



STRENGTH & HONOR

> WITH TOP ATHLETIC FORM AND SOLID FAMILY VALUES
RAFAEL NADAL
WILL FIGHT TO CLAIM BACK HIS THRONE.

One of Rafael Nadal's favorite films is *Gladiator*. I think the reason lies behind the many things he shares with Maximus, the lead character portrayed by Russell Crowe. For starters, they have a commanding presence whenever they set foot in the arena. Rather than retreating once they're hurt, they seem to become more dangerous as soon as they face insurmountable odds, willing themselves to victory by sheer strength, passion, cunning and a great deal of guts. And both know they can turn the crowd in their favor with a single slice. Come to think of it, they even share Spain as a birthplace...

So, despite Rafael Nadal's preference of a tennis racquet and baggy shorts over sword and sandals, it wouldn't be a stretch to call him a gladiator. "When you manage to win a match you were poised to lose, the feeling of satisfaction grows so much... It's all about facing adversity," he reflects. "In tennis, as in life, you still have to deal with all the bad breaks, and the only way to do it is by being brave enough to fight until they start going your way."

I started tracking the Spanish tennis star for a SOBeFiT exclusive about two years ago, so I finally arrived to the much-anticipated interview in New York (with additional follow-ups in Paris and Miami) feeling I had done as much research on his life as I possibly could, despite his private nature. Credit for this must go to his father, Sebastian Nadal, who carefully monitors Rafa's time in order to provide him with as much structure and normalcy as you can expect when you're raising one of sport's most recognizable figures.

In the end, I felt I learned as much about the father as I did about his son. But despite the immense affection and pride he openly displays toward him, Sebastian has taken a nontraditional approach to the young champion's stellar career—one in which he has shared Rafa's development with an entirely family-assembled team (headed by Rafa's uncle and trainer, Toni).

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY [MARTA MONTENEGRO](#)
PHOTOGRAPHED BY [DANIA GRAIBE](#)

“YOU CAN BE BORN WITH ALL THE TALENT IN THE WORLD, BUT IF YOU LACK THE PASSION, YOU CAN’T FIND VICTORY.”

Sebastian even goes as far as to use one of Rafael's passionately pursued interests—fishing—as a motivator by dangling a long-desired fishing yacht, *Wall-E*, as the proverbial carrot. “Get back to No. 1 [in the ATP ranking] and we’ll talk about me paying for my half of *Wall-E*,” dares Sebastian with a smirk. The conditional purchase is a perfectly balanced deal, one in which the parent offers down-to-earth personal and financial advice while the son gets to make the ultimate, sensible decisions. No wonder people who meet Rafa often reflect on how mature and grounded he comes across.

While the Nadals can probably afford a whole fleet of these yachts by now, the unpretentious way they approach every significant decision toward the young star's career explains a lot about Rafael's success. Fame and fortune are valued toward the hard work needed to achieve them, so they make sure Rafa never loses sight of the things that really matter in life: simple pleasures, such as gathering together with some friends to catch a soccer match on TV, or taking a boat out to sea in search of some tasty fish.

“If I start being pretentious here in Majorca, my buddies and my family will make sure I get both feet back on the ground—fast,” Rafa says matter-of-factly. “What really matters is showing the education you’ve received from your earliest days, acting true to yourself and others, and not just running your mouth. For me, it’s not about the house you own or the car you drive, but about the way you carry yourself once you earn those things.”

Between training for his return to the top of the world tennis rankings and waiting for Sebastian to pay for his share of *Wall-E*, Nadal daydreams about fishing and the unlimited sense of freedom his occasional maritime excursions provide. Being limited by countless hotel rooms around the world and the 2,106 square feet of a tennis court is what makes those moments of peace so precious. He smiles proudly when he recalls his biggest catch, a 37-pound grouper he delivered

to his dad's restaurant for a family dinner. This is also why he tries to sneak in a round of golf whenever he can. “It’s not an aggressive sport. Injury risk is small, and it lets me spend four to five hours away from the stress of everyday life, by myself, just enjoying nature.”

ANATOMY OF A CHAMPION

When you consider Rafael Nadal's impressive physique, it's hard to picture him at a standstill sidelined by injuries. But that's what he has been facing, battling ailments (first the knee, later in his abdominal muscles, and now the knee again) that affected his performance while he was trying to defend his most recent grand slam titles. So how do you bring a gladiator back to his top physical form?

“Indoor physical work is as vital to achieve balance and compensation as all the effort you put on court during matches, since elite-level athletes tend to push their bodies to the limit,” Nadal says. “During the rehab process, I relied on the pool and the elliptical trainer for most of my cardio work, and chose pulleys for weight training, since they allowed me to focus not just on the concentric part of the move but also in the eccentric component that is vital in tennis.”

While Rafa knows the nature of his injuries and how much they affected him during the latest tour, he still considers them more manageable than the ones he suffered back in 2005, when a persistent foot support lesion stopped his meteoric ascent in the rankings. Rafa still refers to those days of uncertainty as his roughest time as a pro tennis player.

In contrast, his current situation finds him mentally prepared to deal with adversity, so he's confident about the eventual return to top form. Instead of dwelling on his lack

of playing time, Rafa has learned to take the rehabilitation process as a chance to improve his game, putting extra effort on fine-tuning his serve and developing a more efficient attack strategy at the net.

The Spaniard has been one of the most active players in tennis over the last five years playing tournament after tournament, which is even more surprising when you factor in the intensity he brings to every match. And don't forget the ATP Tour's grueling schedule, an issue he has felt the need to address publicly in an effort to minimize the growing number of injuries affecting players every year. Surely he has a way to deal with the workload, right?

“Think of a Formula One car,” he explains. “It doesn't matter if it's the best-built vehicle in the entire world—it will break down if you go full-speed at all times. I try to keep my intensity in check during training and only push myself to the limit once I'm playing the actual match.”

BORN TO PLAY

This tireless athlete can also be a nightmare for his trainers and medical advisers, who hold their collective breath every time he's in front of a soccer ball. Yes, soccer. “I have a competitive nature,” is his understated confession. Having to choose between tennis and soccer at an early age still weighs on his mind every now and then. “I would have probably played as a striker,” he says while professing his admiration for legends like Zidane, Romario and fellow countryman Raúl—all of them masters of the position.

Yet, you can't witness Rafa's prowess on the tennis court without feeling he was born to play this classic game and marveling at the level of intimidation his opponents must feel when facing him. Is he still fazed by

nerves? “Whoever denies feeling nervous playing at this stage must be lying,” he says. And what about Dad? Is it still nerve-racking to watch his son play? Sebastian answers with the assuring authority of someone who often shares his son's will to prevail at the highest level: “Always.”

But can Rafa bare his soul and cry after a tough loss, even at this stage in his life? “I believe men cry as often as women do, but are prone to do it privately rather than publicly. Me? I can be the most social person in the world, but I'd rather try to collect my thoughts by myself whenever I'm faced with hardship of any kind. And I've cried, of course.”

So even though Rafa isn't immune to the pressure of playing in its many shapes and forms, he has learned new ways to deal with it. Nowadays, he rarely allows nerves to take control of his game. And when the pressure rises, he usually manages to steer himself back on track—the true sign of a veteran.

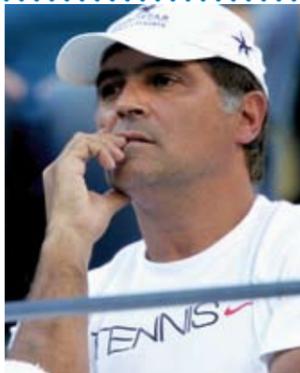
I can see what he means. After so many efforts to schedule the interview with him, my nerves were about to be tested in front of someone whom I admired deeply, not just as an athlete and a sportsman, but as a person as well. Little did I know that the humble nature of Rafa would set me at ease right away. When answering my question about what his advice would be to a kid who wanted to grow up to be just like him: “Whatever it is you want to be, you have to like it so much that you enjoy even the toughest challenges ahead.”

He ends our chat with a gladiator-like quote that seems to contain the true essence of Rafael Nadal: “You can be born with all the talent in the world, but if you lack the passion, you can't find victory.” **S**

RAFAEL NADAL: ALL CLOTHING BY PRADA



> ANTONIO 'TONI' NADAL: A COACH ON AND OFF THE COURT



"I THINK THAT'S RAFA'S ADVANTAGE OVER OTHER PLAYERS ON THE CIRCUIT: HE IS EMOTIONAL BUT MEASURED."

TONI PHOTOGRAPH GETTY IMAGES

There's no denying that Rafael Nadal came to this world with a natural instinct to fight to his last breath on the tennis court. But he's also had the privilege of being trained by someone interested in more than teaching him how to strike the ball properly. That someone is his uncle, Antonio "Toni" Nadal, a man who takes special care in developing Rafa's game along with the strong set of values instilled in the Nadal family. You could say Rafa has become another son to his proud uncle: "You know you have to work as his trainer, but you also can't help having deeper feelings for someone who shares your blood... You worry a lot more and want only the best for him."

The Nadal family was blessed with athletic talent. Another of Rafael's uncles, Miguel Angel, was a star midfielder for soccer powerhouse F.C. Barcelona, and young Rafa seemed destined to follow in his footsteps in the popular sport. But Uncle Toni exposed Rafa to tennis when he was barely 4 years old, and his nephew eventually traded soccer cleats and schoolbooks for a racquet. A wise move, since he has become one of the sports' most recognizable faces and a legit superstar.

How much of Rafael's success is attributable to you as his coach?

Well, he's been very lucky having me around (LAUGHS). No, seriously, I wouldn't say I've had such a big impact. If someone else had trained him, he would have reached the same heights. The only thing I'll take credit for is getting him near the tennis court in the first place.

But being both his coach and his uncle must be difficult...

It's true you can't always keep both roles separate, but as an uncle you place a lot of importance on the stuff that affects him that's not related to tennis. I always wanted him to become a good person first and a top athlete second, even as a little boy.

Have you achieved that goal?

Definitely. He's a great kid.

Is there anything you would like him to improve upon?

Yeah, he is a bit messy (LAUGHS). He definitely could be a little tidier.

How would you describe your training style? Are you an authoritarian?

I can be really demanding, really tough. But I place more importance on the mental aspect of the game. I'm more of a shrink than a coach.

Why is that?

Because I try to understand the sport through the achievements that derive from its practice, the effort it takes to reach your goals. For me, playing sports only makes sense if you acknowledge that sense of effort, of improvement. Otherwise it's pretty pointless, isn't it?

What advice would you give to a coach of a player with Rafael's potential?

Keep things simple. This sport started as a game, even though that game eventually became a profession. You have to remind yourself and your trainees that it should always be fun no matter how hard you work on it. The game sometimes goes your way, and there are times when someone else will win. There's an element of chance to it, and complications may arise.

And with young kids, you have a lot of responsibilities that you share with psychologists, nutritionists, strength trainers...

An expanded team...

Yes, and you should still think of it as a game. You start by hitting the ball, and once you learn that you can start honing your skills. But you must never complicate stuff from the get-go. In essence, it's about embracing the simplicity of enjoying what you're doing and gradually learning to do it better.

But nowadays you're not training a little boy. Rafa is a grown man, one of the sport's best, and you must have noticed the changes undergone by professional tennis since 10 or 15 years ago. Intensity and competitiveness have increased exponentially. Has the sport become better or worse for it?

I wouldn't say worse, for sure. Yes, there may be an excessive attention to the technological revolution in tennis, but that's true of most modern sports. I do feel some kids are treated like grown-ups much too early. They are burdened with too much pressure too soon. Since they start winning tournaments when they're still developing, parents may think they have a world champion in their hands and the kids become isolated from the normal childhoods they need to stay grounded. That's a part of the sport I really don't like.

However, there are also positives, right?

True. The physical aspect has benefited from training young talents in a more efficient manner, and that has translated in an overall improvement in quality. Popularity is at an all-time high, and has been so for a few years, so it's hard to envision how much more it can grow from here.

The coach also has to deal with adversity. What's the first thing you say to Rafa after a loss?

It depends on where and when it happens. A loss in a Wimbledon final is not the same as losing in any other tournament. Some losses hurt a lot more than others. But preparation stays the same, and that's why it's important to define the true meaning of winning and losing right from the start at the earliest possible stages. Rafael has known that from the time he was a 5-year-old, and he accepts the good with the bad, victory and failure. I don't condone special treatment after losses, in the same way I don't turn triumph into the best thing that can ever happen to him. I think that's Rafa's advantage over other players on the circuit: He is emotional but measured.

Rafael had a rough year in 2009. What were his weak spots and what can we expect from him this year?

Last year was difficult because of the injuries, so we obviously have to work on getting his body in shape. His knees need to get stronger after all the punishment they've endured. I can go as far as telling you I'm confident in the work we will do to regain his old form. As for what we can expect from him, predictions about his ATP ranking... That's something only he knows.

So, while Uncle Toni still worries about his nephew's exploits on the tennis court, it's fair to say he has already achieved his greatest goal as a mentor: To develop a well-rounded human being. A man of strength and honor. **S**

RAFA'S PASSING SHOTS

- * He doesn't like mozzarella on his pastas and pizzas: "It ruins the tomatoes!"
- * Not exactly a fan of high-tech stuff. He enjoys basic gadgets that he can master easily during his hectic schedule.
- * Owns two iPods filled with tunes (one of which was my gift. He really needed to add some salsa and merengue to his playlists!)
- * Enjoys reading daily newspapers and the odd book about finance.
- * Prefers to hail a cab on the streets of Manhattan than to hop in a limo.
- * His favorite foods are fresh fish and pasta.
- * His only supplement: electrolytes.
- * The only times when he turns Team Nadal on its collective head is whenever Real Madrid is playing and he needs to find a TV to catch the game.

