball, Futsol, Handball, Roller Hockey and Esports.

The FC Barcelona Academy model has developed some of the best athletes across multiple decades. Most well known is Lionel Messi. It was fantastic to get a tour of the facilities, fields, fitness center, medical areas and even watch some of the academy kids train. The interesting aspects of the facilities is that they are not as extravagant as some we see in other parts of the world, EPL, Aussie Rules, US College Sports, NBA, NFL, MLB etc. However, they had what they needed, but many of the coaches were a little underwhelmed considering the reputation and the consistency of excellence. It does go to show that facilities alone do not make champions, it is the culture, leadership and environment that are the driving components to sustainable performance.





## **BARCELONA TOTAL TENNIS (BTT)**

<https://bttacademy.com/>

Barcelona Total Tennis (BTT) has been in business for more than 20 years. It was started by three Spanish coaches who all have strong pedigrees for player development and high performance. Francis Roig, Alvaro Margets and Jordi Vilaro. Francis Roig coached Rafa Nadal alongside Toni Nadal for a decade, Alvaro Margets was the Technical Director for the Catalan Tennis Federation and Jordi Vilaro was the Spanish Davis Cup Captain as well as personal coach to Felix Mantilla for 11 years, Tommy Robredo and Fernando Verdasco. Over the years the following players were developed in part at BTT: Joao Sousa, Sloane Stephens, Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, Teimuraz Gabashvili, Feliciano Lopez, Fernando Verdasco, Tommy Robredo among others.

This academy was built with high performance as the major goal. It is in the hills just above Barcelona and the club has a full restaurant, hard and clay as well as about 1000 members who own the club. BTT rents the courts and structures their program to maximize court time. This relationship has worked well for nearly 20 years. The USTA has used BTT for over a decade as a European training base for players. It was great to

have Francis Roig spend time with our group and went through some teaching progressions, areas of emphasis around the first few steps to the ball and his emphasis on posture and getting to the ball with the lower body. The attention to detail was clear and it was a point of emphasis. On the court next to us was Rebeka Masarova a Top 100 WTA player getting ready for the French Open. The atmosphere at this club was a positive vibe with parents and players and coaches all together. The facilities are nice, but not extravagant. You had everything you needed (gym, restaurant, courts, field etc, but no opulence. It was a similar vibe to FC Barcelona. It is a place to go to get work done. Not a lot of distractions.



## RAFA NADAL ACADEMY

<https://www.rafanadalacademy.com/en>

We jumped on a plane very early one morning to head to the island of Majorca and the city of Manacor. The location is remote. It is about 30 minutes from the airport, but once you arrive it is something to behold. They have a four star hotel, a fantastic bar and restaurant, dormitories for over 150 student athletes, indoor and outdoor hard and clay courts, multiple fitness centers, recovery areas as well a full healthclub, fitness center/gym which is membership based for the community in addition to what the players have access to. It is on par (if not better in some respects) than IMG Academy in scope, size and quality of facilities. Our entire group were blown away by the size and quality of the facilities and amenities. As Jose Higueras came with us to the Academy and Toni Nadal are rather close, we had a personalized tour by Toni Nadal of the entire

Academy. He spent about 2 hours with us. It was clear speaking with him that he was much more of a life coach for Rafa than a technical tennis coach. He very much instilled good discipline, toughness and ownership. Everything was on Rafa good or bad. Honesty was something that was very clear in how Toni talked to us. He did not sugar coat anything. He said a lot of the players today are just not willing to do what is required - Rafa was. This is something that Jose Higuera has also said. We know what it takes to be Top in the world. It is consistent daily work on the basics, doing things over and over again, taking ownership of your career, training habits etc. Getting in the best shape of your life and competing as hard as possible every day. These standards are non-negotiable.

The academy is outstanding and arguably the best facilities of any tennis academy in the world. You have a lot of adults coming to the Academy for camps as well. One of the most exciting parts of his Academy is the Nadal museum. He keeps all his trophies at the Academy and it is truly something to experience.







## RICARDO PIATTI TENNIS CENTER

<https://www.piattitenniscenter.it/en/>

Ricardo Piatti and his team provided a full day of experiences. The four court facility (2 hard outdoor and 2 hard indoor), plus fitness center, physical therapy and mental training were all purpose built around 5 years ago in a beautiful setting in Bordighera just next to San Remo in Italy. Ricardo Piatti coached Novak Djokovic, Ivan Ljubicic, Milos Raonic, Bornha Coric, Maria Sharapova and Jannik Sinner. He coached Ljubicic over 17 years (his entire professional career) and Renzo Furlan for over 11 years.

As Ricardo said at the beginning of the day... he built this place as his home and everyone involved is considered family. They had a very organized and systematic process. All sessions were 90 minutes in length and they had a very strict adherence to this. Each player either did 90min tennis/90min fitness once per day or twice per day. His structure of coaches was the mentor/apprentice model that has been used for hundreds of years in many industries.

Coaching Progression over time:

Step 1: Apprentice Coach (unpaid)

Step 2: Assistant Coach (paid)

Step 3: Head Coach (paid)

Step 4: 2 Court Supervisor (paid)

The Piatti Tennis Center has over 30 coaches that work at the Academy with only four courts. The model works as the coaches all are trained over time in the methodology and many of them travel on the road with players, do video work, contribute in other ways in addition to the coaching time on court. All sessions include 2 players on a court and at least 3 coaches per court. It is a unique model and difficult for most places to replicate. One thing Ricardo said was all the coaches need to provide value and produce to move up over time to a higher position in the coaching tree which also comes with more money and responsibility. It is a very capitalistic approach and similar to players needing to perform to rise in the rankings.

It was great to see the way the various departments do work together well. It was more inter-disciplinary than many other academies that are more multi-disciplinary. The physio was a former tennis player and knew the Head Academy coach well for many years so it was clear a good trust existed between them all. It was interesting that Ricardo definitely set all the standards for the center. It was his name on the building and it was his methodology. The staff are all a lot younger, but most have been with him for many years. However, he also acknowledged that his model does result in some of the coaches moving on for more pay after a few years.

Mental Training was using some technology designed by a colleague of Ricardo who works with Formula 1 racing. Mental Economy is an interesting technology that provides some fun and interesting off-court training techniques - <https://formulamedicine.com/mental-economy-gym/?lang=en#:~:text=Formula%20Medicine%20%7C%20Mental%20Economy%20Gym&text=%22The%20first%20gym%20entirely%20dedicated,skills%2C%20leadership%20and%20teamwork.%22>





## TROFEO BONFIGLIO MILAN ITF J500

<https://www.trofeobonfiglio.com/>

This is one of the oldest and most respected major junior tournaments in the world. It is hosted by Tennis Club Milano Alberto Bonacossa (<https://www.tcmbonacossa.it/>) which was founded in 1893. It has one of the strongest fields every year and is a great predictor of future success on the professional ATP and WTA tours. We were able to spend two days watching the quarter-finals and semi-finals with some great competitors and future champions. Was able to watch Rodrigo Pacheco Mendez (Mexico) win his Semi-Final match which secured the number #1 junior world ranking. His coach Alain Lemaitre runs a great Academy in Merida, Mexico and is a colleague. Rodrigo went on to win the tournament. We also were able to watch a number of other matches including up and coming Chinese player Yi Zhou who has a huge game and is gifted with size and outstanding power. On the ladies draw two Americans went deep in the event with Kaitlin Quevedo (8<sup>th</sup> seed) winning the title and showing great athleticism and an overall complete game. Clervie Ngounoue who is still only 16 years of age was the 2<sup>nd</sup> seed in one of the top junior events in the world. She made it to the semi-finals and the power and ability to play in all aspects of the court was on display. Will be a fun player to watch for many years to come. The goal for the experience at one of the top junior tournaments was for coaches to understand the level, realize that many of the players are 2-3 years younger than their birth year as well. Many of the best players are 15, 16 or 17 years of age in an 18 and under event. One of the goals of this tour was "Know The Level." Watching the best juniors in the world highlights the physicality of the sport and the need to be competitive at least 1-2 years above your age group on the boys side. We had some 14 and 15 year olds who were competitive in the 18s on the girls side as well.

## KEY POINTS LEARNED

***Professional development is something that is so valuable for all coaches and players. Here is one set of major takeaways from one of the High Performance Coaches on the trip:***

- Each player had at least 90 minutes per day of physical training included in his/her training environment. It was a non-negotiable
- Many of the on-court sessions were 90 minute blocks for drilling. It was not 2 or 3 hours like we see in many non high performance academies.
- More emphasis on rhythm, timing and movement on groundstrokes and prescriptive and high detailed focus on excessive technique.
- Significant emphasis on movement
- A real emphasis on longer term player development, with very little focus/emphasis on short term results.
- Zero racket throwing at any of the academies. Very clear standards and also enforcement of standards.
- A lot of 2 athletes and 1 coach on a court. Also a roaming senior coach in addition.
- Many of the academies that have had long term success truly try to develop a family atmosphere. It was a core value of the program.
- A lot less talking by coaches. Just talk when something important to say.
- Coaches were very humble, interested in sharing and also learning. These were some of the most successful development coaches and they continue to want to learn and are very open to sharing all their information.
- All academies had internal coaching education, internal coach development opportunities and tried to mentor and help the younger coaches.
- The academies valued sending coaches on the road with players to tournaments and really developed their models around tournament and training on the road.