



Lluís Fradera

Barcelona, 1940. Spanish Competitor in Cabinetmaking, Gold Medal. International VET Competition in Brussels, 1958.

My start competing

I started competing at a local level in 1954, and I finished as runner-up in that year's provincial championship. Then I took a sabbatical from participating, and in '56, I think, I participated again in all local, regional, and national phases, and from there... Brussels!

Back then, categories were organized... by age, so you could compete in joinery or cabinetmaking, but depending on your age, you were in category A or B. A was from 17 or 18 years on, I can't remember. I always participated in the B category due to my age, I never minded... When I was old enough to compete in category A, I had to go to work, so I didn't have the chance.

Where were you born? name of the town, city... How do you remember your childhood? How do you remember your years at the school?

My father, in 1934, if I recall correctly, was the doctor for Sant Llorenç Savall. I was born in Barcelona, but, of course, I spent my first seven years in Sant Llorenç Savall, with my parents. When I turned 7, I was sent to a boarding school, because it was time to think of my higher education, and I went to Mataró, to the Piarists. I was there for two years, and then, in '49, if I'm not mistaken, since my sisters were also in Mataró at a boarding school, run by nuns, and when they finished, I finished in Mataró as well, and they took me to Sarrià, to another boarding school, and there I lived for two years, in the students' section, as they called it, and coming of age and knowing that vocational education was something that existed, I chose vocational education.

Was the town linked to Industry?

Back then, industry, industry... of course, there were trades and crafts, obviously there were carpenters, smiths, and people who devoted themselves... everyone worked in their own business. But an industry... the textile industry was just starting, and then in the '60s or '70s, there was no textile boom there anymore, and then it all went under.

How did you access to a technical training?

It caught my eye when I was in that boarding school, in the students' section. Since I saw there was a craftsmen's section and several trades and, by chance, Juan Canadell was in the craftsmen's section, in the joinery section, that motivated me a bit, so I decided to go into the craftsmen's section, in joinery and cabinetmaking.

My memories at the VET school

I remember it was a boarding school where, logically, well, you lived your life in the school: you ate, you slept, Thursdays, I think, or every Saturday and Sunday we'd go out for a walk with a tutor and then, in the school,

you had plays, movies... so you had entertainment besides classes, and, of course, sports, soccer, basically; and basketball too, so we also took part in youth tournaments, representing the school.

Vocational education had five different grades; the first three were basically joinery, whereas the last two were cabinetmaking. So, I obviously started by joinery and, once I finished the joinery grades, I went on until I finished cabinetmaking, earning the Diploma of Higher VET Education (DipHE). ("Título de Maestría Industrial" in Spanish)

There was always a tutor, Mr. Prat, who kept an eye on practical classes and the students, and then we took theory and drawing classes in the room over the workshop, since there were Salesians who taught us the theory and drawing.

We got up at 7 a.m., the first hour of the morning was to get dressed, and then we went to pray first thing in the morning, after which we had our breakfast, then we had recess for a few minutes, and after breakfast we started classes, both students and artisans.

In my final year that I participated in the championships, I spent a year as a teacher, helping Mr. Prat, and that year we did have some students from outside the school, from the army. The army sent soldiers to apprentice crafts, and that group had chosen joinery; others had preferred mechanics; I was in charge of the first group.

At that moment, what was the image of the VET? Was it a first option for young?

The '50s and '60s were years when the country needed everything, so vocational education... since we didn't have the computers we have now, everything was electrical, there were barely any electronics... so vocational education was essential, in order to complete any kind of project, construction or otherwise. So, vocational education was very necessary back then.

Then, with time, of course, it had to change and adapt itself to the circumstances of today's education or of today's needs, but back then I didn't have that pull to go to college. Maybe there were other parents who wanted their children to go to college, but in our case, I lived the need for a vocational education. I think it was interesting and, on the other hand, all the boarders here came from families that had their own workshops and, of course, these families wanted their boys to continue the trade, whether it was joinery or cabinetmaking.

How did your family and friends feel when you choose that training path?

There were nine of us brothers and sisters, and not one of us wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and become a doctor. Some became nurses, entrepreneurs, technicians, engineers... But as for me, along with another brother, I was the one who broke the mould by going into vocational education.

When I chose the trade, they told me "Well, if that's what you want, go ahead," and of course, I was sure they were backing me, and by virtue of my competing and getting awards, they were completely convinced, and they were grateful that I got into this field.

Partly because the school was close by, and partly due to the fact that this man was already in the school, and since we were from the same town and knew each other as neighbours, we knew that another neighbour was learning printing at the school.

What is the role you think cabinetmaking has played in Spanish culture?

Back then, there were all kinds of needs. In the '50s and '60s, if someone got married and had money to spend, they liked having their furniture made especially for them, so there were joinery and cabinetmaking workshops that worked exclusively in that field. Now, with Ikea and all that, it all went down the drain. It's a different world, now.

It feels nice to have built, but it feels thankless to see how joinery has been lost in Spain.

And the Wood-carving? What is the role you think Wood-carving has played in Spanish culture?

Carving is much of the same. Back then, there were a lot of people who worked as woodcarvers, mostly religious carving. Here they made a lot of carvings of saints and Madonna, for church. They were hand carved, and it was important.

What was your first contact with the VET competitions?

I first learned about the competitions here, at school, seeing the older students take part. If teachers saw you were talented, they suggested you take part; they'd tell you "why don't you try your hand at this?" And that's how I started, and on my first year I was the regional runner-up... but I was defeated... and came back home.

I went on sabbatical, so to speak, and then they asked me to participate again, "You've had another year, try again..." and it was better, I won the regional championship at the trade school, the sectorial one, I don't remember where it was... I went to one in Madrid, and maybe somewhere else. In Tarragona, too, I think. And then, the national championship, which took place in Zaragoza.

You win the regional championship and they ask you to go to the nationals, so I sign up, just to see what happens, and if it goes well... all the better! Since it happened, I had no option but to compete at the national level... and if you won, you had to go to the international championship.

Brussels 1958, how did you travel to Brussels? Tell us about your participation in the international competition

It was a source of satisfaction, but it also required hard work, and you wondered, will I do a good job? Do I have the ability? Because it's one thing to do something close to home, where you know the techniques, the people, the tools... but it's very different to compete in other countries you know nothing about, you don't know the tools they'll bring, or their designs, or how they'll build the piece of furniture, what it'll be... So, there's always an unknown, at all times. And when you show up, they give you the blueprint, "Look, this is what you have to make." And you look at it, maybe, maybe not... besides, there were parts I couldn't understand, because it was a Swiss design, in my case, so you pull through as best you can, and you just truck ahead!

Zaragoza was my first trip to win a competition as important as the national one was, and then Brussels... that one was really something to write home about!

They assembled us in Madrid, one or two days beforehand, to tell us what we'd do, how everything would go, the trip, the journey... We went by bus! It was, if I recall correctly, 29 Spanish competitors, I think of these 29 we were 12 who had come in first, and 7 runners-up... I'm not sure; I have it jotted down somewhere. There were competitors from ten different nationalities, and in the cabinetmaking category, I'm not sure if all ten were represented. Seven definitely were.

They tried to keep the mood upbeat, after the championship activities we had lunch and they organized visits to museums, to different places in Brussels and even out of the city, we went on a trip to Bruges, to visit and know the country, since we were there... It was all really nice.

We lodged at a school, I can't remember the name, we were all of us there. The championship activities in hours... I remember that my assignment was, at most, 33 hours, which we had to complete in 5 or 6 days.

I, and some others in other specialties, took longer than the rest. So, the others, the ones who had finished, went on a trip to Germany, and I missed out on that. But, well, I stayed behind, finishing the assignment, polishing the details that needed polishing, until I said, "now it really is ready." I'd lost out on a trip, but, in time, I realized that I had made good use of that time.

Back then we had to communicate through gestures because we didn't know any other language: there were Germans, of course, and Englishmen and Frenchmen... you could get points across to the Italians very spottily, and the same with the French, too, but it was very difficult to get through to the others. But in any case, for the general events, and to explain specific things, there was always someone who could translate.

We trained here daily, with each day's work, seeing "this came out well, this I have to work on and correct..." You had to measure yourself against your work and do your best.

In comparison with the boys from other countries, we worked more or less as hard as they did, although there were some tools that were different, more modern, more advanced or maybe we just didn't know them. But when it came to the basics, using the measuring tape, measuring things, cutting by hand... we all more or less did the same. Some used French tools, others used German ones, and others used Spanish ones.

Awards day, the day diplomas were handed out too, was the day you were most anxious, but, at the same time, you were proud of what you had achieved.

The Belgian ruling came pretty well at the last minute, at least for me, because part of the jury fell for Germany, whereas the other part preferred us, and I don't know what agreement they reached... but I do know that when I found out about the result, it was very late.

Of course, we went with representatives from the organization, but not teachers, like you do now, where each one brings their teacher along, so they're guided throughout the process. In my day, when I left Sarriá, if you went to compete to the trade school, you went on your own, and if you went to Zaragoza, you went on your own, and of course Belgium was the same, but you did have the team that organized the championships.

How did your teachers, classmates and family welcome you when you came back with your gold medal?

They gave you a trophy and diplomas in national championships. In sectorial ones, you only got diplomas. In regional ones, diplomas. In the national and international competitions, it was both at once. I don't know if second or third or fourth place had medals, I don't remember that anymore, there may be medals for runners-up.

When I came here, the school was empty, because it was during the holidays. There I left what I had, all my stuff, and I went back home to my town, to see my parents, and I spent my week off with them, there, and then I came back to prepare for the new school year.

Town Hall, when they found out, I don't know if through the press or through the grapevine, well Town Hall and the mayor, at the time, in '57, gave me a set of compasses and callipers, ruling-pens... It was top-notch.

The most important thing was to go home, see my family, my friends, and spend some time with them. Getting presents and acknowledgement was just the cherry on top, you know?

Tell us about your career after degree

My experience with wood, the fact of working with wood... when I left here, they asked me to join a school... sorry, a factory that was on the rise back then called Polivas. They worked with wood; they made things that had nothing to do with wood. They made wooden moulds, both positive and negative, that were then used to make the fridges used at the time. The first iceboxes were zinc inside, plastic came later, when the insides were made out of plastic, they were either blown or cast. It was a sheet of plastic, flat, like a table, that, when heated up, could be shaped, and then, using the wooden mould you'd made, the plastic was shaped, either you cast it or by blowing. That was the beginning of plastic fridges, you could say, back then. And with a motor, of course.

After seven or eight years came the plastic injection technique, and with plastic injection, wooden moulds weren't necessary anymore, so the company had to reinvent itself.

Back in the '50s, those of us who worked in those circumstances, we also did it for the country's sake, because we were helping the country prosper by working like we did.

School put me on the path of what I wanted. By chance, because I liked it, because other people knew me... but it set me on the path.

In your experience, is currently VET a good option for young? In comparison with when you studied, what would be the differences?

Today's schools, even if they don't have vocational education, should tell students the options they have at any given time, taking one path or the other... and they should help the student choose the path best suited for their future. There should be teachers who don't just teach a given subject, but who know you and teach you.

Before, everything was handmade, you used the tools you had, and then electronics and then computers came, and the professional world has been changed completely. Many things that were done and taught with drawings, well, computers do it now in the blink of an eye, and if you don't like it, you can delete it and five minutes later, you have a new project.

Vocational education has changed a lot, so you have to adapt, that much is certain, you can't walk backwards, you can't say "that was better," no, no... That's good, so of course we have to learn to adapt, but vocational education will always, always exist.



Lluís Fradera: That first photo... that's from when I made the national trophy. They asked me what I took, and I told them, obviously, that I took my tools.

Joan Canadell¹: Yes, yes, yes, a marking gauge, a mallet...

Lluís Fradera: A pencil, a handsaw, a hammer of course, a 90-45-45 set square and a 30-60-90 one, a one-bladed hand plane and a two bladed hand plane.

A screwdriver, a cabinetmaking's mace...

A set of pliers, and I remember all these pieces... the original ones from that time had a number written on them, each of the school's students was assigned a number, and mine was 378.

Joan Canadell: Mine was 243!

Lluís Graus²: And mine 182! It's easier to remember than your cell phone number!

Lluís Fradera: Well, I had the last one, number 378.



Lluís Fradera: This is the international trophy. The tools are the same ones as before, because I used them for the international championship. With a 90-45-45 set square, with a marking gauge... I used all of them at the time.



Lluís Fradera: This is before, while we were in school, in the upper floor, over the workshop.

Yes, yes, over the workshop. I just went by and it's completely different, now it has separate cabinets, and it's completely different. There was another room here, and we were... I don't know why, a different order... I think the younger students were further back and the older ones up front...

By categories, because you didn't get everyone from the same grade every day.

Yes, and then you had your theoretical and drawing classes, which were completely different.

¹ JUAN CANADELL, Cabinetmaking Champion at the Spanish National VET Competition, Madrid, 1954. Spanish Cabinetmaking Competitor at the International VET Competition, Madrid, 1955.

² LLUÍS GRAUS, Cabinetmaking Champion at the International VET Competition, Barcelona, 1960.



Lluís Fradera: This was the box we had to make in the first year.

Joan Canadell: The Technology of Wood... Our class book.

Lluís Fradera: Our class book, yes, this book dates back to our time, although it wasn't published until the seventies, but the work and the soul of this book is Prat.

Lluís Graus: It had instructions for all the assignments...

Lluís Fradera: That's right, all the tools... Everything you made and learned back then is in here, until the computers arrived on scene, then everything changed; but until the computers arrived, everything's in this book, five-hundred-some pages.

Joan Canadell: This toolbox had every single tool you needed to work by hand.

Lluís Fradera: And each one of us had their toolbox by the side of their benches.



Lluís Fradera: I am in that picture, first one on the right. Everyone is doing their assignments, and I'm overseeing what they do, each of them. It looks like this first one is making a church pew, it looks like, this second one is sanding... I don't know...



Joan Canadell: I don't recognize anyone...

Lluís Fradera: You can't recognize anyone in these pictures because they're seven Spaniards from different provinces who went there and took the trophy home, we're the seven ones who won. No one knew anyone else before going. I remember the face of one or two, but the rest of them, I don't remember at all.



Lluís Fradera: I think they took this picture there, in San Lorenzo, when I arrived there with the trophy...



Lluís Fradera: The picture of the piece of furniture... that's the one I made for the national competition, in Madrid's national championship, that was the assignment they gave us there.