

Interview: “I win with my tennis, not with the mind”

by Juan José Mateo

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Juan José Mateo (as translated by genny_ss) – Paris – 10 JUN 2013

Rafael Nadal (Manacor, Mallorca, 1986) says goodbye to Pau Gasol in the hotel lounge where they meet in Paris. It's the first day after the culmination of an odyssey: winning Roland Garros again, for the eighth time, his 12th major, after seven months out with a left knee injury. The mark of celebration remains in his tired eyes. His hands move quickly, accompanying his words with gestures.

Question. What do you feel when an opponent takes you to the limit, as Novak Djokovic in the semifinals?

Answer. The only thing I feel is that I have to endure some more. That's my only feeling. “Resist a little more, you do not know for how long the other will resist either. I feel very bad, but maybe the other is also at the limit. Try forcing him a bit more to see if you end up winning.” That extra effort is always worth it, win or lose. It is a matter of personal satisfaction when you return to the locker room. Priceless. They are feelings that are very difficult to explain.

Q. You refuse to lose ...

A. It is not that I refuse to lose, it is refusing to throw in the towel. I refuse to give up. That's what makes me happy when all ends: knowing that I have done everything I could, and if I have lost, I have lost.

Q. Sometimes you speak of suffering as if it was a friend, the same as Djokovic ...

A. I think he's a great fighter and a great sufferer.

Q. But most, logically, prefer to suffer as little as possible. Where is the difference coming from?

R. From the motivation for what you do, from the passion for what you do. From living everything you do with passion. From everything that it takes to get there, which makes you not want to give up because you know what it takes to arrive. It is a physical suffering, it is a mental suffering. True... but after all you're playing in a central court in Roland Garros, your childhood dream, you're living a match that you know is special, you know that whatever happens it will be one of the matches of the year, because of what it means. Is it a pain? Yes, but it is also a gift and a joy to be able to be there at that moment.

Q. Before, to feel competitive, you needed to train and play a lot. Conquering Roland Garros after playing just eight tournaments this year shows that is not so anymore. Does that outcome vindicate your technical quality over your mind and physical strength?

A. It is a logical evolution in your career. When you get older, you have more automated things, your game is more settled and actually it does not need much preparation. Honestly, it is clear that it is fantastic to have the mental and physical strength as values, and in order to sell that idea is also very positive. I think mentally and physically it's true that I've been a tough player, who have always tried to outdo myself. Apart from the fight and never-say-die attitude, that value, such as the motivation to improve, is a very important mental prowess... but you cannot get what I have achieved without everything else, without having a great forehand, a great backhand or a good control of the ball. Sometimes we forget to highlight those things because we put the emphasis in the rest.

Q. You cannot win without a racket, can you?

R. The mental and physical strength help you at a given time of the match, but overall you win matches with tennis and not the mind. You can win matches with the mind, like the other day in the semifinals against Djokovic, but to win it with the mind you have to reach a limit situation, and you only reach that limit situation with your tennis. It's a combination of everything. Tennis is what makes me get to where I have got and the mental strength is what has made me achieved those extra things that I would not have achieved [without it].

Q. The fact that your technique is not appreciated, is it a matter of aesthetics, for not having a one-handed backhand like Federer?

A. If you ask my opponents, I think they will tell you that, tennis-wise, I have many special things. Perhaps the mental strength has always been more stressed because I have played many long matches, five hours long, in which I have come from behind and that have been very even until the end. This type of matches are the most memorable, of course, and my style of play, of fighting, of never giving up, has favored that this type of matches have gone hand in hand with my career. Federer, because of his game, even more with three shots, did not have those long matches in his career. Technically, there is no doubt that he is better than me, but obviously I'm also better than most. If not, I would not have been able to be here.

Q. "Sport without goals is stupid", you have said.

A. These are things that I've always thought and lived so. We must be realistic: playing tennis without a goal... okay. I hit the ball with a racket so that it goes over the net. What does that mean? Very little. Itself is stupid. Sports in general are stupid if one does not bring them to the fullest. The fullest is to play with a goal, with passion, with motivation. That's what I've always thought in my whole life. When I play golf I try to do my best. People get it wrong sometimes. They say: "What he loves is winning." What I love is the competition, the effort, focusing to try to do my best. Obviously, I like to win, but what really satisfies me is the feeling that I am doing

the best I can. If not, it does not make sense to me. If not, let's accept that we go for a laugh and let's do something else.

Q. How do you feel when your own teammates in the locker room see you as an idol? In Madrid, you talked with Horacio Zeballos, wished him luck, and he reacted jubilantly: "I have been blessed by the Pope".

A. I cannot imagine it. Honestly, I feel close to any player, especially to those who speak Spanish, because the relationship is easier. I do not think they see me as such. I do not know. I feel I am a close person and I believe they see me that way.

Q. Now back to Wimbledon [from June 24], from where you went out injured in 2012.

A. Last year I went to Wimbledon without feeling well, being injured, I played with shots [in the knee]. I tried to make the effort for what that tournament means to me. It could not be. I pushed too hard. All I wanted to try there was too much to the limit. It did not affect me negatively in anything that was going to happen afterwards. When I arrive this year, the simple fact of being there is great news. It is a beautiful tournament, which I love. Even if I do not arrive well prepared, the simple fact of being there fulfills me.

Q. It cleans your head.

A. It fulfills me, I like the feeling of stepping on the grass, playing on those courts, which is a different feeling. For me, whatever the outcome, it is always worth it. Will I arrive worse prepared than other times? [For the first time Rafa will not play on grass before the tournament] Yes, but it always comes down to the same thing: to get there healthy, physically fit, as mentally I think I will be well. Then, if I can be lucky enough to advance some matches, maybe then the fact of not having played a tournament before can turn out to be something positive as far as mental freshness is concerned. There, all matches are very difficult, it is the tournament of the year with most uncertainty. The confidence of having won here gives me that extra that can allow you to play well there.

Q. Nadal of 2008, who only allowed four games to Federer in the final in Paris, is he better than Nadal of 2013?

R. Tennis-wise? It could be. There are times and moments. The one of 2008 did have things that the one of 2013 does not and that of 2013 has things that the one of 2008 did not. When it comes to pure Roland Garros, maybe it [2008] is the best I've played in my career. What you need to look at is the whole. In 2008 I was in a place where probably due to [my] results I continue to be today. These things are in the past. I'm looking ahead.

Q. What is the best advice you were given during your time out?

A. While being out I was lucky to have the family around, which is very important. Also my team, which helped me to continue working with the motivation and the mentality needed to keep fit. I've had friends and sponsors who have continued to rely on me. That has been a very important source of confidence.

Q. You have asked the exact number of [anti-doping] tests made to each player to be made public. Are you bothered that during your time out there were some who could understand you were missing?

A. I do not like it when a player comes and says: "I am tested too little". Very easy to look good this way. Or saying, I am tested too much. [I want it to be] I am tested this much. These many times. That it goes public. In this way, you don't create doubts, nor the feeling that one is very good because he says that he is tested too little and another is very bad for saying that he is tested too much. The logical thing would be to make everything public, and so there is no question about these things. Missing? I have not been missing in any case, anyone who has wanted to find me has known where to find me, at home and working every day.