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DANIEL VALLVERDU

THE TENNIS COACH EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT

DANIEL VALLVERDU: COACH

Imogen A. Rose discovers a coach making serious waves on the elite tennis circuit.

Tennis, at the elite level, is a gruelling, unforgiving sport. It demands a personal, physical and psychological commitment as exacting, if not more so, than any other sport.

At the top level, most players compete for 11 months of the year. During the 'off season', no serious contenders will risk straying too far from regime if they want to maintain, or more usually, improve their ATP ranking. It's also an incredibly exciting and rewarding sport, not least of all due to the unpredictability and challenging force of the game – think indeterminate match duration, strategy, shot selection, opponent and weather. The constant variables mean that players need to be exceptionally well-trained in order to deal with such a broad spectrum of situations.

Talent is one thing but it is never enough. Success requires the deployment of clever tactics and a strategic approach – by both player and coach. Indeed, the relationship between coach and player is particularly potent, and particularly personal. The link between the success of this relationship, and success on the court, is clear and consequential.

Daniel Vallverdu is a respected coach who's currently making a name for himself at the very top levels of the game. Measured and judicious, his calm approach belies a dangerously effective understanding of the game and its players. Since accepting the role of coach to Grigor Dimitrov – the supremely skilled 25-year-old Bulgarian star player – he has guided Dimitrov from an ATP Singles ranking of 40 to 12.

One finds in Vallverdu an engaging and

palpable passion for tennis. It's a passion borne of his upbringing and dedication to the game, first as a player and then as a coach. Born in Valencia, Venezuela, Vallverdu grew up in a tennis and sports loving family. His sister, Laura, made her own mark as a stand-out player and is now the co-head coach of the Miami University tennis team.

At age seven, Vallverdu chose tennis in favour of swimming because he connected with the 'tactical' side of the game. He credits his parents with supporting him unconditionally, enabling him to embrace the various developmental opportunities during his formative years. This included attending the internationally-renowned Academia Sánchez-Casal Barcelona Tennis Academy; an experience that enabled Vallverdu to develop into an exceptional player and to mature as an individual at an early age. It was here that he met, and became friends with, Andy Murray.

In a way, fate led Vallverdu to pursue a coaching career. It was, he says, 'never my plan'. Rather, chronic injury prevented him from successful competition for almost 12 months. At age 24, as he prepared to return to the court, Murray approached him. Having ended relations with his then coach, Murray was looking for coaching help. Their successful collaboration lasted four years. During this time Murray enjoyed many landmark moments such as his 2012 Olympic Gold medal, the 2012 US Open and the 2013 Men's Wimbledon Singles Title.

Vallverdu subsequently worked with Tomáš Berdych, during which time Berdych reached his highest career singles ATP ranking of 4.

Vallverdu has quickly and decidedly distinguished himself as an impressive coach. His relationship with Dimitrov is generating interest from within the tennis world. Whilst Dimitrov's talent has always been obvious, for whatever reason, his journey in tennis has been such that he has yet to fully realise the promising potential he demonstrated so early.

Now almost everyone is remarking upon Dimitrov's successful transition; he is playing with a new sense of direction, a maturity that has lifted his game; and he seems very much in control, aware and responsive to what he needs to do in order to be the best.

It's no coincidence that this noticeable shift has occurred whilst under the tutelage of Vallverdu. The partnership began mid-2016 and has been on a rapid ascent since. This includes two ATP Titles and an enthralling five-hour semi-final battle at the 2017 Australian Open – the latter demonstrating just how close Dimitrov is to challenging for the right of reign.

So how does one explain Daniel Vallverdu's apparent, Midas touch?

Coaching is a profession where personality and temperament are key. Vallverdu concedes he is something of a 'perfectionist' with a 'very strong competitive nature'. To him, coaching is a 'very natural, comfortable fit'. He considers his role as fundamentally supportive saying, 'You are there to assist them to become the best player they can be'. He emphasises the need to consistently do good work, and to lead by example. It is, he says, critical to take the time to understand your player completely



IMOGEN
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ACH ON THE RISE



Photos courtesy of the Garanti Koza Sofia Open 2017. Pictured is Daniel Vallverdu (right) with his player, Grigor Dimitrov (left) at their recent World ATP Tour Title victory.

– both on and off the court. It is about 'developing more than a professional relationship, a kind-of connection outside the court, where you really understand the player as a person, and what triggers them to become the best they can be'.

One must also adjust to different personalities and different games. This means being 'very flexible with your way of coaching because every player is different'.

There has to be a solid foundation built upon honesty and communication. Player and coach must be 'on the same page. If you're not being 100 per cent honest and truthful and clear with the message, it's difficult to adapt your way of training to the player'. This is significant, as an honest appraisal is arguably the key to most things, professionally and personally.

Greatness in any arena demands the ability to confront reality, and a willingness to discard the layers and examine the cold hard truth. It's this lack of pretence and brutal honesty that enables individuals to progress without limits.

Vallverdu speaks of 'controlling the controllable'. He also believes that 'positive actions and positive thoughts, bring success and positive results. If you are doing things the right way consistently, success will come in one way or another'.

Recognising health as the 'key to life', Vallverdu's 'number one priority' is to ensure the optimum health of his player, now and in the future. This encompasses all aspects 'from nutrition to strength, to cardio to mental health'.

In tennis, the need for mental stamina could hardly be overstated. According to Vallverdu, 'the players that make it to the top of the game are the ones most committed to the game mentally, on and off the court'.

Acutely aware of the demanding nature of tennis and the constant pressure players face, he advises an awareness of 'timing'. In fact, Vallverdu believes the timing of information is perhaps the most important part of coaching, being *the* determining factor between a positive or negative impact.

Vallverdu seems ideally suited to the challenges and opportunities that tennis presents. He has a fixed, intractable determination that would not be easily, if at all, swayed. There is a deceptively subtle, significant drive to push boundaries and to pioneer new ground.

In writing about sport, I am often reminded of Socrates and his great proclamation that the 'unexamined life is not worth living'. Success in sport demands an unbridled commitment to constantly analyse performance; examination really is a great tool for keeping things in perspective and for preparing for a successful future.

Vallverdu not only has the tenacity, but an analytical awareness that ensures a perpetual state of improvement – for both coach and player; and it's an approach that promises much for his future!

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