


by TIM BAUER

# THE FRENCH FORMULA

*a science of success*

From Jo-Wilfried Tsonga bursting onto the scene at the Australian Open finals to Gilles Simon defeating Roger Federer at the Masters Cup in Shanghai, French players excelled in 2008. With 14 men in the world's top 100, more French tennis players rank at the top of the ATP tour than any other nation. On the women's side, an astounding 11 French women placed in the WTA tour top 100. As Sinatra sang, "It was a very good year."



A stylized, high-contrast illustration in shades of brown and black. In the foreground, the silhouettes of two tennis players are shown from the chest up, facing each other as if in a match. The background features a large, stylized tennis ball with curved lines. To the right, a portion of the Eiffel Tower is visible, suggesting a Parisian setting. The overall style is graphic and artistic.

**T**oday, tennis is the most watched individual sport in France, and is second only to soccer in national interest. The current vintage of French champions is the product of a system that has been crafted through the decades, rich in both culture and tradition. When Tsonga, Simon, Santoro and Mauresmo hold trophies, you see champions who are deeply rooted in a proud tennis lineage.

How do the French do it? Take a tour of French tennis, an inside look at the people, programs, and history behind the success.

### **The Creation of Future Champions**

In 1888, the French established a national committee for tennis, the Federation Francaise de Tennis (FFT). Since the first French Davis Cup triumph in 1927 against the USA, tennis popularity soared and led to the construction of a Parisian tennis stadium to host the Davis Cup the following year. That stadium, named after French WWI aviator Roland Garros, is now the site of the French Open and home to the FFT.

Six straight French Davis Cup victories between 1925 and 1933 started the FFT's rise from humble beginnings to its current status as one of the most powerful tennis organizations in the world. "The Four Musketeers": Rene Lacoste, Jean Borotra, Jacques Brugnon, and Henri Cochet, as well as female sensation Suzanne Lenglen, ignited the French public's fascination with tennis. Nearly a century later, the passion remains. The torch has been carried by Leconte, Forget, Pioline, and Noah – to be passed on to today's players, like Mauresmo, Simon, and Monfils.

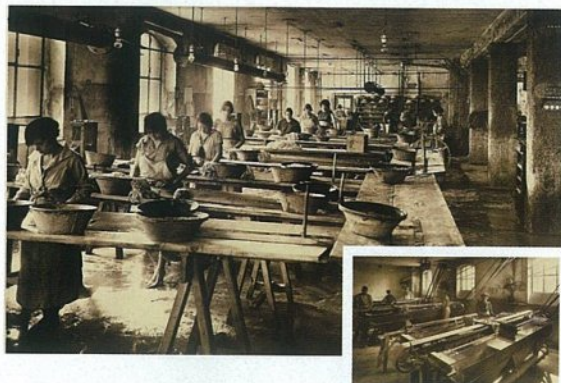
The FFT's comprehensive program focuses on a single goal: producing world champions. The FFT plan is based on finding talent early through exposure to the game, training coaches in a unified way, establishing opportunities to compete, and creating an ideal training environment for the top talents, allowing them to live and breathe tennis, at absolutely no charge to the athlete.

The French have borrowed a Belgian form of mini-tennis that uses a cooperative, story-based approach and small tennis equipment and courts.

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# French innovation



## BABOLAT

In 1875 – one year after Walter Clopton Wingfield filed his patent for the game – Pierre Babolat began making natural gut strings for tennis racquets. Babolat has indeed been around as long as the game of tennis.

More champions have struck the ball with Babolat strings than any other. From the early French stars like Henri Cochet to icons like Bjorn Borg, Boris Becker, and Pete Sampras, countless players have chosen Babolat strings for their feel and performance. High-profile pros have forgone lucrative string contracts just to use Babolat strings, which are crafted from beef intestine.

In 1994, Babolat introduced racquets. Andy Roddick's junior coach, Frenchman Tarik Benhabiles, introduced him to the racquets and he was hooked. Many of the world's top players, including No. 1, Rafael Nadal, play with Babolat.

## RENE LACOSTE, "THE CROCODILE"

By age 24, Lacoste was a champion and the author of *Lacoste on Tennis*. He kept notebooks on his competitors, attempting to solve the riddles of their games.



The Lacoste company got its start when Rene had short-sleeved collared shirts made while searching for a comfortable alternative to the long-sleeved buttoned shirts of the era. Soon his friends were playing in his creations. In the design he used his nickname, "The Crocodile," embroidering what has since become a globally recognized logo. Even the act of adding a company logo was innovative for its time, becoming

one of the first examples of sports marketing.

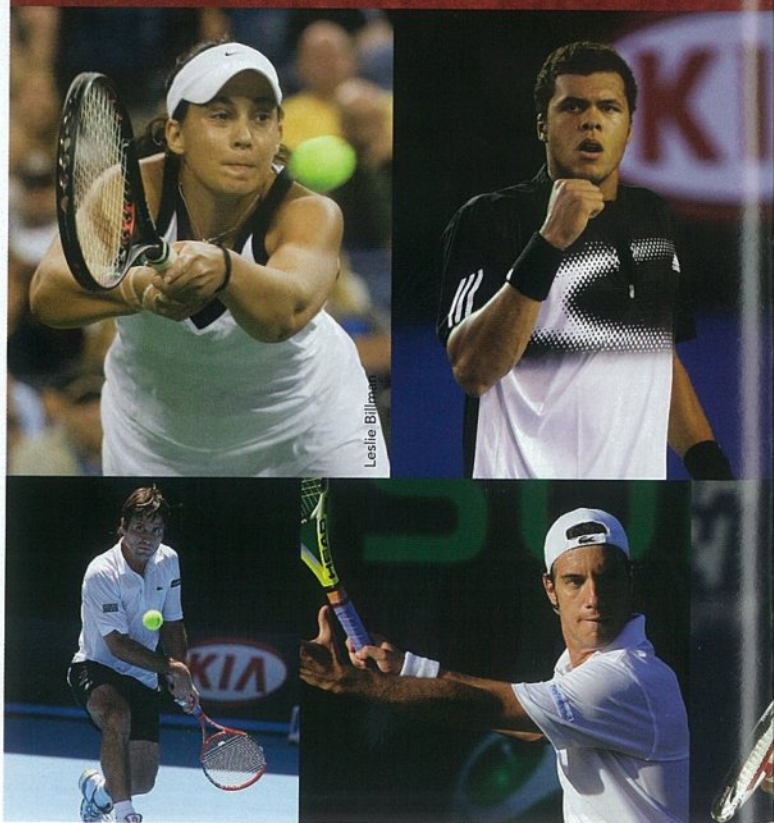
Lacoste later developed the first ball machine as well as one of the most popular mass-produced metal racquets. His invention, the Wilson T-2000, changed the sport and ushered in new technologies that are responsible for the power tennis so prominent in today's game.

This program provides children the opportunity to get involved with the game nearly as soon as they can walk. Young players learn basic motor skills and teamwork from this innovative approach. Former French ATP success Jean-Phillipe Fleurian has brought this concept to the US and is working with children in Florida in a program he calls "Le Petite Tennis." In addition to mini-tennis, French children learn tennis in their elementary school physical education programs. The availability of the sport makes certain that any child that has the talent to be a top player is given the chance to cultivate it.

## Training the Coaches

Once the racquet reaches the hands of young French hopefuls, the power of the French tennis club culture takes over. The FFT divides the nation into 36 regions and funds clubs throughout the land. With over 8000 tennis clubs and 33,000 courts, every interested child is within reach of an FFT program run by a trained coach.

France has roughly 5000 licensed coaches who must pass an intensive program and exhibit an advanced level of playing ability. Courses in anatomy, physiology, psychology, and biomechanics are required, constantly moving the training program forward.





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For more than 40 years, regular meetings between the FFT leadership and top coaches have shaped a national program. The results: detailed training plans and illustrated manuals that are broadcast across the coaching network. The French require training even for those assisting with introductory tennis programs and currently have more than 13,000 people certified.

#### Finding National Talent

Wonder how A French child who falls in love with tennis becomes a Wimbledon champion?

After becoming involved locally, the best children in each

region compete at nation events. Once these young players begin competing, they become one of the more than a half million others under the age of 18 who compete on a regular basis. Nearly two million matches are held annually as part of over 10,000 registered tournaments. A scouting team focuses at national tournaments on the youngest age division looking for players roughly between the ages of 10 and 12. This team identifies the top talent, selecting those they feel have the potential to become world champions.

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## Impact of the French Open



Each spring, the French Open attracts more than three billion viewers. More than 500,000 fans pack the ground. The slow red clay the French call "terre battue," or beaten earth, provides a rustic backdrop for some of the best tennis drama on the year. Long, tough battles on the crushed red brick claim many a tennis superstar: legends like McEnroe, Connors, Becker, Edberg, Sampras, and Federer have never triumphed in Paris.

During the tournament, the French media devotes two television channels that each show nearly 20 hours of daily coverage. This coverage goes beyond center court matches, capturing behind-the-scenes interviews and stories with the top players and coaches to pique national interest.

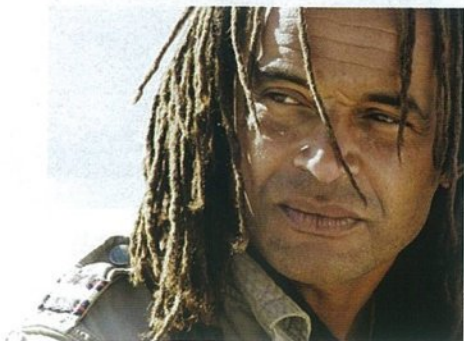
As a result, the entire population is exposed to a game that is constantly on TV and in the sports pages throughout the year. Tennis seems as much a part of the French landscape as food, wine, and café culture.

Beyond sheer popularity, the French Open brings in nearly \$200 million dollars in annual revenue. The FFT uses much of this money to identify and train the next generation of tennis talent.

Pictured Top L-R: Marion Bartoli, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga; Alize Cornet, Gilles Simon. Bottom L-R: Fabrice Sontoro, Richard Gasquet, Amelie Mauresmo, Gael Monfils.







## Yannick Noah: Tennis Star To National Celebrity

Born to a French mother and Cameroonian soccer star, Yannick Noah was discovered by Arthur Ashe in Cameroon as a boy in 1971, and within weeks moved to the Cote d'Azur to become part of the FFT training system. In 1978, Noah partnered with Ashe at Wimbledon in doubles and by 1983 became a French Open champion, ending a 37-year drought. His 1983 victory made him the only French man to win at Roland Garros in the Open era, a distinction he has held since. He has followed in the footsteps of the great champions and played with a personality and flair that reignited the French fascination with tennis. On court Noah became a national icon, and off court he has helped guide the next generation of new players as a coach. Noah has had a ending other droughts that have stood for decades, as winning Davis Cup captain in 1991 and winning Federation Cup captain in 1997. Noah has also launched a successful music career, selling millions of albums and touring to this day.

The selected players are invited to special training centers and programs. The most promising are invited to attend one of the four FFT tennis boarding schools. The FFT funds these players, paying for their training, coaching, and travel. Each athlete moves to the center, boards on site, and attends classes in the morning and training in the afternoon.

Amelie Mauresmo's experience exemplifies the FFT training system and is typical of what many of the current French superstars experienced as young athletes. Inspired by Yannick Noah, a young Mauresmo picked up a racquet after watching triumphs and battles broadcast from Roland Garros. Like thousands of other children around the world, Mauresmo had the interest, but it was the FFT system that recognized her talent and gave her the opportunity and guidance to become a world champion.

### Developing the Complete Player

The FFT program shapes technically sound, versatile players who are comfortable playing on any surface. Each athlete is scrutinized by doctors, nutritionists, physical trainers, psychologists, and by the FFT elite coaches on an almost daily basis. These specialists project athletes' futures from details like their height and body structure and the expectation of their mature style of play. Personalized programs and goals are customized to form benchmarks of progress.

With this approach the FFT has succeeded in creating a steady flow of the world's most successful players. The ITF junior ranks have a long list of French world champions, and Forget, Leconte, and Noah – among them – have been products of the FFT.

### Looking forward

If there are criticisms, it is that the FFT system has been unable to produce a significant number of Grand Slam champions. With the exception of Mauresmo's 2006 Wimbledon and Australian Open triumphs and Yannick Noah's 1983 French Open win, French players have not brought home Grand Slam trophies. Perhaps French players are given too comfortable an existence by the FFT to gain the hunger needed for victory. Now, however, there seems to be enough French talent on tour to create an internal rivalry – which may just elevate their competitiveness on the international level.

The FFT's system has missed late-blooming stars like Arnaud Clement, who had to develop somewhat outside the system because he was not good enough at an early age, and Sebastian Grosjean, who was reportedly dropped because he was small and did not fit the FFT's vision for the big-serving, power game at the time. Some players inside the FFT training centers feel the system can be overly rigid and cutthroat at times, particularly between players who are vying for support. But those that emerge successfully usually feel grateful for the opportunities that they were given.

The current crop of French talent may finally push each other enough to lift Grand Slam trophies. For more than five decades the FFT has operated a highly structured system aimed specifically at victory. The French have waited patiently, yearning for one of their own to come along, as Noah did, to claim the French Open title.

Creating such a system for raising champions, like cultivating fine wine, is an imperfect science that takes time and maturity to produce. The French have approached making tennis champions with much the same passion. The world is eager for a taste of the 2009 vintage, to see if it has the Grand Slam flavor. **T**



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