



# A NEW SENSE OF TENNIS

FORMER WTA STAR JUSTINE HENIN HELPS BRING INNOVATIVE TENNIS ACADEMY TO C. FLORIDA.

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PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NATALIE MIKOLICH

A new brand of tennis is coming to Central Florida, courtesy of a former star of the WTA Tour.

Less than a year ago, Justine Henin was the top-ranked female tennis player in the world when she suddenly retired at the age of 25 to pursue other interests. One of those interests was the 6th Sense Tennis Academy, a teaching institution in Belgium that she had co-founded with her longtime coach, Carlos Rodriguez. Now the Mission Inn Resort & Club at Howey-In-The-Hills is home to the academy's second location, and Henin, Rodriguez and Academy Director Alain

DeVos were on hand to celebrate its grand opening September 27.

"It was fun because everyone's so relaxed," Henin said of the opening ceremonies. "That's what we like here, it's like home. We feel like everyone's happy and everyone's excited, so it was nice."

Several business factors went into the choice of the academy's new location, but Henin's familiarity with Florida's natural charms didn't hurt its chances either.

"The weather is fantastic," Henin said, "and we liked the location a lot,

especially the people. We found something different from many other places, and we've been seduced by that."

The main goal of the academy is to bring a new tennis philosophy to the United States. It's a philosophy that includes starting on a smaller court, which is known in Belgium as "mini-tennis" and in the United States as "quick start." It's the same way Henin learned to play, and Rodriguez emphasized its importance.

"Twenty years ago in Belgium, (Henin) started out with the quick start," Rodriguez said. "I think for Justine it was something really good, because she was quite small, 5 or 6, and if you go to the big court, it would be very difficult for her at that age to develop."

Despite the importance of the quick start method and the excitement around teaching children, the academy will welcome everyone who wants to learn the game. There will be after-school programs, full-time programs (boarding and non-boarding) and adult programs. Instruction has already begun with 10-12 students.

"We cater for every player," DeVos said. "So you can be a beginner, to intermediate level, to advanced, to elite players."

While DeVos will be running the Florida-based academy full-time,

Henin and Rodriguez also plan to be there as often as possible.

"I plan to come a few weeks during the year," Henin said. "I'm going to try to come as much as I can, because there are a lot of things to do. I think it's very important for us to be here. It's not only about giving our name."

Henin and Rodriguez also stress that they have created a well-rounded approach, with more to their teachings than just tennis.

"We come from the point that behind a tennis player is always a human being," Rodriguez said.

"It's not only about tennis," Henin agreed. "It's about off the court also, and the way they're growing up."

However, Henin had strong advice for anyone wanting to succeed at tennis.

"It must be a passion, something that they want to do," she said. "If you decide to do it, no matter what your potential is, just try to give one hundred percent to it."

The same goes for the 6th Sense Tennis Academy, and the people who are making it happen.

"We want to try to put all our attention and time here," Rodriguez said. "If you want to do things right, you try to put in all that you can."

