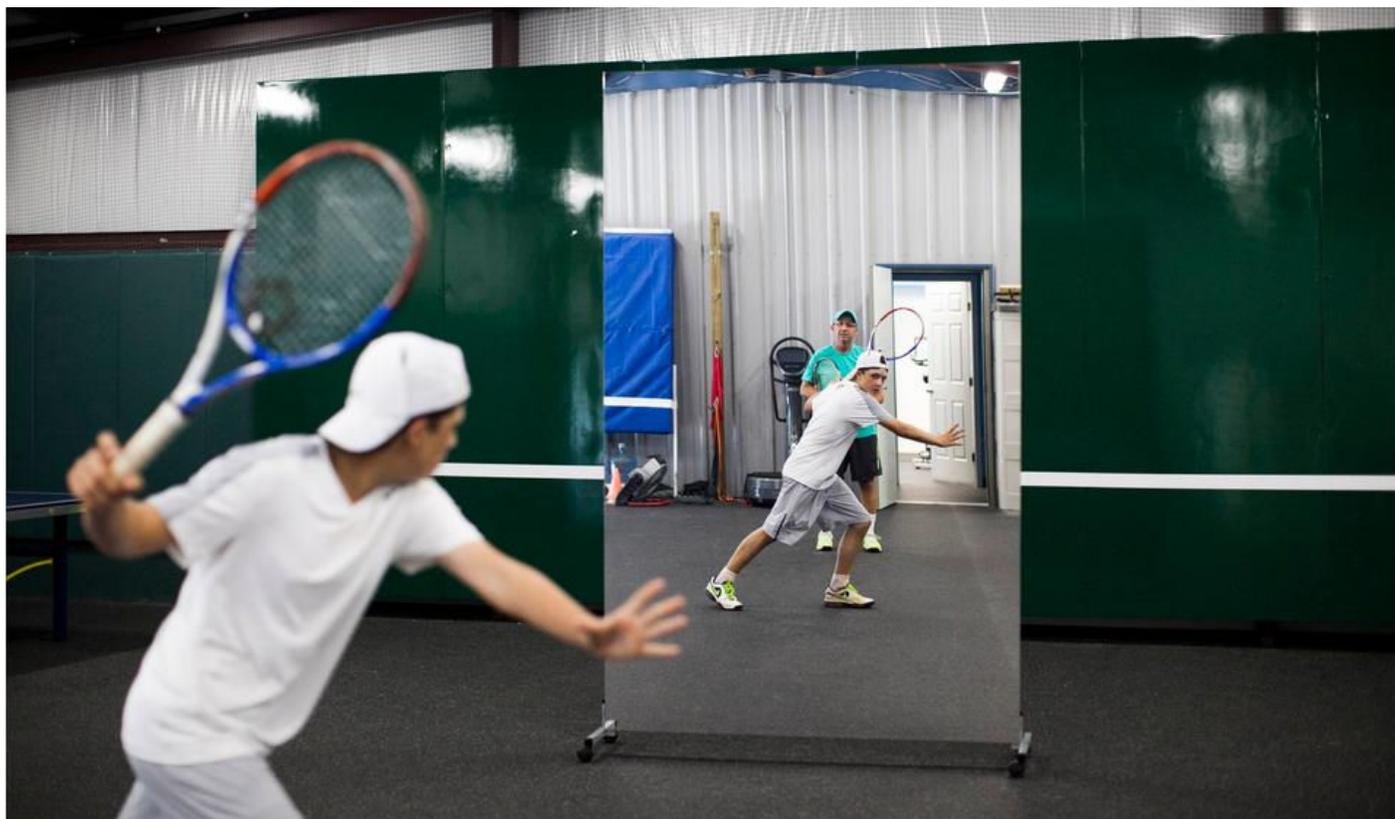


One Kid's Personal Tennis Academy

By
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In Paris this week, Rafael Nadal and Serena Williams are the favorites to win French Open titles. But there's a 12-year-old from Florida who has something that these all-time greats don't: His very own tennis academy. Tom Perrotta reports.



Edward Linsmier for The Wall Street Journal

Guy and Ann Neff didn't want to send their 12-year-old son Adam away to a tennis academy. So they built one in their backyard.

It is on 5 acres of land down a dirt road in Bradenton, Fla., next to a bird sanctuary with chickens, roosters and peacocks. It has a red clay court like the French Open. And a purple hard court like the Sony Open tournament in Key Biscayne, Fla. The Neffs are also building a replica U.S. Open hard court that should be finished in a few weeks. Next to the courts, there is a basketball court, a jungle gym and a giant trampoline. There is also an indoor gym with a hitting wall. On a recent morning at the academy, a bulldozer and a dump truck leveled a stretch of soil for a running

field. The Neffs' German shorthaired pointers—Coco and Rafa, named for Adam's favorite player, Rafael Nadal—raced around the yard.

"They like to chase the bugs around," Adam said.

"Have you ever seen a CVAC?" asked Lance Luciani, Adam's full-time coach, as he gave a tour of the recovery room adjacent to the gym. It's an airtight pod that changes air pressure, temperature and density. Novak Djokovic, the world's best tennis player, and other athletes have used the pod to aid their recovery and oxygen intake.



Edward Linsmier for The Wall Street Journal

"It's a Disneyland for tennis players," said Peter Carnello, a Swedish entertainment executive whose son, Lancelot, trains full-time at the Neff facility.

"People are going to call us nuts, but that's all right, I've been called worse," said Guy Neff, who is a hepatologist. "If this doesn't work, there's always opportunity to be a doctor or an attorney or an accountant, or whatever he wants to do."

"We tend to not listen to the naysayers," said Ann Neff, a dermatologist and former orbital surgeon.

This week, Adam is in Paris for the Longines Future Tennis Aces tournament, which begins Thursday and includes 16 of the best young players in the world. Adam earned a free trip to France, courtesy of the watchmaker, by winning a

national clay-court tournament last month in Delray Beach. He has an ambitious goal for the future: "To be No. 1," he said. "Top five would be nice, but No. 1 would be really cool."

Adam wanted to be a baseball player before his parents enrolled him in a tennis program in Cincinnati, where they lived at the time, with the hope of improving his hand-eye coordination. When Adam was 7, they visited an academy in France that wanted Adam to live there.

"I said no, that's my buddy, he's coming home with me," Adam's father said. Then the Neffs got to thinking: They wanted to move to Florida, where they had trained to become doctors. A friend introduced them to Luciani, who had worked at Nick Bollettieri's academy for nine years and was now teaching privately.

"I just said, wait a second here, let's completely change the way we're thinking of this—let's go out to the country and build the mountain," Ann said. "The amount that we would have spent to buy a nice house in some community somewhere, we can put in our own courts."

The Neffs bought the property in 2011. They built an addition to the house and cleared the yard, which was overrun by palmettos, scorpions and snakes. The three courts will cost around \$160,000. They pay Luciani for private coaching; he maintains the facility and the CVAC pod, which he leased for \$110,000 for five years, he said.

Luciani teaches Adam, Adam's 10-year-old sister, Katarina, and Lancelot full-time, and several others part-time, with the help of his stepdaughter, Emily Mowery, a former player at the University of Miami. The youngest Neff, 5-year-old Isabella, recently hit her first ball—"She knocked the glasses off my face," Luciani said—and will start training with him soon. He's considering other students, but doesn't want to have more than eight.

"It's more a center for private coaching than an academy," he said.

Adam and Katarina are home-schooled in the Kumon curriculum by a tutor. Adam also takes French and Spanish. They study between and after practice sessions.

Adam's day begins at 7:30 a.m. He works through an array of ball-machine drills and hitting patterns as Luciani paces nearby. "Don't be good, be awesome!" Luciani likes to shout. He doesn't tolerate whining. "Bend your left knee!" he yelled during one drill. "I know it hurts, but I don't care."

"He can be funny, he can be mean—he's very realistic," Adam said of his coach. "If you're doing something bad, he'll correct you. If you're doing something good, he'll compliment you."

In the gym, Adam and his sister work through a series of plyometric and coordination drills that are designed and supervised by a trainer. Adam also receives occasional massages and visits a stretching specialist once a week.

When Adam finishes training for the day, it's time for the CVAC. He spends 40 to 60 minutes a day in it. It is equipped with headphones so he can watch television.

"At first I was a little freaked out," he said. "I don't like not being able to talk without a walkie-talkie."

Adam's parents said they researched the CVAC before concluding it was safe.

"It takes advantage of a physiologic process to improve your exercise capacity and your recovery," Ann said. "It's basically just like going up to a mountain and training."

At night, Adam encases his legs in pulsating NormaTec sleeves that pro athletes use to help blood flow and recovery. He sometimes uses a blood-cooling glove invented by Stanford scientists.

"One of the big things I hyper-focus on is recovery," Guy said. "I don't want Adam to have my back when he's 50."



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