



COACHING HIGH PERFORMANCE:



LESSONS FROM VETERANS IN TWO ARENAS

Effectively hiring, retaining and inspiring top talent defines your ability to compete.

by **Jennifer Riel**

IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS, the mindful management of talent — highly-creative, uniquely-skilled, value-producing individuals — is an absolute necessity. High-performing players, whether they be star CEOs, world-class salespeople, great product developers or professional services rainmakers, exist at the tail end of the distribution in terms of ability and impact. They have high aptitude, sought-after skills and the ability to ply their trade almost anywhere around the globe.

How can a leader take a brilliant, talented individual and bring out his or her very best, sustained performance?

Great sports coaches — like **Harry Hopman** in tennis, **Bill Walsh** in football or **Mike Krzyzewski** in college basketball — are prime exemplars. They are able to draw outstanding performance from individuals and to create a legacy of sustained excellence. But how do the lessons from producing peak performance in sports translate to the world of business? To explore this question, I recently convened a discussion between two very different kinds of coaches: **Bob Brett** and **Roger Martin**.

Bob has spent a career coaching some of the most accomplished and recognizable names in tennis, including **Boris**



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Becker (once ranked number one in the world, winner of six Grand Slams), **Goran Ivanisevic** (a world number-two and Wimbledon champion) and **Marin Čilić** (currently ranked 15th in the world). Brett is also a high-performance consultant with **Tennis Canada**, in which capacity he met Roger Martin, who is its Chair. In his current role as Dean at the Rotman School, in his former career as a partner at **Monitor Company** and more recently as an advisor to CEOs, Roger has spent decades working with high-performing talent in a business context.

Following are the highlights of our conversation.

Producing great performance likely begins with finding the right players. How do you think about that, Bob? How do you know who 'has what it takes' to be a tennis champion?

Bob Brett: It starts with world-class talent, which is a combination of the ability to learn, the ability to read the game and athleticism. However, we cannot ignore desire and character. Typically, in tennis, there are three things to look for: hands, feet and eyes. In the hands, an ease with which the player strikes the ball and the ball leaves the racquet; in the feet, a certain grace and efficiency of movement; and in the eyes, a sparkle — a degree of acute attention and an ability to learn from watching and imitating without needing too many details.

I suspect an ability to learn is a constant in champions across domains. But in different industries, the definition of talent varies. Roger, how do you think about talent in the business world?

Roger Martin: Bob probably has a more nuanced view of what talent looks like in his field than I did starting out in mine; he has a heuristic he's honed through 30 years of experience. When I was younger, I attempted to develop too many people who lacked world-class talent. But that was my mistake, not theirs. I'm getting more selective now. I attempt to limit my consulting now to world-class CEOs and protégés with world-class talent. The challenge will always be identifying the talent that truly warrants investment. It isn't hard to look into the

world and find the most talented individuals working today, but that talent is already very expensive and is often already set in its ways.

The key is to find potential. Who has the potential to be out on the tail of the distribution? In business, it's about having an ability to work with heuristics, to operate in complexity with rules of thumb and intuition, rather than simply running an algorithm. In consulting, and in knowledge work generally, there is a lot of work that requires personal judgment. So, I look for that. It entails looking for weak, early signals of future potential.

BB: Rather than focusing entirely on current and past performance, the single most important question in selecting high-performance players is, "what might be?" What could be built on this promising foundation? With coaching, what could this individual accomplish? Where are the strengths and how may these be linked, while minimizing the areas of weakness. It is important to understand how talented people cope with pressure, what motivates them most deeply, how they deal with failure and constraints, and what they most value.

It strikes me that talent is difficult to assess if you look too narrowly; it is broader than a single aptitude. We've all seen extremely-talented athletes who fail to become champions and bright young hires who don't pan out. Bob, beyond talent, what else does it take?

BB: The attributes I look for are similar to the ones my friend **Stan Nicholes**, the great strength and conditioning coach, called 'the qualities of a champion'. There are four things: first, the ability to play your best when it counts the most — to play at the highest level when the pressure is most intense; second, the ability to push beyond expectations or pain levels, the strength to be better than ever before — better than anyone thought possible; third, the ability to overcome difficulty, reaching past the obstacle rather than being demoralized by it; and fourth is loyalty — a commitment to a team, a coach and a regime, over the long haul.

RM: There is a good deal of cross-over to business from that list of criteria. When I reflect on how I thought about truly outstanding performers in my consulting life, certain elements stand out. A desire to exceed expectations is a part of it. Peak performers have a willingness to seek a great solution for a client when the client would have been happy with a merely good solution. And in terms of overcoming difficulty, I think it's about learning. In life, you're going to hit a lot of walls. When the best performers hit a wall, they see it as an opportunity to learn and grow. In business, on the long and complicated road up, if you aren't a learner, you won't get very far.

In other words, for many people, hitting a wall is the end, but for the best performers, it is the beginning. What about the other elements Bob cites – playing well under pressure and loyalty?

RM: Loyalty is a very big deal. If you want someone to invest in coaching you, you'd better not bail halfway through. It would be a giant waste of time — for all concerned — to have someone step out when they are half developed. So, commitment is necessary to achieve great performance.

I've written about mastery and originality before, and I think both are important. Like **Malcolm Gladwell** noted about the 10,000-hours rule in *Outliers*, it takes a long time to truly gain mastery, whether you're well-coached or not. On playing at your best when it matters most, in some ways the world of business makes this easier. Bob can't go onto the court with a player during a match, but I can always go into an important meeting with junior folks to back them up. No question, though, in due course that junior person has to be able to perform at the highest levels without me there. They need to play to their potential and beyond it.

So, as in all things, mindset matters. That's a critical part of the difference between champions – those who maximize their ability, and others who do not.

BB: Yes. Champions take personal responsibility for their perfor-

mance. They are able — eager even — to take part of an idea from a coach and fill in the rest themselves. They accept not having the full picture, and embrace the risk of trying anyway. They are able to work on the unfinished project, creating a critical part of it themselves and executing on it when it matters. They are eager to own the challenge and see a coach as a source of general direction and inspiration rather than a source of step-by-step instruction.

In 1985, **Ivan Lendl** was the number one player in the world. On occasion he would share with me new training routines he added because he believed they would enable him to maintain his supremacy. Champions don't measure themselves against the win of today, but rather against the possible future. Instead of resting comfortably at number one, they strive to do better still, to get to number zero. Being a champion is about pushing the edge: one more repetition, a heavier weight, taking a chance that isn't comfortable but seems right.

If these are the attributes and mindset of a champion, how does one coach such an individual?

BB: It starts with working with what you have, and building advantage out of it. There is a big difference in working with players on the pro tour and working with players who are beginning a professional career. With the younger players, there is a larger developmental window, during which time a coach's vision can be more creative. At this point, be mindful and attuned to the elements of performance from an individual that catch your attention, something that is really different from others and that could give the individual a competitive advantage at the highest levels. Where are the strengths — the potential weapons — technically, physically and psychologically? Further develop these areas into a sustainable competitive advantage, and there just may be a champion there.

RM: Every high performer is different and needs a different approach to development. But long-term coaching is less ubiquitous in business than in sports. In tennis, almost everyone needs a coach to be successful, and most of the greats tend to stick to a single coach for long stretches. In business, lots of stars have



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informal mentors, but not a long-term coach. I wonder how much better they might be with real and consistent coaching.

It's interesting: much has been written and studied about how to manage and develop the majority of workers in an organization, the vital mass in the middle. But I think with high-performers, a lot more customization is required. High performers are distinct. They are not going to look the same and you can't treat them the same. You have to work with what they have, know it well and figure out a customized way forward.

This idea that coaching high-performance means taking an individualistic approach to development, building excellence from the seeds in each individual, is an interesting one. How much of figuring out what to build on is up to the coach, and how much to the player?

BB: A vital aspect of coaching is to understand and appreciate what is in the player's head regarding what they believe they might achieve. The player's imagination is critical to any success. Coaches must encourage the development of creativity, of independent thinking, so the player has the ability to make effective decisions under pressure. The coach can't hit the perfect shot at the perfect time; the player needs to be able to think that through on the court, under pressure.

RM: There is a great deal of judgment in your approach, Bob. Your whole philosophy is almost entirely judgment-based. You seem to accept that there is no single rule, no one right thing that works every time. Rules are so much easier. Lots of people say, "I want the rule. Give me the rule that says as long as I show up at 9:00 and leave at 5:00, I've done a day's work," as opposed to, "No, you actually have to do something useful."

BB: In coaching for high performance, there is no single rule. There are some moments when it's not appropriate to say something to a player. You may have to wait for another day for the right moment; you might have to wait a couple of months, looking for the opportunity when the information or feedback will be most impactful and meaningful. It's about choosing the right

moment for the player. Sometimes, a player just isn't ready to hear it, and your words will be wasted if you insist on telling them straight away.

When is the best time to start working with a great player, to coach them towards a change?

BB: Starting early is great, but often, the ideal time to work with a player is when they're frustrated by their perceived lack of success. At this point, the individual is most likely to be open and more receptive to new ideas. When all is going well, coaching can be tricky. For a player who is performing extremely well, suggested changes may be seen as too risky, because when an individual follows the coach's advice, performance may actually fall back initially before there is stabilization and finally, progress. In tennis, changes to a player's game — technically, physically, strategically and even psychologically — generally take between six and nine months until a solid foundation is built and progress becomes visible. So, when working with a faltering performer, instruction must be given with simplicity, clarity and patience. During this phase, a coach's emotional stance must be one of positive reinforcement, firmness in direction and not of frustration.

RM: High-performers need lots of credit — lots of it. They are likely to be motivated by praise and recognition, not just money. So they need their coach to be positive, not consistently down or negative. A coach in this context has to be positive and passionate, taking responsibility for setbacks and letting the pupil take responsibility for winning. This is what being a great coach means — helping others win.

BB: That is why it is essential that a coach has commitment, discipline, enthusiasm, understanding of others and a passion for the game. When things are going badly, it is the passion that will see you through. When everything else is collapsing, it gives you the strength to be positive and provide the individual you're coaching with belief that he or she can get through the difficulty.

Specifically, what does good coaching look like? What do you do or say to get to peak performance?

BB: First, tell players what to do, not what not to do. The temptation for coaches is to focus on what someone is doing wrong; that's a mistake.

RM: Not telling someone what not to do is exceedingly difficult. It is like being asked not to think of an elephant. Instantly, you think of an elephant.

BB: 'Don't' is a negative; 'Try this,' is a positive. In frustrating times, forget the word *don't*. I was coaching my daughter recently and caught myself telling her what she was doing wrong instead of building on what she was doing right, giving clear direction on what to do. I switched, and the improvement was immediate.

RM: It is more broadly about communicating with care. If you are going to operate from principles rather than rules, and treat individuals differently according to their needs, you need to explain what you're doing and why. Make sure they understand the principles. Communicate as if they are the only one in the world that needs that particular pattern of communication. Be present with that individual.

BB: Also, respect the individual's right to ask why they should follow a recommended pathway. A coach seeking high performance is looking to produce independent thinking, a strong character and a willingness to risk failure in order to ultimately achieve success.

So, a spirit of inquiry on both sides is important. Both coach and player should inquire into the thinking of the other.

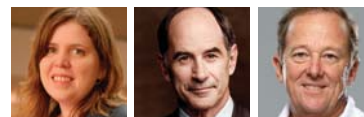
BB: A coach will be lost if the objective is simply to drill his or her own thoughts into the mind of the player. In critical moments, it is the player and not the coach who must perform at the highest level. When a player is on centre court at Wimbledon, the coach sits a long way from the court. Players have to be able to make decisions alone, which comes from discussion and repetition, during first minor and then major events. It's always a temptation for coaches

to help whenever they see an individual in need; but learning to be able to find the solution oneself is one of the qualities of a champion. This independence begins with the preparation.

What about when things go wrong? How do you deal with a high performer who has failed in some meaningful way?

RM: High performers are difficult. They are egotistical by nature, or they wouldn't be great; strong-willed, or they won't strive hard enough; high-strung, because they are in a gladiatorial business in which losing is obvious and painful. Great performers do mess up. And when they do, they will beg for forgiveness (having not asked for permission.) So forgiveness of mistakes is important.

BB: Individuals make mistakes. Rather than walk away, teach. If you can provide a lesson that is valuable, they will remember that much more than if you put them in the penalty box. **R**



Jennifer Riel (MBA '06) is associate director of the Desautels Centre for Integrative Thinking at the Rotman School of Management. **Roger Martin**

is Dean, Premier's Research Chair in Competitiveness and Prosperity and professor of Strategic Management at the Rotman School of Management. His latest book is *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*, with A.G. Lafley (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013). Australian native **Bob Brett** is one of the most recognizable tennis coaches in the world, having served the sport and its elite players for the past 35 years. His most notable coaching tenure came from 1987-91 when he guided top-ranked Boris Becker to Australian Open, Wimbledon and U.S. Open titles.