



# The Secrets of Spanish Tennis.

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## ABSTRACT

The Secrets of Spanish Tennis are the common core elements that I have observed being taught across the country by different leading academies and coaching. They are the essence of the Spanish way, if the Spanish way can be effectively defined as a universal system. I have tried to harmonise the many varied and disconnected approaches that can be found across the country into simple elements that all coaches, parents, and players around the world can learn and assimilate into their own training systems. This article is an extract from the book 'Secrets of Spanish Tennis' by Chris Lewit.

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## INTRODUCTION

The core Spanish elements are versatile and easily adaptable and can be "piggybacked" onto by other systems, and indeed this is part of their inherent value. The secrets are so remarkably easy to assimilate that I've often remarked that the Spanish way is like the Buddhism religion, which historically spread rapidly throughout Asia and the rest of the world due to its ease of assimilation and adaptability to other religions. The fact is that systems with intense, strong dogma, whether religious or otherwise, often do not spread as easily as methods that have some flexibility and do not seek to supplant other systems entirely.

I have made every effort to highlight commonalities in the Spanish way that can be easily adapted to current systems to provide supplemental support, although of course, these principles could be used to supplant your current training regimens entirely.

It is also important to understand that these secrets, while they can be taught as independent subjects, are often integrated into complete exercises in Spain. One of the hallmarks of the Spanish way, in general, is that the coaches work simply, without an overemphasis on only one area, such as technique, for example. Spain has developed a style of training that is successful in part due to its, "keep it simple," holistic approach. In an effort to explain the philosophy and system in Spain, I have necessarily broken the approach into parts, but the reader should remember that the Spanish way often teaches core secrets all-at-once in integrated exercises.

## FOOTWORK, MOVEMENT, AND BALANCE

Footwork is an obsession for Spanish coaches, as well as many South American coaches. The top academies and coaches

relentlessly drill their players to move quickly, fluidly, and to get in position.

Why has footwork become such an obsession in Spanish coaching circles? My best guess is that it probably has something to do with a European culture that tends to focus on playing with the feet more than the hands (consider the popularity of soccer in Europe vis-à-vis the popularity of baseball in the US), and with a tennis culture that celebrates running and triumphing on the red clay, where footwork is essential to winning. The clay surface itself is like a second teacher, helping to train the movement and balance even without the coach's input or drills.

Any Spanish coach worth his salt will have a toolbox of effective footwork drills (usually hand-fed) that he can use to help a player with positioning work. I must admit my own coaching has been greatly enhanced by studying footwork overseas at leading Spanish academies over the last few years. I have learned the keys to positioning, moving quickly with balance, and recovering, and I have picked up many unique drills along the way.

I am proud of the Spanish influences in my system because I believe Spanish coaches have developed some very important pedagogical approaches and drills to develop this key area. I think all coaches could learn how to teach movement and footwork better by studying the Spanish way.

## BALANCE

A player needs to move fluidly with dynamic balance and good posture. Posture is very important to the Spanish coach. Controlling the COG (center of gravity) is also very important.

Spanish Coaches are trained to look for imbalances when the player is on the move, during the shot and on the recovery.

Sometimes a player must shift his or her COG, in order to move quickly to a shot (for example, when sprinting to a ball out wide), but more often than not, and especially during the actual shot itself, the body should be centered. Rotation should take place around a central axis.

Firstly, Spanish coaches look for the contact point to be at the right height. In Spain, the most frequent directive to describe this is: “hit the ball between your hip and shoulder.” In other words, don’t let the ball drop below your hips or bounce over your shoulders where it’s out of the strike zone (to borrow an American baseball term). Thus the height of the struck ball should be between the hip and the shoulder for the majority of shots.

Secondly, the distance from the body of the contact point should be such that the arm/s efficiently extend so that there is no crowding and the arm/s do not get jammed too close to the body. This relates prominently to the technical goal of good extension, which I wrote about at length in my last book, *The Tennis Technique Bible*.

Thirdly, the body should be positioned such that the ball is played early and out in front. One of the most commonly used footwork teaching phrases in Spain is probably: “get [your body/feet] behind the ball,” used by Spanish coaches to instruct their players to get into position with their bodies so that the ball can be played out in front.

When these three criteria are met, the Spanish coach is happy because the body has a better chance to be on balance during the delivery of the shot if the contact point is correct. However, if the contact point is not correct, if even one criterion is missing, the player will most likely lose control of his COG and be off balance for the shot. Therefore, there is a critical connection between the contact point, the balance, and the footwork; they are intertwined. Ultimately, the positioning of the player’s feet determines whether the contact point is good, and thus whether the shot will be in balance or not. Spanish coaches become obsessed with the positioning because, without it, there is often a bad contact point and usually poor balance.

## POSITIONING

Positioning in Spain classically means getting to the ball and getting the feet in a good stance, the proper distance from the ball, so as to allow for a balanced body during the swing. Positioning can also mean court position (such as whether a player is playing deep in the backcourt or close to the baseline). In this case, Spanish coaches guide players to be in the right position to attack or defend, depending on the situation and the type of ball hit by the opponent.

The positioning, as per the first definition, can be thought of as the footwork used to “receive the ball,” a commonly used phrase in Spanish tennis teaching. Receiving the ball means getting the feet into the right position to allow a good, balanced reception of the incoming flight of the ball. So in Spain there is this obsession with getting the footwork right during the flight

of the incoming ball, to learn how to receive the ball properly, in good position, and then to send the ball with balance.

## CONCLUSION

In my experience studying tennis systems in the US, I sincerely believe that our coaching curriculums do not spend nearly enough time working on footwork and especially this critical skill—the positioning—as they should. Fortunately, José Higuera, as Head of USTA High Performance Coaching, is working very hard to teach American coaches how to work on the footwork and positioning of their players. In fact, the USTA Elite Coaching Department has adopted many Spanish philosophies and even many Spanish footwork drills in its new teaching methodology, which is promoted to US coaches. The USTA has also installed more clay courts at American national training centers. The USTA has wholeheartedly and earnestly turned to the Spanish way!

What stance should players use as they get into position? In Spain, believe it or not, many academies still stress the basic neutral stance (which I see as almost an anachronism in the modern game, but the traditional neutral stance is still highly favored and is often recommended especially for beginners, which I think is good advice). Bruguera Top Team and Sánchez-Casal are major proponents of this classical approach, for example. They still teach neutral stance and stepping in to the ball as the foundational footwork skill. That being said, it is clear that most Spanish players evolve to use semi-open and open stances, and they use these heavily at the top ITF and professional levels, so these stances are certainly acceptable for higher level players and situationally, on emergency balls out wide (for example). Open stance can be used to get more body rotation and thus more racquet speed, power, and spin as players advance in level. But no matter what the stance, the positioning must be there, and the balance must be maintained through the shot.

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