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Ripped. (Or Torn Up?)

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Postscript Appended

There was no moon over the tennis stadium, but it was after midnight, the risers still crowded, and [Rafael Nadal](#) was playing the Argentine [David Nalbandian](#). This was in Indian Wells, Calif., three months ago, at a tournament in the desert called the BNP Paribas Open. People had taken off their visors and straw hats, and the night now was windless and warm, and although Nadal is No. 1 in the world and Nalbandian was that week No. 11, Nadal was having a terrible first set. He'd try one of his scary forehand drives, the whole arm whipping around so fast and the wrist snap so fluid that it's like watching a thick rope flicked and hissing, and he'd uuunhh the way he does as his racket meets the ball, the sharp grunt that for an instant would be the only sound in the stadium, and then the ball would splat straight into the net. Or the ball would go long, meant to drop spinning just inside the baseline but instead sailing a whole foot out, and thousands of people would wince all at once. "It's O.K., Rafa, come on." Sometimes the stadium fans love to roll the R in the Spanish manner, especially when they're singing to him, "RRRAfa, RRRaAfa," but these were sober, unaccented voices calling from the risers to Nadal, who didn't look up.

He'd been playing this way for an hour. It was a best-of-three-sets tournament, and finally he lost the first, 3-6. If he lost the second, he was done.

He sat and drank some water. He took off his shirt, which made spectators start wolf-whistling, and put on a fresh one. Nalbandian changed his shirt, too, but nobody wolf-whistled at him. The umpire called for the start of the second set.

I said to some people near me, Rafa's not going to win this match, is he.

The look they gave me was amused, knowing and kind. A woman said, "Watch him." She was smiling.

Nadal set down his water bottle beside a second water bottle. He lifted the second one, took a sip and replaced it in the exact spot where it stood before. As he readied himself to serve, he tucked his sweaty hair behind his ears with one hand, left ear first, then right ear. He reached around to his backside to pull loose his shorts. The Spaniards who travel with him call these his manías, his on-court tics; Nadal is messy at home, and when he was a teenager in Majorca, his mother used to complain about his room. But in competition, his rituals are precise, like those of many sports champions. Nike, which pays Nadal more than \$3 million a year to wear its clothes, has never designed a pair of shorts that kept Nadal from loosening the seat just before he serves the ball.

Now he started to play. At tournaments, teenage girls scream when they see Nadal walk onto a tennis court,

literally shriek and leap to their feet and clutch each other; women older than his mother shiver and elbow their friends; men raise their cameras aloft; there's flash-popping and Spanish flag-unfurling and a rising swell of noise and applause, and at some point Nadal lifts one arm and smiles at spectators, which sets off momentary pandemonium among the women. (Once, pressed between two middle-aged ladies who had worked their way to the front of a crowd staring through a wire fence at Nadal on a practice court, I asked the one on my left to speak specifically of the appeal. "Um, his tenacity," she said. "His energy. His. . . ." And the lady on my right snapped, without taking her eyes off Nadal: "His hotness. Just get to it.") He is barely 23, and I've heard people describe him as an evolutionary leap, the kind of new life form that materializes every few generations in tennis and makes everybody ecstatic and argumentative and eloquent. There is debate among serious tennis watchers, for example, as to whether Nadal's victory over [Roger Federer](#) in the Wimbledon final last year was the greatest tennis match ever played or whether it has only been called the greatest tennis match ever played when, in fact, Nadal's victory over his Spanish countryman Fernando Verdasco in the semifinals of the Australian Open in January was greater.

Each match went on for more than four and a half hours. Each was desperate, operatic, repeatedly to-the-brink-and-back; each ended with Nadal collapsing to the court in triumph and the spectators exhausted and perspiring, and if you are not a tennis person, I suspect this may be somewhat hard to fathom — the idea that watching two men spend that many hours hitting a ball could actually make your heart pound so hard that you have to keep jumping up and yelling and grabbing your own head. But let me just suggest that if there were ever a time to understand why people invoke Shakespearean tragedy and ancient gladiators and so on when they carry on about competitive tennis, now is that time.

Wimbledon, which starts this week, will feature Nadal as a looming presence whether he plays the tournament or not. Two weeks ago, he received a diagnosis of tendinitis in both knees and announced that he would immediately start anti-inflammatories and recuperative therapy to try to make himself, in his words, "100 percent ready to play." This served only to crank up the plotline: Federer, the Swiss champion who many people believe is the most brilliant tennis player in history, is locked into unpredictable, week-by-week, multiepisodic combat with the Spaniard whom [Andre Agassi](#) recently called a "freak of nature" and who has taken Federer's place as the top-ranked player in the world.

Nadal lost the [French Open](#) three weeks ago, yes. He lost shockingly, unexpectedly, before even reaching the quarterfinals. The knees might or might not have been a factor; Nadal refused to make any injury excuses for his defeat, but in any case, it was the first match he ever lost at the French Open, which he had won four times in a row. Because he left early, before he and Federer could face each other, there will always be an unanswered question attached to Federer's championship: the French was the only one of the four Grand Slam tournaments, the majors, that Federer had never been able to win. He was beaten there by Nadal four years in a row. In last year's final, in fact, Nadal obliterated him so completely that people either stared in fascination or averted their eyes, as though witnessing a dreadful car wreck. For a few days, when I was at the French Open, Nadal's defeat made for richer drama than anybody else's victory, and I would not really have understood why that was had I not also been at Indian Wells in the middle of the night in March and watched Nadal's face during that second set against Nalbandian, especially when Nadal began moving faster and faster, coiling, springing, powering the ball into back corners, missing, driving again. After a time, I realized a new sound was coming from Nadal in between the hitting grunts, an even more guttural sound

that was low, feral and drawn out between intakes of breath. He was growling.

Nadal's postmatch press conferences always begin the same way: The door beside the lectern opens, he walks in loose-limbed and with his hair disheveled and he sits down and says politely into the microphone, "Hello." He still grapples with English, being in his daily life a speaker of Spanish and Mallorquín, which is a variant of Catalan and even harder to understand, unless you grew up on the island of Majorca. So it comes out "HHallo," and he takes the English questions first. I've seen him do this with a half-eaten chocolate-chip cookie in his hand, grinning and wiping crumbs from his mouth; but after he finished beating Nalbandian, he looked dark and irritated.

"I am not happy," he said. "I am not happy about myself in the first two sets." It was almost 3 a.m. Nadal won the second set 7-6 in a tiebreaker and the third 6-0, and by the time everything was over, Nalbandian looked as if somebody had been hitting him with a broom all night. "I was scared about his backhand," Nadal said. "I think I didn't go to the match with a clear idea of how to play."

He needed a shave, though in truth he usually looks as if he needs a shave; it's part of the allure. When he's pleased, he has a way of smiling with half his mouth, too, as though he's shyly just starting to realize how good he feels; the effect is of a young [Harrison Ford](#), but with unbelievable biceps, and the combination of on-court savagery and off-court humility has disarmed people who have followed tennis closely for decades. "I don't think I've ever seen a guy acting as natural, as a champion, as Rafael Nadal," the French writer Philippe Bouin told me recently. Bouin has been covering tennis for 30 years for the sports paper L'Équipe. He is regarded as a sage in the tournament newsrooms, and when I first met him, at a tournament in Miami, he mused aloud about the extraordinary relationship between Nadal and Federer, each of whom regards the other as the most admirable and dangerous competitor he has ever faced.

"You must remember," Bouin said gently, in his lovely accented English, "that in tennis you have to kill the other." Not just play better. Sometimes the one who plays better can lose. It's a sport of splendid cruelty, for all its decorum and finicky trappings; every winning point comes when the other guy, in front of a whole stadium of people staring directly at him, is forced by his opponent into inadequacy. He lunges for the ball but whiffs, he whacks it long, he hits it into the net, he screws up. From the stands, you sometimes see players surrender not because they don't know how to return the shots coming at them but because the specter of this impending inadequacy has suddenly just taken over their brains. It transpires right in front of your eyes: something sags, and they go sort of limp; you can see their faces and their posture start registering get me out of here.

When he's on — which is most of the time but not always, thereby heightening the suspense — Nadal is better than anybody at making this happen to opponents. If he does play Wimbledon these next two weeks and wins, or if he holds off and recuperates and perhaps goes on to win the U.S. Open in September, he will have earned legitimate entry into the ranks of the all-time greats — not just the world No. 1's, in other words, but the players whose names make up those best-ever lists that are constantly being debated and rearranged by fans. Federer floats around at the top of those lists, along with a dozen or so others ([Agassi](#), [Pete Sampras](#), [John McEnroe](#), Sweden's Bjorn Borg, Australia's Rod Laver and so on). Two of the three reasons for preparing to consider Nadal for these ranks, contentious as such propositions tend to be, are straightforward:

1. He wins on all three court surfaces on which the world's four most important tennis tournaments are now played: the grass of Wimbledon, which Nadal won for the first time last summer; the hard acrylic composition used at the Australian Open, which Nadal won in January, and the U.S. Open, which has so far eluded him; and the soft red clay of the French Open, on which Nadal and Borg share the record of four straight titles. (On clay, in fact, Nadal is the best player who has ever lived. Until losing to Federer two years ago in Hamburg, Nadal had a streak of 81 victories on clay, a record that took on such a life of its own that people around Nadal felt a certain relief when the streak ended.) Being a three-surface champion at this level of competition is almost impossibly difficult, requiring three kinds of pacing, strategy and ball attack; it's as if an international track star won gold in the 100 meters, the mile and the steeplechase. There are undisputed great players — Sampras, McEnroe and [Jimmy Connors](#), for example — who never in their careers mastered the French Open's clay.

2. He spent three whole years second in the world only to Federer, who during those years could not only outplay everybody but, in many people's opinions, could probably have outplayed anybody who ever lived and nonetheless could not get past Nadal in Paris. Nadal was a phenomenal No. 2. His No. 2-ness was heroic and inspirational, and he was known to mention it quite cheerfully in press conferences: "I'm not the best, but I am a very good No. 2 in the world."

3. He thrills people. Federer thrills people, too, but the Nadal thrill is so different from the Federer thrill that studying the two of them is like a gorgeous immersion course in the varieties of athletic possibility. Federer is elegant and fluid and cerebral, so that his best tennis looks effortless even when he is making shots that ought to be physically impossible. Nadal is muscled-up and explosive and relentless, so that his best tennis looks not like a gift from heaven but instead like the product of ferocious will. His victories and his taped-up knees and his years as a very good No. 2 in the world all resonate together, as though the rewards and the wages of individual effort had been animated in a single human being: if you hurl yourself at a particular goal furiously enough and long enough you may tear your body up in the process, but maybe you can get there after all. People have loved watching Nadal create trouble inside Federer's head. This is how they characterize it in tennis, that Nadal makes Federer crazy, that Nadal's refusal over and over to be beaten by Federer in Paris was the one problem that Federer — who usually has uncanny on-court telepathy about what his opponent plans for three shots hence and exactly how to wreck it — was unable to figure out.

Then Nadal finally beat Federer at Wimbledon too, and then at the Australian, where Federer famously picked up his runner-up trophy and looked at the assembled reporters and [burst into tears](#), causing Nadal to put an arm around him, the young Spaniard at once respectful and consoling, and murmur something private into his ear. That Nadal now has the capacity to outplay Federer on multiple surfaces — that the signature game of the world's highest-ranked tennis player is not a beautiful ballet unto victory but an imperfect, bruising, savage refusal to yield — this is why Nadal thrills people. This and the biceps. "Every tennis lover would like, someday, to play like Federer," Philippe Bouin told me. "But every man wants to be Rafael Nadal. Which is different."

Nadal has played tennis left-handed since he was 11, but he uses his right hand to sign autographs, wave, play golf, turn on video games and react fast to most things that require a hand. "Watch," he said to me in Spanish one afternoon this spring, nodding toward his publicity man, Benito Perez-Barbadillo, who was lounging around nearby. "Benito! Throw something at me." Perez-Barbadillo tossed his cellphone. Nadal's

right arm jerked up and grabbed the phone out of the air, and he smiled and shrugged. “Whatever involves feeling, I do with the right.”

The word he used was *sensibilidad*, which means many kinds of feeling, literal and perceptual and emotional, and the assertion that Nadal does everything of *sensibilidad* right-handed seemed sort of preposterous, given what tennis requires of the hand that is holding the racket. Hitting a tennis ball in elite competition is like a cross between boxing and pitching a baseball, situationally complicated like either but executed at much faster speed and requiring split-second calculations about many more variables: how hard; how high; angle of racket head; wind speed; court surface; how much ball spin; what kind of ball spin (top, side or back?); where exactly to aim within an area 39 feet long by 27 feet wide; opponent’s weaknesses, state of mind, footing stance and location not at this exact instant but in the time it will take for the ball to cross the net, etc. *Sensibilidad* of the left hand, I wondered — surely Nadal possesses that when he holds a tennis racket?

“That’s the only thing with the left,” he said. “Well, I’m ambidextrous when I eat. But playing tennis right-handed — I can’t do it. I’m clueless. Benito could beat me.”

Perez-Barbadillo made a face at him, and Nadal scrunched amiably into his armchair, his long legs crossed at the ankle on the low table in front of him. We were in the players’ lounge at the Indian Wells tournament, which is not one of the four Grand Slam events but is the inaugural U.S. stop of the year and draws nearly every top player in the world. Massive posters of Nadal were plastered all over the tennis complex, like Times Square billboards, so that from on high he was smiling or making killer faces over the carnival array of standard tennis tournament commerce: frozen-lemonade stands, food courts, oversize yellow balls for collecting autographs. Nadal sometimes has burly guys in sunglasses with him when he walks on the pathways between courts, and although it’s plain why they accompany him — parents shove their autograph-ball-brandishing children through adult crowds toward Nadal, and once I heard a young woman repeat in a low, ominous voice, “You don’t ignore me, you don’t ignore me,” as she was trying to catch his eye — the fans adore him partly because he moves so sweetly in their midst.

He signs the balls and the bare arms and the T-shirts. He rumples small boys’ hair. He waits while people press up alongside him to pose for snapshots. The Nadal personality stories that circulate among tournament fans are all variations on a single theme: the young man is *educado*, as they say in Spanish, not so much educated in the formal sense (Nadal left conventional schooling after he turned pro at 15), but courteous, respectful, raised by a family with its priorities in order. Nadal may have the on-court demeanor of a hit man, as far as the party across the net is concerned, but you will never see this champion hurl his racket during a match.

The only lead coach Nadal has ever had — highly unusual in tennis, where frequently players discard coaches one after another in their effort to ascend the competitive ranks — is one of his paternal uncles, Toni Nadal. Toni is the impassive man, usually in sunglasses and a cap and with his arms crossed placidly over his chest, that the television cameras turn to periodically during Nadal’s matches. Among the numerous Rafa-and-Toni stories I heard in the stands: that Toni declared years ago that if he ever saw Rafa lose his temper on the court (racket-hurling is the standard tantrum, but there’s also cursing the line judges, sulking and yelling at spectators), their coaching relationship would end on the spot. Or that Toni refuses on

principle to carry Rafa's rackets for him. Or that they always fly commercial because Toni scoffs at the idea of a tennis star, even one worth scores of millions, believing that he merits a private jet.

These accounts turn out to be exaggerated, but not by much. "No, no, I've never delivered ultimatums to him," Toni said dismissively in Spanish when I met him in Miami in March. "He knows he can't throw a racket. He just knows. As far as I'm concerned, it's shameful when he orders a meal and doesn't finish it. Understand? Same thing with rackets. These rackets cost money."

It is true, Toni says, that he taught Rafael years ago to put his tennis shoes on carefully, not mashing his feet over the backs and slopping around as though in slippers. It is also true that Toni expects Rafael to carry his own rackets; that Rafael plays left-handed because of something Toni figured out long ago; and that at a tournament a few years back, when Rafael's manager, Carlos Costa, asked Toni to make Rafael stop eating the chocolate croissants he was wolfing down before a match, Toni raised his eyebrows at Costa and said no. "Que tenga dolor de estómago," Toni said. Let him get a stomachache. Tomorrow he'll know not to do it again.

"It's about respect," Toni told me. "It's really easy for these guys to start thinking the world revolves around them. I never could have tolerated it if Rafael had become a good player and a bad example of a human being. I was at a symposium recently and a trainer said to me, 'Look, if you ask a young player's father which he'd rather get at the end of this process — a courteous person or the French Open champion — you know what that father is going to say.' And I said: 'No, that's all wrong. Because if that player is brought up courteous, brought up as a respectful person, he's got a better chance to reach the championship of the French Open — because it's going to be easier for him to accomplish the hard work.'"

Both Toni and Rafael still live in Majorca, along with multiple Nadal relatives, in a nontouristy little city called Manacor, about 15 miles from the beach. A four-story building has served for many years as an informal family compound, housing Rafael's parents, his younger sister, his grandparents and various other relations. Rafael has his own apartment there, with workout machines and the PlayStation he likes to take with him on the road, and in the Majorcan tradition, there are also Nadal weekend houses at the beach. It is not an athletics-obsessed family — one of Rafael's grandfathers is a retired orchestra conductor, and his father, the oldest of five brothers, owns real estate and a window-and-glass business in Manacor. But Toni, the second oldest, learned tennis as a child, on what was then one of the few courts in Majorca; he was nationally ranked in Spain before becoming a tennis teacher and then opening his own club on the island. Miguel Ángel, the youngest of the brothers, was a professional soccer player when Rafa was born.

There was a lot more soccer than tennis during Rafa's early childhood, in fact. Miguel Ángel was picked up by one of the best teams in the country; he played for the Spanish national team in three World Cups, and some of his own first instincts about Rafael came from watching the boy play against his adult relatives during a keep-away game in which people in a circle try to pass a ball back and forth to one another past someone at the center of the circle. The only way for the middle person to get out and become a passer is to intercept a pass. "He liked being the middle," Miguel Ángel told me. "We'd all do our tricky maneuvers to try to get the ball past him. Any one of a hundred little kids, you do those kinds of moves on him, he'll start crying. But Rafa, no. He'd keep fighting to get the ball."

The family apartment hallways and local streets served for ballhandling practice, too, and before long, Rafael was the leading scorer even on teams of boys older than he was. “I was passionate about soccer,” Rafael told me. “I still am. Odd, though — playing soccer always made me much more anxious than playing tennis. On soccer days, I’d be out of bed by 6 in the morning, all nervous. But I was always calm when it was time for a tennis match. I still don’t know why.”

In tennis circles, Nadal is occasionally mentioned in the same sentence with [Tiger Woods](#), as in: some matters appear explainable by upbringing and training, and some by a felicitous accident of natural design. (When Agassi used the term “freak of nature,” he hastened to add that he meant it as a compliment — Agassi was at the French Open issuing public praise of Federer and observing that only the freak of nature from Majorca had kept Federer from multiple French Open victories already.) Like Woods, Nadal started what would become his career sport when he was a toddler; Toni remembers his nephew having been no older than 3. “He was at the club one day, and I handed him a racket, we had some little ones, and then tossed a ball at him,” Toni said before practice one morning in Miami. “When he hit it back — two-handed, he wouldn’t have been strong enough otherwise — I said to myself, ‘O.K., this is not normal.’ His feet, especially, the way he’d move himself into good hitting position when I tossed balls at him. This is a rare thing in a child.”

Rafael’s parents have a standard policy of declining interview requests; their support for him is by all accounts unwavering but uniformly private, and when I asked Toni how the family managed the destined-to-do-this challenge, how you help a gifted child flourish without oppressing or souring him, he shot me a look that was at once mocking and stern. “I don’t believe anybody’s destined to do anything in this life,” he said. He is firmly antireligioso, his term, and he also seems to take pleasure in placing the game of tennis — “being able to pass a ball back and forth over a net,” as I’ve heard him describe it — into its proper perspective in the universe. (Once when I used the word “drama” in a question about Rafa and Federer, Toni interrupted me midsentence. “This is not drama,” he said. “Drama is people in Africa who don’t have enough to eat. Drama is people no one ever smiles at. There is no drama here.”) The primary athletic goal when Rafa was little was ensuring that he had fun, Toni said, and because the boy was the first grandchild, that wasn’t hard to do.

“He was the family toy,” Toni said. “We’re all close. Everything was really a form of athletic training. He didn’t come back to the club much when he was 3, he’d get bored; but then when he was 4, he’d come once or twice a week, and I started throwing balls at him a little harder. He still liked soccer more than tennis, and he was very good. Left-footed shooter. I started paying him when he scored — one euro for a left-footed goal, two euros for a right-footed goal.”

The payment offers were partly Uncle Toni humor, he said; as Rafa grew, the two of them developed a series of running jokes in which Toni simultaneously teased, prodded and made himself comically huge. He invented a mythical back story in which he, too, was a famous futbolista, now retired, having played soccer brilliantly for a professional team in Italy. Toni had been known as El Gran Natali, he assured Rafa, and when futbolista friends of Miguel Ángel came to visit one day, Toni persuaded them to use this name in hearty greetings and to come up with tales for Rafa about the Great Natali’s exploits on the field. But there was also a practical motive for the euros-for-goals deal: Toni was assessing Rafael’s reactions, testing to see how instinctively and with what kind of power the boy used one side versus the other. “It’s been said I was

very clever for having changed him into a left-hander,” Toni told me. “But it’s not true. Because Rafael was left-footed, I thought he might turn out to be left-handed in tennis. When he started, he was playing with both hands — and he hit harder from the left.” This is Rafael’s recollection as well; whatever else he did every day with his right hand and foot, his physical strength seemed more concentrated on the other side. By the time he was 11, he was playing competitive tennis regularly — so well, indeed, that Toni had already remarked to Rafa’s father, “This boy will be the Spanish national champion someday” — but he was still grasping the racket two-handed, for forehand and backhand alike.

“So I asked him, ‘How many Top 10 players play with two hands?’ ” Toni said. “He told me, ‘None.’ And I said, ‘You’re not going to be the first.’ ”

Nadal’s arms, both of them, have inspired over the years a fervent subgroup of admirers, especially once he began appearing at international matches in what became his trademark outfit: sleeveless shirt, wide headband knotted around the unruly hair and his celebrated piratas, rakish knee-length shorts that made him look like a surfer who lifted weights in his spare time. When Nike altered the ensemble early this year, in what everybody involved insists was a mutual decision by the company and Nadal’s entourage (the idea was to move him into something more grown-up), there was a brief but spirited insurrection among the fans. The Vamos Brigade, an international Nadal-watching Web site frequented mostly by enamored and effusive women, set up a special discussion devoted to Nadal’s new short-sleeved shirts and more conventional shorts; the title was Official Mourning Thread. “I found that if I just stared at his face long enough, I could make the sleeves disappear and see him sleeveless in my brain,” one correspondent wrote. Lamented another: “I miss the arms!!! The big, muscled, tanned arms.” Perhaps the young man was ready for a change, someone suggested. The response was quick and curt: “Please leave us alone to grieve.”

The arms have also been considered with more seriousness of purpose, as have the legs, by observers trying to dissect the mechanics of Nadal’s power and to guess at the cumulative toll his style of play may be taking on his body. The coach Robert Lansdorp, who has worked with Pete Sampras and [Maria Sharapova](#), among others, uses the informal label “reverse forehand” for Nadal’s most characteristic stroke, his searing, spinning, miserable-to-return forehand drive. The crowds around Nadal’s practice courts love to watch him up close as he repeats this stroke over and over; his racket appears to rip across the top of the tennis ball, shooting it toward the net like a twirling missile, not only brutally fast but also heavy-feeling and unpredictable on the bounce. The “reverse” part comes at the finish, which is sometimes not the traditional across-the-chest follow-through, but rather a defiant full-arm snap upward, as though Nadal were whipping a lariat over his head or delivering an Italian obscene gesture — almost the opposite, Lansdorp observes, of what coaches generally teach tennis students to do.

“It’s not that he’s the only one who hits this,” Lansdorp says. “Nadal just does it to an extreme, and he’s really mastered that reverse forehand to a great extent. He can do it from anyplace, almost to any ball, and make winners. He can hit it cross court, down the line, wherever he wants to go. And he’s probably done it since he was 10. Thank God nobody changed it and told him, ‘Hey, that is not the way to hit a forehand.’ ”

The ferocity of Nadal’s spinning forehand was quantified three years ago, in fact, when a San Francisco tennis researcher named John Yandell used a high-speed video camera and special software to count the average number of revolutions of a tennis ball hit full force by Nadal. “We’ve measured the spin rates on the

forehands of quite a few of the top players, including Nadal, Federer, Sampras and Andre Agassi,” Yandell told me when I visited the apartment from which he runs his online teaching site, www.tennisplayer.net, where videos and explanations of many famous players’ strokes are posted. (A brief Yandell video analysis of Nadal’s stroke can be found on nytimes.com.) “The first guys we did were Sampras and Agassi. They were hitting forehands that in general were spinning about 1,800 to 1,900 revolutions per minute.” Sampras’s serve, the deadliest in tennis during his five years as the world No. 1, was so hard to return partly because it combined so much speed with so much spin, Yandell said. “One guy who played against him said to me once: ‘John, I can return to guys who serve faster than Pete. But the problem with Pete’s serve is you’re trying to return a bowling ball with a badminton racket.’ ”

Yandell chuckled. “Federer is hitting with an amazing amount of spin, too, right? Twenty-seven hundred revolutions per minute. Well, we measured one forehand Nadal hit at 4,900. His average was 3,200. Think about that for a second. It’s a little frightening to contemplate. It takes a ball about a second to travel between the players’ rackets, O.K.?” He grabbed a calculator and punched in numbers. “So a Nadal forehand would have turned over 80 times in the second it took to get to Federer’s racket. I don’t know about you, but that’s almost impossible for me to visualize.”

Left-handedness has its own strategic advantages, in tennis as in baseball; Nadal has a strong two-handed backhand, but the geometry of tennis courts means the evil whirling forehand, his toughest shot, is easily aimed at the weaker backhand of righty opponents like Federer. It’s not unreturnable, the way Sampras’s serve often seemed to be; every competitor Nadal plays gets that shot back to him sometimes. But it tends to pin players at the back of the court, where they use all they have just trying to stay alive defensively. And it never, ever eases up. The coach Jose Higuera, who was also born in Spain but now directs elite player development for the U.S. Tennis Association, says he first saw Nadal play in Majorca, when the boy was 14. Rafael had reluctantly given up soccer by that time, after his soccer coach insisted that he devote himself to one sport or the other. He was fulfilling his uncle’s predictions on the court: he won several junior national championships and was the first three-time consecutive winner of the international Nike Junior Tour. The Spanish national team was scouting him — Nadal would be brought on at 16 and two years later help Spain win the 2004 Davis Cup — and Higuera says that as he watched the teenager, he was struck at once by the very quality that so reliably beats down Nadal’s opponents now.

“The intensity, in every single shot he hit at that age, was unbelievable,” Higuera says. “When you see him practice, it’s pretty spectacular. Every ball he hits with the same intensity and power. Every day, it’s like it’s going to be the last practice of his life.”

Juega cada punto como si fuera el último. They say at the tournaments that this is what Toni Nadal still hammers at his nephew: Play every point as though it were the last— of the game, of the match, of the day, of your life. “It’s out of respect for the sport,” Toni told me when I asked him about it. “If you’re going to do a thing, do it absolutely the best you can. Did I ever say it to him directly? No. In my family, there were lots of things my father never said to me. You just see them, in the attitude. From the time Rafael was little, he’d win that first point of the match, which nobody ever pays much attention to, and he’d yell, ‘Vamos!’ All pumped up. Let’s go! And you play like you train. As he grew up, he got used to training as though each point were the last one.”

Nadal didn't shoot toward the top of the player rankings once he joined the pro tour at 15, in 2001. His first ranking was at No. 1,002; it was 2003 when he cracked the Top 100. He had a lot to learn. He couldn't "read" the court the way players like Federer did, intuiting where both ball and opponent would go next. He played hard from the back of the court, where his endurance and insistent groundstrokes gradually wore out his opponents, but he wasn't yet nimble or tricky at the net. His serve was oddly flabby for a player of such power — it still can be, in fact, though recently it has improved in both speed and precision. Once when I was talking to Toni, I wondered aloud whether in retrospect the two of them had sacrificed a certain sensibilidad when they settled on Nadal as a left-handed player, whether he's stronger with the left but might have been more exacting and coordinated with the right. I used the word *problemas* in my question, recalling Rafa's occasional critiques of his own serve, and then backtracked: wait, the guy's the best in the world, probably not right to call them problems, exactly. Toni watched me flounder and then started laughing.

"See what getting to be No. 1 does!" he teased. "Here you are, thinking, 'Whoa, must watch my words carefully here.' Yes. It's possible he'd be serving better if he played right-handed. Throwing the ball perfectly is hard for him, and he doesn't always hit it at the correct height. The whole thing is just not something he does very well. We're working on it."

The relationship between Nadal's technique and his injuries has pursued him for years now, less because there's specific research to back it up (if you haven't suffered from hurting knees yourself at some point, you surely know someone who is not an elite athlete and has) than because it almost hurts to watch him play. The man just works so hard, and all the time, and at such tremendous velocity. And he has been doing this at tournament level, before spectators, since the age some children start tee ball. "More speed, bigger problems," Nadal's doctor, Angel Ruiz-Cotorro, told me when I visited him in Barcelona after Nadal lost at the French Open. "Tennis has changed a great deal in recent years. We used to talk about injuries: the elbow, the shoulder, the wrist. But in recent years, with the change in equipment materials — the rackets, mostly, but also the strings — we have whole new pathologies. Everything's faster. You're hitting the ball faster and harder, and in new positions, which creates problems with the spine, the knees, even the hips."

The tally of Nadal's ailments over the years is honestly not as impressive as that of many professional athletes: a stress fracture in his left foot, a banged-up elbow from a fall outside a tennis court, random knee and joint pains, the tendinitis. People imagine the whipping forehand must wreak havoc on his shoulders, but so far, at least, it has not. "We've been doing prevention stuff for years — some with weights, some with rubber resistance bands, always before starting play and after finishing," Ruiz-Cotorro said. "But Rafa's never put huge work into those shoulders, despite what people think. They came with the genes. If you look at his family, you'll see the same powerful constitution." (This is true; in their 40s now, Toni and Miguel Ángel are both built like American football players.)

There is no question, though, that hardcourt surfaces are tougher on the body — the joints, the tendons, the back — than grass or clay. The harder Nadal works to hold his No. 1 ranking and try for tennis's career Grand Slam (titles in all four majors), the more he needs to dominate not only clay but also the harder-pounding material that covers the courts of the U.S. Open. The image of Nadal in poetic self-immolation, the glorious athlete pushing himself resolutely toward his own undoing, is so mesmerizing and distressing that I've heard it raised by spectators and coaches and by former competitors who now run the tournaments

Rafa enters. Ruiz-Cotorro said he feels twinges of it himself, not just with Nadal but with many of the elites he's charged with trying to keep both healthy and in play. "It's brutally demanding, this obligation to win," he said. "But in order to do it, you use the best weapons you've got."

His remedies? Ruiz-Cotorro sighed. "Tendinitis is hard to treat," he said. "The first thing you have to do is decrease the inflammation and rest. He's resting now. But for an athlete like this, the word 'rest' does not exist."

Ruiz-Cotorro observed that since way back in the early piratas days, a kind of magnifying glass has been applied to everything that happens to Nadal on the tennis court. When I told Nadal about all the people who worried aloud to me about the level at which he is using up his body — this was back in March, it must be remembered, while he was winning everything in sight — he laughed and threw up his hands and looked for an instant less like an international tennis champion than a righteously ripped 22-year-old being told he was going to hurt himself if he kept snowboarding so fast.

"They were saying this three years ago, that I couldn't last," Nadal said. "And after four years, I'm better than I ever was. This irritates me, no? I'm tired of people telling me I can't go on playing like this. In the end this is what makes me win, lose, everything. I can't control how I play. I want to keep getting better. And the most important part is the head."

After the Swedish player Robin Soderling beat him in the fourth round of the French Open, Nadal held one unsmiling press conference and then quickly went home with his support team, pleading to be left alone. He celebrated his birthday with his girlfriend and his family, the first time he had done so in five years, since the day falls during the tournament he had more or less come to own. Around the tournament site, the postmatch dissections traversed a wide range of physical and psychological territory, all of it speculative: Nadal's knees were bothering him. Or Nadal was depleted by the nonstop competition schedule. Or Nadal was rattled by just having lost a tournament in Madrid, in the finals and on clay and to Federer. Or Nadal was psyched out by Soderling, whose world ranking was only No. 23 but nonetheless hits powerful, flat balls — minimal spin, that is — that Nadal, even though he'd always beaten him before, finds a challenge to return.

At the press conference, the reporters kept after Nadal, in English and in Spanish, poking about for some revelatory quote. He had moments of looking like himself in the match, but not many. Soderling, who has a reputation for mental surrender under pressure, seemed to have been possessed by some sort of cosmic visitation. ([Martina Navratilova](#), calling the match on television, cried out in admiration, "Soderling is playing out of his mind!") Nadal appeared heavy-footed and off-kilter from the first set on, and people who know his game grew increasingly perplexed as they awaited the familiar surge that smashed Nalbandian at Indian Wells and dozens of other opponents over the years. "Up until the end, everybody was saying, 'Something will happen, something will,'" Philippe Bouin told me when I found him at the French Open press center. "We've seen this movie many times. [John Wayne](#) never dies at the end of the movie. But this time, the cavalry was not there."

Nadal himself kept declining, with mounting frustration, to buy into any sort of Superhero Collapses Mysteriously narrative. "You know, guys, I lost," he said at one point, sounding uncharacteristically tetchy.

“I lost. That’s what I can say. I didn’t play my best tennis today.” People close to him say they could see it right away, both in the stadium and on television; Miguel Ángel Nadal, who was watching in Manacor, told me he watched the beginning of play and simply knew, one athlete to another, that this time the champion was going to struggle. It happens, Miguel Ángel said, and shrugged. “Same as when you go out in the street and you look up at the clouds and you know,” he told me. “It’s not going to be a good day.”

In every Rafael Nadal press conference I’ve attended since March, somebody inevitably asks him about the pressures of being No. 1. He always has the same reaction: a certain expression flickers across his face, like would you guys please just get over this, and then he says something along the lines of: “I promise you, I don’t get up in the morning thinking about being No. 1. I get up in the morning thinking that I’ve got a match, and I need to try to play as well as I possibly can.” That rendition of the I Don’t Think About It response was delivered in Spanish, to some reporters at Indian Wells, but I’ve heard it in Nadal’s less-fluid English, too, over and over: I’m fine, I don’t dwell on it, I just want to play my best tennis.

One of Nadal’s most endearing traits, since he assumed a starring role in international tennis, has been his public admiration for Federer. Nadal makes a practice of complimenting his opponents’ abilities, even when he has just come from stomping all over them, but when he talks about Federer, he still sounds like the adulatory apprentice. “You are a great champion,” Nadal said in English to Federer, in front of the whole tennis-watching world, at the Australian Open awards ceremony. “You are one of the best of history.” Nadal had beaten him, of course, and some months earlier pushed Federer from the world No. 1 spot, and even after one has heard him deny it a dozen times, it’s hard not to think it must be unsettling for the very good No. 2 to adjust to the burden of finally having made it — of having achieved what he wanted, so that now the fight is no longer to get there but to stave off the hungry competitors behind him, one of whom is the master himself.

“Inside him, I don’t think anything has changed — he still thinks Federer is the best,” his manager, Carlos Costa, told me when I was in Barcelona the day before the French Open final. Like the rest of Nadal’s support team, Costa was philosophical and undefensive about the loss to Soderling; the champion played a lousy match, they said, and it happened to be against a very good player playing the match of his life. “I haven’t talked to Rafa about this,” Costa said. “But I think there may have been some tension. ‘I never lose here, so many years, I’ve never lost at center court, record record record.’ This is just my thought. I’m not going to touch it now. Maybe later.”

I went back to Paris to watch Federer in the final against Soderling, whose run of playing out of his mind held right through quarterfinal and semifinal matches against players of much higher rank. During the Nadal-Soderling match, the French spectators were snarky to Nadal, cheering lustily as it became clearer that the trophy-hogging Spaniard was going to lose. But they love Federer, and shouted him on now as he glided about the court, appearing not to break a sweat as he did law-of-physics-defying things with the tennis ball, like causing it to arc gently over the net and land on the forecourt clay and just stop, right there, while Soderling would scramble from the back court in a futile attempt at a return. “Ooh la la,” said the man sitting beside me, who turned out to be Jean-Paul Loth, a retired French competitor who for 10 years was captain of the national team. The cosmic intervention had come to an end; there was some intense second-set action, but Federer would take the match in straight sets, and as Soderling’s game unspooled, Loth watched and shook his head. On a regular day, he said — Nadal playing like Nadal, Soderling playing

like this — the Spaniard would have made swift work of the upstart from Sweden. “And if Nadal had had a chance to be in this final,” Loth said, “Federer would never win.”

The most important part is the head, Nadal had told me. Tennis improvement manuals are full of this instruction, as are all manner of other guides for trying to live the life you want, and as Federer sank to his knees in joy when the last point was over, I wondered whether Nadal was in front of his television in Manacor, or whether he spent the finals afternoon the way Costa guessed he would, on a family friend’s fishing boat in the Mediterranean. Nadal loves fishing. He competes when he’s on fishing boats too — he can’t help himself, he likes to see who will get the biggest catch. I asked him once how he envisioned his adult life when professional tennis was over, and the first thing he said was, “A boat.”

He’ll still live in Majorca, he said. He and his mother have started a foundation, aimed at improving the lives of children in developing countries; he’ll have some role in the foundation, and in sports. “If my career lasts for three more years, it lasts three more years,” he said. “I still want to improve at tennis. If it’s two years, then it’s two. If it’s five more years, perfect.” Then he’ll buy the boat, he said, but not a huge one. “A normal-sized boat,” Nadal said. “To go fishing in the sea.”

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Postscript: June 20, 2009

The cover article this weekend about the tennis champion Rafael Nadal refers to the possibility that tendinitis could prevent him from playing Wimbledon, which starts on Monday. On Friday, after the magazine went to press, Mr. Nadal withdrew from the tournament.

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