

A VISITOR TO BUENOS AIRES COULD BE FORGIVEN IF, upon brushing shoulders with Guillermo Coria, he mistook the 22-year-old for an upwardly mobile native of the city's sprawling slums, the *villas miserias*. While Coria finished 2003 ranked No. 5 in the world, his sinewy, almost scrawny 145-pound frame, together with his squinty eyes, stringy hair, and taut, boyish face, seem less the endowments of a budding tennis star than a street urchin.

Indeed, watching Coria practice one day this spring at the Pacific Life Open, in Indian Wells, Calif., 60-year-old tennis enthusiast Patrick Hynes admitted that he couldn't identify the balletic, if spindly legged, player. As Hynes said, "He's the most unknown No. 5 in the world, and I've been following tennis for a long time."

Rest assured, though, that Coria's rivals on the ATP tour would have no trouble picking him out in a lineup. Coria is such an accomplished athlete that he has earned the nickname *El Mago*—"the Magician." But for all his deft racquet work, Coria's game has less to do with smoke and mirrors than with steely will, grooved ground strokes, and a willingness to run all day. And, owing to a humble, rural background, he appreciates every opportunity the glitzy profession offers. "When a family doesn't have enough money, it creates a lot of problems," Coria says, through the interpreter who shepherds him through interviews in any language but Spanish. "I appreciate what I have when I go out on the court, and I will run to death to win a match."

Andre Agassi can attest to the sincerity of that claim, having been picked apart by Coria in four sets at last

year's French Open (Coria reached the semifinals).

"There's no question he's one of the best clay-courtiers," Agassi says. "He forces you to play a risky game, basically because of his great movement and the way he controls the ball." Andy Roddick has a simpler assessment, characterizing Coria's game on dirt as just plain "McNasty."

Whatever that means, it can't be good—at least not for the handful of contenders at Roland Garros, including the defending champion, Juan Carlos Ferrero of Spain, and the game's newest No. 1, Switzerland's Roger Federer. For them, the troubling news is that the indefatigable Coria has another crucial year of experience under his belt. "To win is my only objective," he says. "Last year I was very disappointed because I was so close, but I lacked a little bit of experience. Now I'm ready emotionally and psychologically to win."

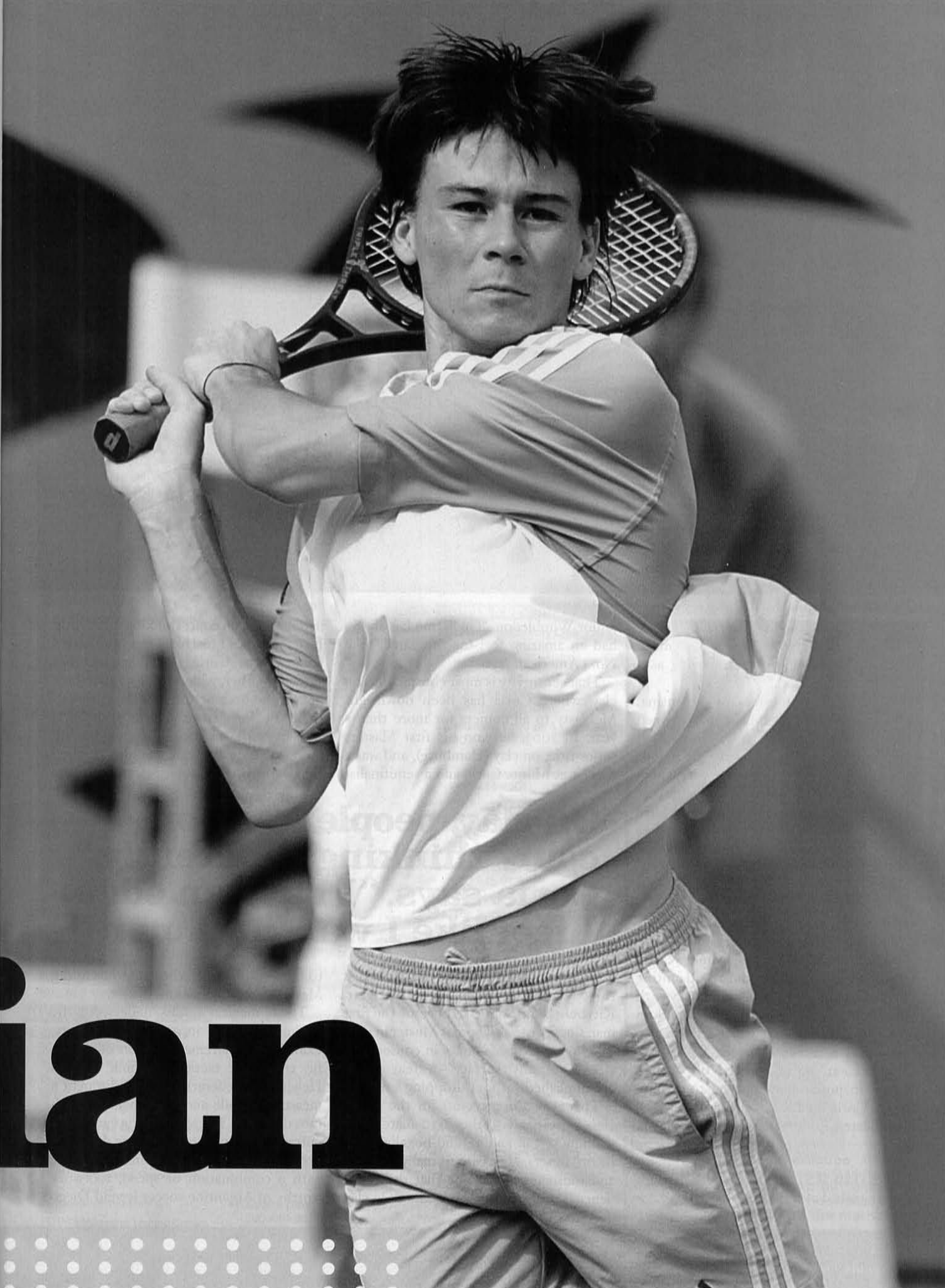
IF CORIA'S FORMATIVE YEARS WERE NOT EXACTLY Dickensian, they certainly were flush with great expectations. His father, Oscar, was a tennis coach in Venado Tuerto, a sleepy town in the Argentine farming heartland. The city of 75,000 is a four-hour drive northwest of Buenos Aires and a place where, as Coria fondly says, "Everybody knows everybody."

Oscar had plans for the oldest of his three sons even while the boy was still in the womb, deciding to name him in honor of the legendary Argentine player Guillermo Vilas. The new Guillermo did not disappoint, happily picking up a racquet as soon as he could walk. At times, Coria says, family finances were tight.

He may be a skinny country boy from a place where streetlights are rare, but don't be surprised if Guillermo Coria takes the City of Lights by storm. BY DOUGLAS ROBSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL COLE

The Magician



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Nimble feet and a willingness to scratch and claw for every point are Coria's greatest assets.



"We always had food on the table, but my dad had to teach a lot of tennis to make ends meet. Then, with me playing as a pro, that helped too."

Like many youngsters in Argentina, young Guillermo split his time between tennis and soccer. But by 12, Coria realized that his future lay in hitting balls, not kicking them. A year later, he quit school and dove into the Latin tennis pipeline that has spit out scores of South American kids: the Key Biscayne, Fla., academy of Patricio Apey, former coach of Gabriela Sabatini. Coria says he finally became "serious" about his tennis at Apey's, modeling his baseline game after three players whom he came to play nothing like, but still idolizes: Vilas, Marcelo Rios, and Agassi.

After developing his game, Coria returned to Argentina and the daunting task of battling for junior supremacy with his rival, David Nalbandian (beating him for the junior title at Roland Garros in 1999 was a career highlight for Coria). Roddick, 21, never squared off against Coria in junior play. But he took note when Coria double-bageled a player who had beaten Roddick one round earlier at

junior Wimbledon. "Guillermo has always had an amazing feel for the game," the No. 1 American says.

That sensitivity is most conspicuous on clay, where Coria has been downright McNasty to all comers for more than a year. In 2003, he won his first Masters series title, on clay (Hamburg), and was a finalist at Monte Carlo and a semifinalist

people come on court thinking differently. I have an edge. I feel like I was born on it."

For all that, Coria is no slouch on other surfaces, either, which helps explain how in 2003 he became the first Argentine to crash the Top 5 since Vilas in 1982. Coria won five titles in 2003, including one on indoor carpet in Basel. He also reached the quarterfinals of the U.S. Open en route

"On clay, people come on court thinking differently," Coria says. "I have an edge. I feel like I was born on it."

at Roland Garros. Later, he captured three straight clay-court titles (Stuttgart, Kitzbühel, and Sopot) to become the first man since Austria's Thomas Muster in 1996 to win three tournaments in consecutive weeks on any surface—a feat Coria accomplished without dropping a set.

This year, Coria set off for the spring clay-court events toting a 20-match clay winning streak and a mind-boggling 42-2 record in sets. "I've won so many matches and tournaments on clay that the confidence is really there," Coria says. "On clay,

to qualifying for the season-ending Masters Cup in Houston.

These magical results underscore the extent to which, in an age of bangers, Coria is part of an emerging cadre of mobile, fit, consistent tacticians (think Lleyton Hewitt and Federer) who have brought a measure of guile and craftsmanship back into the sport. The slight Coria can hardly outmuscle opponents, but he can dominate matches, even against imposing opponents, with a combination of speed, footwork worthy of Argentine soccer legend Diego

THIS IS DOUGLAS ROBSON'S FIRST FULL-LENGTH FEATURE FOR "TENNIS." HE HAS ALSO COVERED THE GAME FOR "USA TODAY" AND "BUSINESSWEEK."

PAUL ZIMMER



Coria (left) says his win over countryman and rival David Nalbandian at the 1999 junior French Open is still a career highlight.

Maradona, and reliable ground strokes and returns of serve. Coria led the tour last year in return games won (39 percent), and was second in break-point conversion rate (49 percent).

But despite his burgeoning stardom, Coria remains a country boy, fiercely devoted to Venado Tuerto. He also dotes on his two younger brothers, Roman and Federico. And on tour last year, Coria so missed his 19-year-old girlfriend, economics student Carla Francovich, that he at times considered tanking just to get home to her.

They resolved the issue with a December wedding attended by 400 guests. A lifelong fan of the legendary River Plate soccer club, Coria had the team's red logo emblazoned on the shirt that he wore under his tux at the altar. Carla didn't learn of the stunt until too late, when they were on the way to the reception. Coria says, laughing, "She almost killed me."

That he behaves more like a starstruck sports fan than an emerging sports idol underscores Coria's refreshingly simple character in the flashy world of big-time athletics. His only nod to flamboyance is the gold chain around his neck, which bears his wedding ring and a small gold tennis racquet presented to him by hometown friends. Coria's greatest vice seems to be a weakness for electronic gadgets—he's never seen a Best Buy that he didn't want to clear out. Coria's close friends call him "Guille" (pronounced *GHEE-jay*), but that's a small, tight circle. The introverted Coria is particularly

careful to maintain a distance from his Argentine rivals.

"It's not easy for him to make friends with other people," says Martin Garcia, a friend and doubles specialist from Argentina. "He likes to be with his group."

FOR A SHY AND SEEMINGLY GROUNDED young man, Coria has known a fair share of controversy. And his on-court temperament is anything but retiring. In many ways he seems a Latin version of Hewitt, right down to his penchant for punctuating winners with cries of "*Vamos!*"—"let's go!"

One of the controversies in which

"We always had food on the table," Coria says. "But my dad had to teach a lot of tennis to make ends meet."

Coria became embroiled was a potential career killer: the seven-month suspension he received during the second half of 2001 for testing positive for the banned steroid nandrolone. Coria successfully argued that the positive result was caused by his ingestion of contaminated vitamins—hence, the relatively light sentence.

Still, Coria says, "It was the worst period of my life. But it also made me very strong. If I managed to come back from that, it proves that nothing is going to stop me. It also made me realize how

much I love tennis. And it was important for me to see who was around me, who was supporting me at the time."

Last year at Roland Garros, in his first Grand Slam semifinal, Coria received an official warning for a shocking outburst during which he hurled his racquet to the backstop, narrowly missing a ball girl in the process. It hardly helped that he made amends later, removing his shirt and presenting it to the girl while tapping his heart in a gesture of atonement.

Presumably, he makes no such gesture when firing coaches. Coria's post-suspension shakeout included firing his coach and countryman, Franco Davin. The next man to step into the breach was another Argentine, former Top Tenner Alberto Mancini. He lasted a year. Coria also went back to the motherland for his current coach, Fabian Blengino. To survive, he'll have to live up to a rigorous standard of productivity and avoid the differences with Coria that undid Mancini.

In South America, Coria is often compared with the burned-out Chilean star Rios. But Coria is a more resolute competitor. And while he may not have lethal firepower, he employs wicked angles, lobs, and devastating forehand drop shots to back up his keen court sense. He often makes opponents look like Fred Flintstone trying to take off in his car—feet spinning furiously, they still get nowhere in the point. As U.S. Davis Cup captain Patrick McEnroe says, "He can make guys feel stupid when they're playing him."

Coria will probably need to get stronger

and improve his net play in order to move higher in the rankings. But many, including McEnroe, feel that, as he matures, his prowess on fast courts will increase. For Coria, leading his country to a Davis Cup triumph and winning a gold medal at the upcoming Olympic Games are high priorities. But neither is quite as towering as his desire to win the world championships of clay, Roland Garros.

As his peers will attest, El Mago is more than capable of achieving that without resorting to sleight of hand. ♣