

1AD NCO wins All-Armed Forces Racquetball Championship



Miguel A. Santiago coaches his grandson Miguel "Mikey" Santiago on the fundamentals of racquet positioning and focusing his eyes on the ball. Miguel, who recently won the All-Armed Forces Racquetball Tournament, has two daughters and a son that play racquetball.

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WIESBADEN, Germany – Miguel A. Santiago sends the blue rubber ball soaring through the air like it was fired out of the main gun of an Abrams tank. His target is the white brick wall ahead. His shot ricochets off the wall and comes screaming straight back to him. He cocks his arm up and fires the ball right back to the wall where it hits no more than two feet away from his last shot.

Santiago, the top-ranked military racquetball player in Europe, repeats this routine over and over again until he hits the same shot five times in a row and moves on to another shot. He goes through this practice regimen on a daily basis, hoping that practice will indeed

make perfect.

Santiago, operations sergeant for the 1st Armored Division Chemical section, won the All-Armed Forces Racquetball Tournament and made it all the way to the quarterfinals in the U.S. National Championship Tournament in May. He has played in three World Championships, medaling in all three. His wife, Belinda, who also works for the division as the G-1 secretary, says the biggest reason for his success is his consistency and his dedication to practicing.

"It is all about his determination," said Belinda, who, along with their children, goes to all of his tournaments and most of his practices. "He goes to the court to play or to practice every single day. If he cannot find someone to play, he plays alone [performing his practice routine]. Even at the smaller tournaments, where

everybody knows he is going to win, we cheer him on as enthusiastically as if he was playing in the Olympics."

According to Miguel, while he prefers to play people who are of the same ability level, he will step on the court with just about anybody. He does his normal physical training in the morning and plays racquetball usually from 6 to 8 p.m. almost every night. Every once in a while, people show up at the gym just to play him.

"I play for the workout," said Miguel. "I do whatever I have to do no matter who I am playing against. I can work on my shots with anyone. But I obviously prefer to play against people of the same ability. There are a lot of quality players in Germany and in Europe. I try to play in as many tournaments as I can."

Adrian Benavides has played Miguel a couple times over the last four months. According to Benavides, during that time his skills have improved as he has tried to apply some of the same strategies he has seen Miguel use.

"I have learned a lot just by playing and watching him play," said Benavides. "He usually tries to beat you with three hits. He serves it to your backhand. Then he watches how you return the ball and positions himself accordingly. Then on the third shot, he goes for the kill shot by hitting the ball low enough so that when it comes off the back wall it is rolling on the floor, making it impossible to return. Even though I have gotten better using that strategy, the most points I have ever scored on him in a game is about 11, playing to 15."

According to Miguel, there is one

piece of equipment that is the most essential to a good racquetball player.

"Shoes are the most important piece of equipment you can buy," said Miguel. "I prefer a good court shoe with solid ankle support and cushioning. There is a lot of lateral movement and stop and starting involved in racquetball. You can really hurt yourself if you do not wear proper shoes. If you do not take care of your feet, they will not take care of you. Besides that, racquetball takes time. You just have to be dedicated enough to practice, practice and practice some more."

While Miguel is currently the top-ranked military player in Europe, somewhere down the line he might not even be the best player in his own family. His family has traveled with him to tournaments for as long as they can remember. So it came as no surprise when they all started playing, also.

"When we were back in the States, we used to go to tournaments all over the place," said Belinda. "Some of those tournaments lasted until 11:30 at night, or later. But we would never have missed it. The kids just love watching him play that much. That is what got them all playing. We have two 15-year-old daughters [from previous marriages] and an 11-year-old son, as well as one 4-year-old grandson that play now. Our son, Steven, has picked it up the quickest. When we were stationed in Bad Kreuznach, he was always at the gym challenging soldiers who were twice his age and three times his size to play. He beat this one first sergeant once, but [the first sergeant] made him promise not to

tell his name to anyone because he did not want his soldiers to find out."

While Miguel never pressured any of his family to play racquetball, now that they have started playing, he coaches them even though he never received any formal coaching himself.

He started playing for fun when he was stationed in Korea, 17 years ago, and started competing a couple of years later. According to Miguel, he got better just by watching other people play and by diligently practicing all of his shots.

He is no stranger to coaching, having coached the Puerto Rican National Racquetball Team to a bronze medal at the '99 Pan-American Games in Canada. Miguel had played for the team for five years before being offered the opportunity to coach. He said he would like to make the team as a player for the next games.

"When he trains and coaches me, he is very serious," said Belinda. "He does not take it easy on me just because I am his wife. He is a little bit easier on the kids, but not much. He does have more patience with our grandson, Mikey."

Miguel "Mikey" Santiago, 4, is not much taller than his racquet. But he can



Miguel A. Santiago's practice routine consists of hitting each shot over and over again until he hits the same spot five times in a row.

hit the ball consistently with a one-handed forehand swing.

"My husband keeps telling me, if he keeps on playing and improving like he has, he is going to be an incredible player, maybe even the best in the family," said Belinda.

Miguel, 42, wants to keep competing as long as he can and to keep coaching after that. He plans to compete in the Central American Games in the Dominican Republic and the World Championships in Puerto Rico next year.

He said he will continue to support and coach his family as their racquetball abilities continue to grow and catch up to his own. He regularly reminds them of what it takes to become a good racquetball player.

"I have dedicated many, many hours of practice towards getting myself to this level," said Miguel. "Racquetball is like most other individual sports. The only way to get better is to make the time to practice."