Learning to become a champion-acquiring expertise in sport: A reading of the autobiographies

of Agassi and Sampras

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ABSTRACT

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David Zilberman

The popular belief about top performing athletes is that they were born with some "god given" natural ability. This becomes a part of the athletes' and coaches' mindset. If talent and natural ability are not what set the best athletes apart from their peers than what are some of the contributing factors that propel athletes into superstardom? What are the reasons that some athletes reach the pinnacle of their sport? How do they acquire such expertise as evidenced in their winning international titles in competitions?

An examination of the literature revealed that there are some important factors in achieving expert status: the 10 year or 10,000 hours of practice (to attain a level of automaticity); deliberate practice under the guidance of skilled teachers and well planned design as well as "goal orientedness". The individual differences on the road to achieving expertise are also related to physiological, technical, cognitive and emotional elements and preparedness in the education and training of the expert athletes.

The thesis presents illustrations for this framework, culled from the literature review, by examining the autobiographies of two expert athletes: Andre Agassi and Peter Sampras.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction

I often struggled with the idea of how certain athletes attained the highest levels of performance while others fell short. It was intriguing to read biographies about the top competitors in the world from various sports. It gave me insight into how they started as athletes, their development and learning along the way and lastly their success. While reading these personal accounts I was able to look at certain periods of their lives in learning and training and observed their commonalities. It almost appeared that these people had uncovered a common recipe for success.

While reading through the biographies and autobiographies of world class athletes in different sports, I related certain aspects of their lives to my own. I looked at the age they started practicing. I observed their motivations, internal as well as external and finally their major influences. It was also important to look at the people from whom they learned and those who stood behind them, the family members and friends who acted as a support group. It was really captivating to examine the ups and downs of their careers.

I competed as an amateur wrestler for about 15 years. I accomplished some of the highest levels in my sport while failing to attain certain other goals I set for myself. Because of my inability to reach these goals, I started questioning certain areas of my athletic career in terms of my development. Why didn't I reach my goals? Did I start wrestling too late? Did I put in enough hours of training? These questions are the motivation behind this thesis. I read the biographies of top athletes as an athlete myself and as an international competitor and now I will study this information as a coach and as an educator at the university level.

Problem Statement

There is a common belief about the top athletes in the world. It is that they were born with some god-given natural ability. This popular belief would then suggest that we have no control of whether or not we can attain the highest levels of sport, or music or anything for that matter. If people believe this about sport then it must be true for all other disciplines. Perhaps this way of thinking is erroneous. Perhaps there are other contributing factors that help influence a person's ability to succeed and become an expert in his or her respective sport. In athletics the performance on the job culminates in championship status. This thesis will try to understand the pathway to achieve the expert status as evidenced by championship performance.

Research Questions

The popular belief that I am making reference to has become common internal and external dialogue among coaches and athletes alike. This becomes a part of the athletes and coaches mindset, meaning that there is no hope for the athlete unless those natural abilities are present from the start. If I look at my own experience as an athlete, the start did not look too promising. I did not have that natural ability that so many of my peers had. So how was I going to become an expert? Did I even have the slightest chance at making it to the highest levels of sport? Was I capable of being world class?

One might ask if talent or natural ability is not what sets the best athletes apart, then: (1) What are some of the contributing factors that propel athletes into superstardom? (2) What are the reasons that athletes reach the pinnacle of sport? (3) How do these athletes acquire expertise?

Literature Review

The road to expertise is long and arduous that takes patience, perseverance and extreme will. It takes years and thousands of hours of mental, emotional and physical work to become the best. There are several contributing factors that make for expert performance. The literature review will present some theories that examine the contributing factors to reaching expert level performance.

Identifying an Expert

It is hard to define what it means to be an expert; many people have different interpretations of what it really means. According to the leading researchers there are key factors that will allow for the identification of someone being an expert. Ericsson, Prietula and Cokely (2007) explain that in order to know if someone is an expert, there are three tests to identify one "first, it must lead to performance that is consistently superior to that of the experts peers. Second, real expertise produces concrete results. Brain surgeons, for example, not only must be skillful with their scalpels but also must have successful outcomes with their patients. A chess player must be able to win matches in tournaments. Finally, true expertise can be replicated and measured in the lab.

The ideas that Ericsson et al. (2007) put forth are all solid examples of identifying an expert. What is interesting of these principles of identifying an expert is not only in the acquisition of the knowledge but the ability to apply them in high pressure situations. As the example states, a surgeon must have successful outcomes with patients in addition to having the basic skills with a scalpel. The successful application of the material learned is a key element in identifying whether the pianist, sprinter or chess player is an expert. Although knowledge is

critical, but, without being able to apply it in the specific situation, the individual cannot be considered an expert.

Furthermore expertise is defined in a different way by Janelle and Hillman (2003). They state the following about expert identification:

> Expert performance in sport can be defined as the consistent superior athletic performance over an extended period. To obtain expert status, athletes must excel in no less than four domains: physiological, technical, cognitive,(tactical/strategic; perceptual/decision making), and emotional (regulation/coping; psychological). (p.21)

The 10 Year Rule

Ericsson (1996, 2009) suggests that it takes at least 10 years of preparation to become world class. He states "… not even the most 'talented' individuals can attain international performance in less than about 10 years of preparation, whereas the vast majority of international level performers have spent considerably longer" (Ericsson, 1996, p.10). It is crucial to understand that the idea that some athletes were 'born champions' is a myth and that champions or in this case expert performers have had a long road to learn to be the best.

The idea of 10 years of preparation to become an expert needs to be clarified. Understanding that a certain level of preparation has to take place is vital. A key example is of people who recreationally play golf. There are recreational golfers who play up to 5 days a week for well over 10 years. Does this suggest that they are experts? Unfortunately for them it does not. Ericsson (1996) clarifies:

> This claim has occasionally been misconstrued to mean that 10 years of relevant experience is sufficient to be considered an expert. However, mere amount of experience is only a weak predictor of an individual's level of performance in a domain and thus 10

> years of experience in a domain does not guarantee that expert performance is attained. (p.10)

Deliberate Practice

In order to reach peak performances at expert levels, it takes a certain type of preparation. Ericsson calls it *deliberate practice*. Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1993) define deliberate practice as "a well-defined task with an appropriate difficulty level for the particular individual, informative feedback, and opportunities for repetition and corrections of errors" (p.367). It is equally important to note that these factors are crucial if there is a common goal set by the coach and the athlete. Perhaps the long term goal is to eventually win a gold medal at the 2015 world championships and the short term goal is to improve the execution of a specific technique. Both are equally important because you cannot have one without the other, meaning, one cannot become a world champion without perfecting the execution of that specific technique and one would not have the motivation to perfect that specific technique without that specific long term goal. It is important to note that the idea to perfect something such as a skill for example does not come easily and takes hours upon hours of work. Furthermore, Ericsson explains:

> a skilled teacher designs training tasks adapted to the needs and skills of a particular student, who then goes off to practice these tasks alone to acquire the skill one by one. The student then returns to the teacher for an evaluation of performance and assignments for corrections and new tasks. (2009, p.10)

In order for the student to improve on a specific task, the student should focus and concentrate on perfecting that specific task. Without this practice, their rate of improvement is slowed down or perhaps never achieved. There needs to be motivation on the students' part to

really work on the skill until they have perfected it. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993) make predictions in terms of acquiring expert performance through deliberate practice.

- Quality and Quantity of deliberate practice is related to the attained level of performance.
- The characteristics of deliberate practice, such as effort and concentration. This is compared to other domain related activities such as playful interaction.
- People do not engage in deliberate practice because they enjoy it but because they are intent on improving their performance.

Research Methods

Autobiography as Qualitative Method of Inquiry

The two autobiographies that I will focus on will act as a comparative tool from the literature review. The experiences of these athletes and what they have gone through will allow for a better understanding of what it takes to become an expert. I will use the two autobiographies to collect information about their athletic development. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state “virtually thousands of such documents get published and most contain extensive discussions of people’s educational experiences" (p.136).

The drive for writing the autobiography is a key element in terms of validity. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argue, “the motivation will affect the content of the document” (p.136). A person’s motivation for writing an autobiography can differ, therefore understanding where the writer is coming from is important. I believe that the writers wanted to tell their stories as it was. They wanted to share their experiences as athletes in a reflective manner. Autobiographers want to create a scenario that will evoke feelings and thoughts which will in turn allow the reader to experience what the author might have experienced (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011).

Design and Database

I have presented Ericsson's work highlighting all the major areas that focus on time spent on sport practice i.e. the 10 year rule and the 10 000 hour rule. I will also focus on the areas that speak about deliberate practice, calling upon the work of many other experts who have studied this field (Coyle, 2012; Gladwell, 2011; Janelle & Hillmen, 2003; Lemov, Woolway & Yezzi, 2011; Starkes, 2003; Syed, 2010). I will also use some of this information to back up Ericsson's claims about these two ideas. In addition to these I have taken into consideration other relevant literature including the work of Orlick (2007).Terry Orlick has written many books on the attainment of high performance sport. His work gives insight into the different steps athletes need to take in order to reach a world-class level of athletics. Although Orlick's focus is primarily on the psychological aspect, his work does also maintain some focus on physical preparation as well.

The specific examples to illustrate the claims of the literature, summarized in the framework figure at the end of this section, will be drawn mainly from two case studies in the form of autobiographies: (1) Pete Sampras' autobiography (2) Andre Agassi's autobiography. Their detailed accounts will be read keeping in mind the findings of Ericsson on expert performance. Once the literature review is presented and the factors leading to expert performance are identified, I will review Pete Sampras' and Andre Agassi's autobiographies in detail. I will focus on the different areas that Ericsson and related literature reviews have underlined as a reference base to and compare and contrast the different ways in which these two expert athletes fall or do not fall in the framework identified by the literature review. I am going to record all the different passages from both autobiographies that relate to the areas pulled from the literature review on which I am focusing and as summarized in the following Figure:

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework (prepared by David Zilberman based on literature review)

Elements from Ericson	1. 10 year and 10,000 hours of practice (include concept of automaticity by **Lemov et al)**. 2. Deliberate Practice 3. Skilled teacher/coach design/plan 4. Goal oriented
Elements from Janelle & Hillman	Elements to hone for expert performance 1. Physiological 2. Technical 3. Cognitive (tactical/strategic; perceptual/decision making) 4. Emotional (regulation/coping; psychological) (**Orlick** also emphasized the psychological)

The above figure represents elements from the literature review which will be used to analyze the autobiographies of two champions: Agassi and Sampras.

Key Texts for Analysis

Andre Agassi's Autobiography, *Open*

Andre Agassi is one of Tennis' all time greats. Some of his achievements include 8 singles grand slam titles and 7 time runner up, Olympic gold medalist and a former world number 1 ranking. He achieved the pinnacle of the tennis world through hours and years of hard work and dedication. Although there were many speed bumps along the way, through his story there appeared to be a huge connection between his love of the sport and his desire to succeed at the highest levels possible. Agassi had many influences along his path to expertise, some positive, some negative. I will examine his story through his biography and make references and comparisons to his development and road to expertise, based on the framework summarized from the literature review section of this thesis.

Pete Sampras' Autobiography, a *Champion's Mind: Lessons from a Life in Tennis*

Pete Sampras is arguably the best tennis player of all time and held the record for most singles titles up until Roger Federer broke it. Sampras won 14 singles grand slam titles and held the number 1 world ranking for six consecutive years. He was undoubtedly the best tennis player of his time. He played at the same time as Agassi and many saw them as rivals. Although Agassi was a great tennis player, Sampras was far more successful. What made Sampras stand out from his peers? Was there something that he possessed that nobody else did? I will look at Sampras' autobiography based on the framework summarized from the literature review section of this thesis.

Presentation of Findings

- *Chapter 1*: Consists of an introduction to the topic, problem statement and the research question. It also presents the research method and a literature review leading to the framework to be used for analyzing the road to expertise by Agassi and Sampras.
- *Chapter 2*: This chapter is divided into two sections; first segment being about Andre Agassi and the second about Pete Sampras. These two sections include specific sketches taken from their respective autobiographies. These two sections are presented following the general outline presented in the Framework presented at the end of *Chapter 1* summarizing the literature reviewed.
- *Chapter 3*: This concludes the thesis and presents a personal reflection based on my practice as an expert athlete, a coach and an educator at the university level. The chapter concludes with recommendations for coaches and aspiring champions.

Chapter Two: Autobiographical Evidence from Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras

Andre Agassi: Recipe for Success

Andre Agassi was born April 29th 1970. He was the youngest of 4 children (Agassi, 2009). His parents were immigrants from Iran. He lived with his family in Las Vegas Nevada. His father, Emmanuel, who was hugely influential in his early career was an amateur boxer who represented Iran in two Olympic Games as a bantam weight, once in London in 1948 and the second time in Helsinki in 1952 (Agassi, 2009). Andre won many titles as a pro, winning all major grand slams including Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, the French Open and the Australian Open. Agassi also won the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta (Agassi, 2009). Andre attained the world number one ranking in 1995 (Agassi, 2009). Like all other athletes, Agassi had his ups and downs, but, his highs were soaring and his lows were rock bottom. It is believed by many that Agassi had far more physical ability than his adversary Pete Sampras.

The Road to 10 Years of Practice

Andre first started hitting tennis balls at the age of four. His father who was a tennis fanatic used to get tennis pros to come and hit with little Andre (Agassi, 2009). Andre started competing at 8 years old around Arizona and California. The whole family would travel to watch him and his brother play. Although Andre was the more talented out of the two, nevertheless the whole family would travel together to support each other. Andre would go on to win his first 7 tournaments. He played in the 10 and under age group and dominated (Agassi, 2009).

Andre started going through rigorous training at a young age. His father had an intense love for the game of tennis. His passion was pushed on to Andre and his training. Andre states from the start of the book how much he dislikes the game and it is mentioned throughout the book. (Agassi, 2009). His father played such a critical role in laying the foundation for Andre's

game. His father believed in numbers. In addition to his passion for the game, he took what he learned from his expertise in boxing and transferred some of the ideas to tennis. Agassi says:

> My father says that if I hit 2,500 balls each day, I'll hit 17,500 balls each week, and at the end of one year I'll have hit nearly one million balls. He believes in math. Numbers, he says, don't lie. A child who hits one million balls each year will be unbeatable. (Agassi, 2009, p.28)

The idea of repetition is discussed in "Perfect Practice, makes perfect". It is said that the subject needs to practice to automaticity. Meaning that with extensive repetition, the body moves without having to think about it. Lemov et al. state three critical points in letting the "mind follow the body":

- Stress learning skills all the way to automaticity so that participants can use them automatically and before they consciously decide to.
- Build up layers of related automated skills so that participants can do complex tasks without actively thinking about them.
- Automate fundamentals, but also look for more complex and subtle skills that may also respond to automation. It's a false assumption that only simple things can become habits. (2011, p. 36)

A critical moment in Andre's career happened early on. Even though Andre trained a lot and spent hours on the family's backyard court his father built. It still was not enough to become the world's best. Andre had won almost all the major tournaments in his age group, also, beating kids older than he was. It was important for him to develop other skills that his father could not teach him anymore. Emmanuel realized that he could not teach him anymore than he already has.

He decides that Andre needs to focus more on tennis. The Nick Bollettieri tennis Academy in Florida is where he would go. He recounts this experience in his autobiography:

> My father accosts me in the kitchen. He says we need to talk. He describes a story he caught recently on *60 Minutes*. It was all about a tennis boarding school on the west coast of Florida, near Tampa Bay. The first school of its kind, my father says. A boot camp for young tennis players, its run by a former paratrooper names Nick Bollettieri. So? So–you're going there. What! You're not getting any better here in Las Vegas. You've beaten all the local boys. You've beaten all the boys in the west. Andre you've beaten all the players at the local college! I have nothing left to teach you. Andre, he says, you've got to eat, sleep and drink tennis. It's the only way you're going to be number one. (Agassi, p.70)

The decision to send Andre to Florida was a very calculated risk. Because despite all the improvements he was making at such a young age, Emmanuel understood that he did not have all the tools to get Andre to the top of the tennis ranks. Syed (2010) discusses the Bollettieri Academy calling it a "Citadel of Excellence":

> Bollettieri has become a byword for excellence since his academy was established in 1978 of Florida's west coast. Here the youngsters train with devotion; they undertake physical training as if it is a privilege, not a chore; they eat food like it is fuel. This is simply not what it is like at other tennis centers. Sure, there is an appetite for practice and hard work at other venues, but it is not so visible, so raw, so voracious. It does not blow you away. He praises effort, never talent; he eulogizes about the transformational power of practice at every opportunity; he preaches the vital importance of hard work during

> every interruption in play. And he does not regard failure in his students as either good or bad, but as an opportunity to improve. (Syed, 2010, p.133-134)

As we can see, the importance of leaving Arizona to go to Florida was paramount. Even though Andre did not want to do it, it was imperative if he wanted to grow as an athlete. At this center he would focus all of his attention of his development as an athlete in an environment that fostered tennis excellence.

Once Andre arrives at the Nick Bollettieri tennis academy, he quickly realizes what it means to train full time and live the lifestyle of an athlete. It is an environment that is not pleasant as it is full of kids that are roughly around the same age shooting to become the best. As Andre describes it, it is cutthroat. The development is as much physical as it is mental and emotional. Without these components of training, it would not be possible to become the best:

> People like to call the Bollettieri academy a boot camp, but it's really a glorified prison camp. And not all that glorified. We eat gruel beige meats and gelatinous stews and gray slop poured over rice and sleep in rickety bunks that line the plywood walls of our military style barracks. We rise at dawn and go to bed soon after dinner. We rarely leave, and we have scant contact with the outside world. Like most prisoners we do nothing but sleep and work, and our main rock pile is drills. Serve drills, net drills, backhand drills, forehand drills, with occasional match play to establish the pecking order, strong to weak. Sometimes it feels as though we're gladiators, preparing underneath the colosseum.
>
> Certainly the thirty-five instructors who bark at us during drills think of themselves as slave drivers. When we're not drilling, we're studying the psychology of tennis. We take classes on mental toughness, positive thinking, and visualization. We're taught to close our eyes and picture ourselves winning Wimbledon, hoisting that gold

> trophy above our heads. Then we go to aerobics or weight training, or out to the crushed shell track, where we run until we drop. The constant pressure, the cutthroat competition, the total lack of adult supervision - it slowly turns us into animals. (Agassi, 2009, p.74)

As Agassi's career advances, he is still struggling with his training. His 10 000 hours or 10 years of preparation is not just what he does on the tennis court, but what he does off the court. As an athlete, the importance of developing one's physical conditioning goes hand in hand with the acquisition of the skills necessary to compete with the best in the world.

In 1987 Andre wins his first tournament as a pro in Brazil:

> I'm running out of steam in long matches. And for me every match is long, because my serve is average. I can't serve my way out of trouble, I get no easy points of my serve, so every opponent takes me the full twelve rounds my knowledge of the game is improving but my body is breaking down. I'm skinny, brittle, and my legs give out quickly, followed in short order by nerve. I tell Nick that I'm not fit enough to compete with the best in the world. He agrees. Legs are everything he says.
>
> I find a trainer in Vegas, a retired military colonel named Lenny. Tough as burlap, Lenny curses like a sailor and walks like a pirate, the result of being shot in a long ago war he doesn't like to talk about. After one hour with Lenny I wish someone would shoot me. Few things give Lenny more pleasure than abusing me and hurling obscenities at me in the process. (Agassi, 2009, p.114)

Agassi plays the US open in 1989 and faces Ivan Lendl in the semi-finals:

> In the semis I lose again to Lendl. I take him to a fourth set, but he's too strong. Trying to wear him out, I wear myself out. Despite the best efforts of limping Lenny and pat the

> spitting Chilean, I'm not able to stay with a man of Lendl's caliber. I tell myself that when I get back to Vegas, the search must continue for someone, anyone, who can make me battle ready. (Agassi, 2009, p.122)

The search continues for a trainer that can get Andre in peak physical condition. When he returns to Nevada, he decides to go to the University of Nevada in Las Vegas (UNLV) to do a workout with Pat. While there, he meets Gil who happens to be the head strength and conditioning coach for the student athletes at UNLV. Andre asks Gil if he could be his trainer. Gil accepts. He tells Andre that he will work with him upon his return from the summer tennis tour (Agassi, 2009).

Upon returning from his tour, Gail and Andre meet and discuss the different ways the body works. Gil makes Andre look at the different ways he has been training and how that might be detrimental to his career. He explains the dangers of his old method and decides to develop a new strategy to get Andre in top shape:

> I work with Gil throughout the fall of 1989. The gains are big, and our bond is strong. Eighteen years older than I, Gil can tell that he's a father figure. On some level I also sense that I'm the son he never had." (Agassi, 2009, p.139)

Deliberate Practice

Andre's game developed really quickly because of his intense training. His father pushed him to extremes. To some it would appear to be overwhelming but Andre handled the pressure really well. His father would do a lot of yelling and sometimes had unreal expectations from a 7 year old. While they might appear to be unrealistic, it was necessary. The specificity of Andre's training was what set him apart from his peers at such a young age. Syed (2010) explains deliberate practice or purposeful practice:

> […] the practice sessions of aspiring champions have a specific and never changing purpose: progress. Every second of every minute of every hour, the goal is to extend one's mind and body, to push oneself beyond the outer limits of one's capacities, to engage so deeply in the task that one leaves the training session, literally, a changed person. (Syed, 2010, p.80)

On top of the lengthy practices, he also manipulated the ball machine which Andre called the dragon in order to challenge him in different ways:

> My father has deliberately made the dragon fearsome. He's given it an extra long neck of aluminum tubing, and a narrow aluminum head, which recoils like a whip every time the dragon fires. He's also set the dragon on a base several feet high, and moved it flush against the net, so the dragon towers above me. At seven years old I'm small for my age. But standing before the dragon, I look tiny. Feel tiny. Helpless.
>
> My father wants the dragon to tower over me not simply because it commands my attention and respect. He wants the balls that shoot from the dragon's mouth to land at my feet as if dropped from an airplane. The trajectory makes the balls nearly impossible to return in a conventional way: I need to hit every ball on the rise, or else it will bounce over my head. But even that's not enough for my father. "Hit earlier," he yells. "Hit earlier." (Agassi, 2009, p.28)

Emmanuel was a stickler for details. If it was perfect he would often yell at Andre demanding perfection. Furthermore, Andre liked getting things right, he liked getting things perfect. Surely this was a behavior inherited from his father:

> Hit harder, my father yells. Hit harder. Now backhands. Backhands. My arm feels like it's going to fall off. I want to ask, how much longer, pops? But I don't ask. I

do as I'm told. I hit as hard as I can, then slightly harder. On one swing I surprise myself by how hard I hit, how leanly. Though I hate tennis, I like the feeling of hitting a ball dead perfect. It's the only peace. When I do something perfect, I enjoy a split second of sanity and calm. (Agassi, 2009, p.29)

These somewhat unreal expectations allowed Andre to develop different skills that perhaps he would not have learned otherwise. His father stressed finesse while working on his backhand and forehand strokes. "Short backswings, my father says. Short back – that's it. Brush the ball, brush the ball." (Agassi, 2009, p.29)

In addition to focusing on finesse, his father also wanted him to develop power with his swings. His father would stress the importance of following through with his swings (Agassi, 2009). It was not enough that Andre would return the ball, but, how he returned the ball was extremely important. The focus on deliberate practice started early on:

My father yells everything twice, sometimes three times, sometimes ten. Harder he says, harder. But what's the use? No matter how hard I hit a ball, no matter how early, the ball comes back. Every ball I send across the net joins the thousands that already cover the court. Not hundreds. Thousands. They roll toward me in perpetual waves. I have no room to turn, to step, to pivot. I can't move without stepping on a ball – and yet I can't step on a ball, because my father won't bear it. Step on one of my father's tennis balls and he'll howl as if you stepped on his eyeball.

> Every third ball fired by the dragon hits a ball already on the ground, causing a crazy sideways hop. I adjust at the last second, catch the ball early, and hit it smartly across the net. I know this is no ordinary reflex. I know, there are few children in the world who could have seen that ball, let alone hit it. But I take no pride in my reflexes, and I get no credit. It's what I'm supposed to do. Every hit is expected, every miss is a crisis. (Agassi, 2009, p.28)

Although this seems dangerous because of the high probability of injury, Andre was able to develop different skills through this exercise. He was able to focus on hitting the ball while being mindful of the balls around him. He approached this with an open mind and was given obstacles to overcome while trying to perfect his return.

Andre spent countless hours taking part in these specific types of training. Emmanuel was relentless in his training regimen for young Andre. It is mentioned often throughout his autobiography that he hated tennis. But there was something inside him that made him continue the training. Andre displayed flashes of desire and brilliance when training. It showed that there was an emotional attachment to what he was doing. That it went deeper than just his father pushing him:

> I've worked so many volleys I can no longer see the court. Not one patch of green cement is visible beneath the yellow balls… My shoulder aches. I can't hit another ball. I hit another three. I can't go on another minute. I go another ten. (Agassi, 2009, p.30)

This type of determination is what sets mediocre athletes apart from potential world class expertise.

Agassi's style of play was developed by his father's background in boxing. Fans and

critics alike called Andre Agassi the best returner in the game. This physical skill was developed through years of practice in addition, being a returner, ended up being a mental tactic in his game. This counter style of tennis was brought on by a philosophy that his father taught him from boxing. Part of this game is what made Andre Agassi such a fierce competitor. He would challenge every opponent he had and did not get intimidated:

> My father says that when he boxed, he always wanted to take a guy's best punch. He tells me one day on the tennis court: when you know that you just took the other guy's best punch, and you're still standing, and the other guy knows it, you will rip his heart right out of him. In tennis, he says, same rule. Attack the other man's strength. If the man is a server, take away his serve. If he's a power player, overpower him. If he has a big forehand, takes pride in his forehand, go after his forehand until he hates his forehand.
>
> My father has a special name for this contrarian strategy. He calls it putting a blister on the other guy's brain. With this strategy, this brutal philosophy, he stamps me for life. He turns me into a boxer with a tennis racket. More, since most tennis players pride themselves on their serve, my father turns me into a counterpuncher – a returner. (Agassi, 2009, p.42)

The Roadblocks to Excellence

Andre's uneven commitment to excellence and determination to train consistently was perhaps his biggest flaw. This is displayed countless times throughout his autobiography. His career was riddled with bad relationships, drug use, partying, drinking and self-doubt. His focus was not clear, it was inconsistent. He developed his tennis skills early on, but, throughout his autobiography he professes his hate for the game. He struggled with the athlete lifestyle, the single mindedness, the commitment to excellence that it takes to become the best. Andre

displayed many physical gifts but lacked some psychological skills that would help him grow quicker.

Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of being at a tennis academy is the schedule and lifestyle that is conferred to these young athletes. Being disciplined and honing tennis skills is possible in this environment. Andre is a rebel by nature, anything that he is told to do, his first desire is to go against it. He is staying at the academy against his will. It is his father's wish for Andre to be at the academy and he will do whatever he can to get kicked out and sent home. Instead of embracing the experience, he fights it:

> What more can I do? Nick, Gabriel, Mrs. G, Doc G – no one seems to notice my antics anymore. I've mutilated my hair, grown my nails, including one pinky nail that's two inches long and painted fire-engine red. I've pierced my body, broken rules, busted curfew, picked fistfights, thrown tantrums, cut classes, even slipped into the girls barracks after hours. I've consumed gallons of whiskey, often while sitting brazenly atop my bunk, and as an extra dash of audacity I've built a pyramid from my dead soldiers. A three foot tower of empty Jack Daniels bottles. I chew tobacco, hardcore weed like Skoal and Kodiak, soaked in whiskey. After losses I stick a plum-sized wad of chew inside my cheek. The bigger the loss, the bigger the wad. What rebellion is left? What new sin can I commit to show the world I'm unhappy and want to go home? (Agassi, 2009, p.86)

Agassi argues against the idea of going to school. One of the things students of the Bollettieri Academy have to do is to attend school while keeping up with their training. Andre being the top tennis player at the Academy quickly realises that he is needed by Nick because of all the talent he possesses as a 14 year old. He displays a ton of potential and gets nick to agree on allowing Agassi to do school through correspondence. Agassi does not do his work in fact he

gets his mother to do it. Instead of going to school, he focuses on his training and competition. Agassi believes that these conditions are much more desirable compared to having to juggle training, competition and education:

> The morning is mine, mine, and I spend it hitting balls. Hit harder. I hit for two hours, channeling my newfound freedom into every swing. I can feel the difference. The ball explodes off my racket. Nick appears, shaking his head. I pity your next opponent, he says. (Agassi, 2009, p.97*)*

Imaginably, because of his lifestyle of drinking and partying as a young athlete, he does not possess all the tools to be the best. It continually happens in his matches that he runs out of steam. His opponents out-condition him. They are in better shape than he is, and, they are capable of breaking him mentally and physically in long matches. Andre struggles throughout his career with this problem. Because he hates tennis so much his dedication to training is lacklustre therefore his development can only go to a certain level. This frustrates Andre:

> Still in a foul mood, I travel several weeks later to Washington D.C. In the first round, playing Patrick Kuhnen's hand, I come up empty. Bone dry. After a long slog across Europe I have nothing left. The travel, the losses, the stress, its all sapped me. Plus, the day is oppressively hot and I'm not physically fit. I'm totally unprepared, so I become unpresent. When we're tied at one set apiece, I leave the court, mentally. My mind departs my body and goes floating out of the arena. I'm long gone when the third set starts. I lose 6-0.
>
> I walk to the net and shake Kuhnen's hand. He says something, but I can't see or hear him. He's a blob of energy at the end of a tube. I grab my tennis bag and stumble out of the arena. I walk across the street, into Rock Creek Park, into some woods and when I

feel sure no one is around, I berate the trees.

I can't take this shit anymore! I'm fucking done! I quit! (Agassi, 2009, p.111)

Setting New Standards

Andre's results depended solely on his motivation. When he set goals for himself and focused fully on them, he was able to put everything he had into it. After becoming world number 1 in 1995 he struggled with whether or not he wanted to continue playing tennis. He looked forward and decided to try for the Olympic Games. Agassi decides to prepare for the Olympic Games and approaches his training with the upmost professionalism. He changes his diet and takes his training more seriously than he has in the past. It is something that even surprises him. Gil works out a plan of attack in terms of his training, nutrition and lifestyle. Even though Andre is to get married to Brooke Shields, the Olympics consume him:

As summer approaches, there is only one elaborate pageant that interest and inspires me. And it's not my wedding. It's the Atlanta Olympics. I don't know why. Maybe it feels like something new. Maybe it feels like something that has nothing to do with me. Ill be playing for my country, playing for a team with 300 million members. I'll be closing a circle. My father was an Olympian, now me.

I plan a regimen with Gil, an Olympians regimen, and give all out effort in our training sessions. I spend two hours with Gil each morning, then hit with Brad for two hours, then run up and down Gil Hill in the hottest part of the day. I want the heat. I want the pain.

As the games begin, sportswriters kill me for skipping the opening ceremonies. Perry kills me for it too. But I'm not in Atlanta for opening ceremonies, I'm here for gold, and I need to hoard what little concentration and energy I can muster these days.

> The tennis is being played in Stone Mountain, an hour's drive from the opening ceremonies downtown. Stand around in the Georgia heat and humidity, wearing a coat and tie, waiting for hours to walk around the track, then drive to Stone Mountain and give my best? No. I can't. I'd love to experience the pageantry, to savor the spectacle of the Olympics, but not before my first match. This, I tell myself, is focus. This is what it means to put substance above image. (Agassi, 2009, p.237)
>
> Agassi went on to win the Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996. (Agassi, 2009, p.238)

Pete Sampras: Lessons from a Life in Tennis

Pete Sampras was born on August 12th 1971 in Potomac Maryland, second youngest of four children. They were two girls and two boys. Sampras started playing tennis at the age of 7 (Sampras, 2008). Sampras is arguably the best tennis player of all time; in addition to that, many regarded him as a complete player based on his style of play (Sampras, 2008). The youngest player to win the US open since the beginning of the twentieth century, he also won 14 Grand Slam titles. On top of all the single titles he accumulated, he was also world number one for six consecutive years.

Sampras had many qualities that made him a champion. His mental fortitude is what set him apart from the rest of his peers. This is on top of having perhaps the best serve in tennis. Sampras dedicated his life to tennis, allowing very little space for distraction. He knew what he wanted and went for it with everything he had. Examining Sampras' early stages in his career, the focus was on long term development. Everything he and his coaches did centred around the idea of developing a game that would be effective later on in his career.

The Road to Excellence

Sampras was not the kind of guy who liked media attention or someone who like drawing

attention to him. He was a highly disciplined athlete who had the ability to focus on what he wanted:

> After all, I was the guy who let his racket do the talking. I was the guy who kept his eyes on the prize, leading a very disciplined, almost monkish existence in my quest to accumulate Grand Slam titles. And I was the guy who guarded his private life and successfully avoided controversy and drama, both in my career and personal life. (Sampras, 2008, p. ix)

This lifestyle that Sampras embraced dictated the way he trained and the way he performed on the court. The lack of distraction and single mindedness allow him to fully focus on his goals. Sampras credits his mom for his ability to focus:

> If I got my calm, reserved nature from dad, I got my toughness, a share of my resilience, and a measure of my stubbornness from my mom. She helped instill my basic values – showing me that I wasn't going to get anywhere by taking shortcuts. I think I may have gotten my ability to focus absolutely and exclusively on the task at hand from my mother, too. Throughout my career, my mind rarely wandered and I was never sidetracked by distractions, no matter what I was going through off the court. (Sampras, 2008, p.10)

When Sampras first started playing tennis he had an unusual situation because of his coach Pete Fischer. Fischer was his first coach and had a tremendous impact on Sampras' development:

> Not long after I started playing at the Kramer club my dad became acquainted with a member named Pete Fischer. He was a successful pediatrician originally from New York, and he looked the part and played tennis like it. He was thickly built, with a big belly, and had one of the most horrific tennis games anyone ever laid eyes on. But he was a very

smart, stubborn tennis visionary – a true tennis nut.

Fischer looked at me and saw some kind of supernatural talent, so he befriended my dad, who would take me to and from lessons, and ultimately convinced dad to allow him to become my coach. In retrospect "coach" is not exactly the right word for Fischer, because his greatest asset was: knowing what he didn't know. He was a hacker tennis player who masterminded my tennis development in a wise way – by having various coaches and specialists bring their unique skills to my development. He had grand, almost preposterous plans for me. He was like a combination of mad scientist and general contractor – one who was in charge of building the all time grand slam champion. (Sampras, 2008, p.7)

10 000 Hours/10 Years of Development

Pete had many different coaches all of whom played their own special part in his development:

The foundations of my ground game were laid by Lansdorp. He's an icon in southern California tennis circles, legendary for his no nonsense drill sergeant approach. His fingerprints were, and still are, all over some of the best ground strokes in the game. Almost all Lansdorp protégés developed huge forehands. He teaches a fairly flat, clean, economical stroke, and he was especially good with girls, including Tracy Austin, Lindsay davenport, Melissa gurney and Stephanie Rehe, all of whom were junior sensations and, to varying degrees, successful pros. (Sampras, 2008, p.13)

Landsorp, like most successful coaches, focused on repetition. Hitting as many balls as possible:

There was no secret technique in Landsorp's repertoire. His big thing was repetition,

> which had critical side effect: it taught extreme stroking discipline. Robert had this big, supermarket size shopping cart filled with balls, and whatever we were working on – preparation, taking the short midcourt ball, the running forehand that became my trademark shot - we would do it for an hour, or my half of the hour that I shared with Stella. We did drill after drill.
>
> Eliot Teltscher thinks that Robert has a genius for feeding balls a job you wouldn't think is difficult. But Eliot is right; Robert put the ball in exactly the right place, time after time. And we're talking about hundreds of balls an hour, day after day. I hit a million balls and that was important – I had to get that muscle memory, burn it in so it was a natural thing. (Sampras, 2008, p.14)

The training regimen designed for Sampras by Fischer was exhausting. Sampras had his routine that he would follow. If he was not practicing his skills, he was playing practice matches, or tournaments. This is what it takes to become a world class competitor:

> Fischer became a daily presence in our family's life as time went on, and we soon had a comfortable pattern going. I would work with Del Little on Tuesdays, take from Landsorp on Thursdays, and work with Fischer at the end of his workweek, on Friday. Between lessons and on weekends I played practice matches with other juniors, or went to tournaments. (Sampras, 2008, p.15)
>
> In the morning I would go to Vista Grande Elementary at eight and stay until noon. Then Mom would pick us all up and take us home. I would eat lunch, change and head over to the Kramer Club at three where I would play a set or two with whoever was scheduled that day. There were enough fast track kids – there's that California tennis advantage – that partners were always in abundance. Two days a week there was tennis

> camp at the club, and some days – more often, as time went on I had a lesson. My day ended around 7 P.M., when I would have dinner at home, do homework, go to sleep and wake up only to do the whole thing again.
>
> It was regimented as it sounds – and it only became more so as I got older. But in order to be great at something, it really needs to be the focus of your life. In that sense I don't think you can have your cake and eat it too. You can't have this great social life, a big academic load and athletic ambitions, and be able to focus on all of them. It takes a lot of time and work to get good at tennis, and those childhood years are pivotal.
>
> At 11:30 A.M. every day, I would go home from school. I had to hang out with, because my friends were in Rolling Hills. My life revolved around home and the Kramer Club. I was shy to begin with, but as I got deeper into adolescence, I grew even more introverted. When other kids were thinking about going out or going on dates, I was in an awkward phase. I wasn't interested in girls, I was mostly thinking about tennis. I knew what I was, and what I would be in the future: a tennis player. Around school I became known as the 'tennis kid'." (Sampras, 2008, p.19-20)

Sampras was the type of athlete that took everything he could from his coaches. His open mind to learning allowed him to grow in ways he did not fully understand. It was important to develop different parts of his game and as it will be explained later on in the chapter, his serve was carefully constructed early on in his career. It would become his biggest tool along with his ability to keep an open mind:

> Fischer had a good grasp of tennis style and strategy, and he tried to impart that knowledge to Dad and me. Pete was a pretty good feeder, and I got a lot out of working with him, especially on the serve, which is where things get a little weird.

> Pete and Del Little had this thing they called the Chong. God, it still makes me laugh just to think about it. It sounds mysterious, like something out of martial arts. The Chong had something to do with the way you took your service stance and how you brought your heels together to create a certain angle. I never did understand it, but it was wild to hear Fischer say, "That's right, Chong!"
>
> One of my signature mannerisms is the start of my service motion. I have my left foot up at the baseline, more or less pointing toward the court I'm serving into. Then I slightly shift my weight back, and lift my left toe well off the ground, signaling the true start of my service motion. Pete and Del started me doing that, because it had something to do with bringing my feet together to Chong.
>
> But Chong or not, I did end up with a pretty clean, simple service motion, and that would be a great plus. The more glitches and ticks you have, the more things can go wrong. In later years, Pete often said I was very "coachable". I was just a kid, of course, and I did what all kids do – I soaked things up like a little sponge. (Sampras, 2008, p.17)

Although Pete Fischer had a lot of positive qualities as a coach, he could not be around full time as he had a full time practice being a doctor. This meant Pete was looking for a new coach. Once this happened Sampras started working with real experts in the field. His results gained him notoriety amongst the other players on the tour and people wanted to train with him.

Once Sampras started winning more matches, he started getting more notoriety amongst the players on tour. People wanted to train with him. He was asked to help Ivan Lendle, who at the time was the number one player in the world, train. Sampras had the opportunity to learn from the best in the world:

> I got a strong taste of Ivan's own work ethic. Within a day or two, he had me going on

these bike rides of thirty miles or so, through the cold and sleet, following a car driven by one of his trainers (Sampras, 2008, p.39)

Pete decided to change coaches; he moved on and hired Tim Gullikson. He describes his relationship with him and what the coaching process was like:

He was a real student of the game, that rare combination of a guy who played at a high level (he won three tour singles titles and fifteen in doubles and was ranked as high as number fifteen in singles), but also loved it with the purity and the wide eyed enthusiasm of a fan.

When it came to the X's and O's, one of the first things Tim did was get me to shorten my practice sessions. This was something Tim learned from Jimmy Connors, who may have practiced less in terms of minutes spent than any other top player. Jimmy was legendary for his short intense practices. He sometimes practiced for as few as forty five minutes but always with total focus and purpose. He ran for every ball, hit his best shots and kept up the pressure all the way. He could wear out a guy accustomed to two hour practices in less than half that time. With Jimmy, you didn't play two points and then stop, drink some Gatorade and chitchat. (Sampras, 2008, p.76)

Deliberate Practice

As it was mentioned earlier on, each coach Sampras started with, brought different tools to Pete's all around game. He discusses the different skills he worked on with each coach. The specific drills would mould Sampras into a very unique player that developed his skills from the ground up. There were no shortcuts, they built a solid foundation:

When I started playing, it was still the wooden racket era, and Robert taught me to hit properly. A few years later, technology would transform the basic tennis racket, and

> eventually it would be easier for everyone to develop a weapon. But I shaped mine the hard way. Some of the things we did were very basic. Robert would open his racket cover – back then, it was just a soft, zippered vinyl case that covered the racket head down to the throat – put his keys inside of it, and close it back up on the head of the racket. (Robert always had about forty keys, so his key ring was heavy as an anvil.) then I would practice the forehand stroke with the weighted racket. For a little kid, that was tough, but it taught me to drive through the ball. With Robert, it was all about the sweet spot and driving through the ball." (Sampras, 2008, p.14)

Landsorp continuously made things challenging for Sampras. He had a number of drills that were designed to get Pete out of his comfort zone:

> One of Robert's favorite tricks, was hitting these big topspin shots right at me, jamming me. And remember, this is a very big man who weighed two hundred plus, hitting with a skinny twelve year old. Fending off those shots taught me to stand in and go toe to toe with him, trading shots. That toughened me up. Robert would stand in a position favoring one leg so that he could get balls out of the cart in a hurry with one hand and feed with the other one for hours. He ultimately had hip surgery, and I swear it was because of that leaned over feeding position. He would take up that post right around the middle of the center service stripe and bang big forehands cross court for fifteen minute stretches at a time. It was exhausting. (Sampras, 2008, p.14)

Perhaps the biggest impact Pete Fischer made for Sampras early on in his career was how he developed Sampras' serve. Sampras again arguably had the greatest serve in tennis. This serve was developed over time and became his biggest tool in his matches. It was something Sampras was always able to rely on:

> Fischer made another big contribution that I can explain more easily, he taught me to disguise my serve. During lessons, he would have me toss the ball in the air, and then he would call out where he wanted me to hit it, and with which spin, if any. Later, players would say they had trouble reading where my serve was going, or what kind of ball movement it had, and that was all Pete's doing. Over time, I learned to use my wrist and I had a talent for 'pronating' or bending my wrist in a way that enabled me to use the same basic motion to hit different kinds of serves. The kick serve was the only one that was a little different because you have to toss the ball father back and to the left to get that big kick, and it's impossible to disguise. But even then, I didn't telegraph my intention as much as most players. (Sampras, 2008, p.17)

Fischer had a plan to develop every part of Sampras' game. Fischer wanted Sampras to have a one handed backhand. While Sampras junior counterparts were all still using a two handed backhand, they decided to start early and have Sampras develop his one handed backhand. This was a big move and raised a lot of questions about whether or not it was the right move. As I mentioned earlier on, Sampras game was developed with a strong foundation for future performances:

> Larry Easley came into play when I abandoned my two handed backhand and started serving and volleying. Easley, who was terrific with the volley, helped me out. We had moments of serious doubt and struggle during that transition, as I discuss later, and people at the Kramer Club thought I was crazy to change my backhand – especially when my rival Michael Chang gained valuable ground on me as a result. So much for short term rewards. (Sampras, 2008, p.17)

> To us, it was always about playing the right way, trying to develop a game that would hold up throughout my career. It was a calculated risk. If it didn't pay off, it would have shown that I was either not good enough or delusional. On the other hand, some of those juniors were like starving guys, eating everything on the table while the eating was good. They didn't think long term, they lived and died by their daily results, ignoring the fact that what worked in the juniors wouldn't necessarily be useful on the pro tour. (Sampras, 2008, p.24)

Everything was geared towards playing the correct way, even if it meant losing. The focus was on long term development. It meant that not only was Sampras supposed to practice the right habits in practice, but also in competition. The pressure was not necessarily on winning but on playing well:

> The great challenge in junior tennis is avoiding pressure, because it can be huge, just huge especially at the national level. By putting pressure on myself to develop a great game, I had less pressure to win. These days, I tell kids that the way I grew up, it wasn't about winning. It was about playing well, about playing the 'right' way. That approach helped me enjoy the game and develop mine to its maximum potential. (Sampras, 2008, p.25)

> My journey to tennis stardom was pretty straight path that I traveled quickly thanks to my great developmental environment. But there were up hills and down hills, and my toughest challenge was changing my mindset from grinder to attacker. I had to learn to start thinking differently, and more. (Sampras, 2008, p.30)

> Over the next two transitional years, I would get help from various people. By that time, I was high on the radar of our national tennis association, the United States Tennis

> Association (USTA). Part of their mandate is to develop junior talent, so they hooked me up with a series of coaches on a one off basis. I went out to see the clay court expert Jose Higueras in Palm Springs. I also spent time in Jacksonville Florida with a guy whose game was more similar to mine, Brian Gottfried. He was an old school type serve and volley player who worked with me on various aspects of the attacking game. We would drill for ninety minutes in the morning and play matches in the afternoon.
>
> We would do this full day of workouts, and then at 4p.m. he would drop me back at the condo where I was staying. I did that for a three week stretch. This was different from the Kramer Club – that had been pretty easy stuff. It was also more lonely. (Sampras, 2008, p.35)

A big positive that came out of changing to a one-handed back hand is that Sampras learned how to lose. Every athlete wants to win but there is very little control over that. Winning is important but one cannot control the outcome of a match. The only thing that an athlete can control is the way he plays the game. Focusing on winning can create anxiety and playing with a fear of failure:

> Another valuable side effect of playing up and making a radical change in my technique was that I learned to lose. A champion is supposed to hate to lose, and it wasn't like I was very crazy about the idea. But I learned to deal with losing without having my spirit or confidence broken, which would help me immensely over time, not just in the big picture but even in specific matches when I found myself in a jam. Fear of losing is a terrible thing. (Sampras, 2008, p.25)

Pete's new coach Tim Gullikson was a stickler for details which made Pete clean up his swings. Sampras did posess a lot of talent but at times according to Tim, he was lazy:

> At the start of our relationship, Tim thought I was getting a little "handsy" inclined to use my hands loosely to compensate for a lack of technical discipline. In other words, I was a little lazy. Hand and wrists play a role in almost all of your shots, but they shouldn't be doing work intended for your arms, feet and torso when it comes to hitting a firm penetrating shot. It's especially tempting for players with good touch to get handsy and they always pay a price in the way of less weight and penetration on their shots.
>
> Tim fired up my backhand volley and slice, or underspin shot. He had me shorten up my backhand slice motion to get a little more weight behind the shot even if it meant less spin. It penetrated better and went through the court more quickly. That made it harder to attack.
>
> On the backhand volley, we focused on getting my entire body down lower to meet the ball. Dropping the racket head always rob a shot of pace; it's one of those things handsy people do. But the firmest volleys are hit more decisively with more weight behind the racket that calls for a little positioning, which is a little more work, but it paid off. These tunings all heled and shortening up my backswings on all my returns was of critical importance in my transformation into a good grass court player. (Sampras, 2008, p.77)

Mindset of a Champion

One of the key factors that made Sampras so unique was his mental/psychological approach to the game. He found ways to deal with the pressure of having to compete against the top players in the world. He wanted to win, but, staying focused on the process allowed him to perform with less pressure:

> My dad and Pete Fischer began dealing with all of the action and the action was moving

> fast. In those early days of my pro career, I would often tell myself, hey, it's all a learning experience […] it was a hedge against feeling pressure, because I had been thrown off the deep end. One minute, it seemed, I was just a decent amateur slowly making progress, and the net I was a blooded pro, with a couple of gaudy scalps hanging from my belt and expectations hanging over my head. I was pretty good, but not that good. I didn't pop onto the pro tour with a seamless game. I still had lots of holes, and I would kind of fill those in as I went along, reciting my mantra: It's all a learning experience. (Sampras, 2008, p.33)

Something unique and special about Sampras was his ability to keep an open mind when going out to compete. His ability to go in a match and focus on his strengths was probably the best in the world. Most athletes focus on their opponents too much, creating pressure.

> […] I never went into a match with a cut and dried game plan. I knew my own strengths and the kind of game I felt most comfortable playing, and I tried to be aware of what my opponents did well or badly, and how to get to their games. But I always liked to feel my way into a match, fine tune what I would do based on my level of play and the feedback I was getting from across the net. (Sampras, 2008, p.67)

Perhaps one of the most overlooked qualities of an athlete is his or her ability to set challenging goals. Sampras had set the goal of becoming the best in the world. Furthermore once he achieved this amazing feat, he pushed further and set new goals. After finishing 1996 at number 1 for the fourth consecutive year, Sampras had set a goal to beat Jimmy Connors record for most consecutive years at number 1. Connors did it 5 years in a row. Sampras discussed what his goal was for with his coach and together they moved forward (Sampras, 2008). Because of the goal setting, Sampras was able to keep pushing himself in times of fatigue and injury.

Chapter Three: Reflections on Findings

As a former athlete and now a coach, I have come to realize that it is important that in order for athletes to achieve expertise in their respective disciplines, they must lay the groundwork for a strong foundation. The foundation as shown by the examples of Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi is built on hard work, along with10 years of deliberate practice. The deep and timely practice they went through from a young age was extreme but necessary in order to have a chance at becoming world class or an expert.

While I competed, I put in a tremendous number of hours on focused work from the beginning. Through those long hours of practice, I developed not only the physical skills to perform on the international stage, but the mental habits that would carry me through the ups and downs that sport inevitably brings. My understanding on the importance of regular training only grew as I matured into my adulthood. The beginning/developmental stage for any athlete is perhaps the most crucial, because it instills the habits that the athletes will bring with them into the future.

The mental skills developed from the beginning will also be the guiding light for future performances. If the habits are learned from the start, it will be easier to build a successful future. If we take Andre Agassi as an example, he focused too much on being perfect and not making mistakes, compared to Pete Sampras who focused on playing the game and took every game and opponent as it came. Two very different mindsets, one very destructive while the other being open. Agassi did not have a real tennis coach from the start, rather he had his father who instructed him. There were positives and negatives with this situation. The positives being that he really developed his tennis game, but, lacked the mental skills to develop a more solid game.

Unfortunately Agassi lacked focus. His lack of focus damaged his training, which in turn damaged his confidence. Perhaps this was Andre's biggest weakness, as we saw in the previous chapter. He was constantly getting derailed from his training. Orlick (2007) discusses the importance of focus stating:

> Improving your focus allows you to continue to learn, experiment, grow, create, enjoy and perform close to your capacity. Excellence flows naturally when you develop confidence in your focus and know that your focus will take you where you want to go. Consistent high level performance depends on consistent high quality focus. When you develop, direct, and connect your focus, you strengthen all elements of excellence that add quality and consistency to your performance and joy to your life." (p.12)

If we examine the case of Pete Sampras, we can see that he was in a special situation, whereas he had many different coaches teaching him different skills. His first coach Pete Fischer had an unusual understanding of the sport and brought in different specialist to develop Pete's game. But one thing that Sampras definitely had, that Agassi did not have, it was the desire to grow. Sampras wanted to learn, he wanted to grow as an athlete whereas Andre states many times throughout the book that he hated tennis. Sampras chose excellence and developed.

Orlick (2007) states that "You can choose to go through the motions, to slop through whatever you are doing, or choose to focus on performing with quality, to the best of your ability." (p.5) Of course, this is not to stay that Agassi slopped through his training, but, he did lack the consistency that Sampras had.

When I was competing, I was not the only wrestler in the practice room. There were other athletes training alongside me trying to become better athletes. Although they wanted to improve, their focus was not consistent and what separates the experts from the norm or the

average athletes, is what Orlick states above. The majority of athletes come into the practice room and just go through the motions. Once in a while, they would show up to practice and train like world champions, but those sessions were few and far between. Sampras, as mentioned above, did everything to the best of his ability. If he did not succeed, he did not take it negatively and he did not beat himself up. Andre on the other hand took his losses personally and it really had a negative effect on him and his performances. This definitely came from having his father coach him. His father placed huge emphasis on winning rather than on development, whereas Sampras, if he lost and gave his everything, it was okay. The focus was on development.

When analyzing the deliberate practice that Sampras and Agassi accomplished, it shows just how specific the development and training needs to be. The 10 000 hours of training is just a small part of the total package. It is critical that an athlete trains, but it is more important that they do the right type of training. If the work is not focused and precise, there is no chance that an athlete can perform under pressure at the highest levels of competition.

In my practice as a coach, I often try and give analogies that would make things more clear for the athletes. If we take a concert pianist for example, if he was to prepare for a recital, would it not be extremely important that he practice the piece with precision? Would it not be important that he play each note correctly? Would not his finger placement be of importance? Would it not be important that his ability to play the piece without mistakes be important to put on a good recital? Imagine if the pianist practiced the piece differently each day, when the time would come to perform, he would not be able to replicate what the piece is supposed to sound like. I give this example because when practicing the different techniques, athletes seem to think it is okay to just practice them anyway they please. Without deliberate practice, focused skills and the mindset of trying to perfect each movement, there is no chance at reaching expertise.

As an educator and a coach I understand that each student learns differently and more importantly that each student has different capabilities and capacities. Although this is important to take into consideration, this does not mean that the athlete or student should not do the 10 000 hours or deliberate practice to achieve the high levels of competence and expertise at the skill they are performing. As stated earlier on in the thesis, you cannot skip these two elements to become an expert. One cannot attain levels of expertise without having gone through deep practice. Athletes learn a lot from their coaches, but, there is a tremendous amount of knowledge that they learn by doing the training on their own. They learn not only about the sport but most importantly they learn about themselves.

- They learn what their present limitations are
- They learn how to learn
- They learn how to be critical thinkers
- They learn how to reflect
- They learn how to set short term and long term goals
- They learn what their strengths and weaknesses are
- They learn how to deal with stress, anxiety and fatigue
- They learn how to push themselves beyond what they thought they were capable of

All these ideas are central in being a world class performer. The interesting part about these elements is that they can change as the athlete grows. Their limitations change, their strength and weaknesses change, their anxiety and stress change and most importantly their short term goals change while keeping their long term ones in mind.

Goal setting was monumental in the development in both tennis superstars. After becoming world number one, it was important to repeat that feat. Agassi had different goals than

Sampras but nonetheless, the goals they set for themselves were continuously changing as their careers progressed. An athlete's ability to set goals is what will allow them to stay hungry once they have accomplished what they set out to undertake. Without the ability to set goals, the motivations to train and develop have no meaning. We saw Agassi struggle with becoming world number 1. He wrestled with the idea of walking away from tennis. Once he reflected on his career up to that point, he thought that maybe he was done as an athlete. Once he really looked inwards and realized that tennis was a huge part of his life that in turn led him to set other goals, which kept him motivated to continue training.

Maintaining a regimented lifestyle is hard enough while trying to pursue a dream. Possibly what is even harder is trying to stay motivated and hungry once you are on top. To repeatedly be a world class performer over time is exceptionally difficult.

Ultimately expert athletes are not born; they are made and developed over time. After examining the autobiographies, these two athletes cultivated their abilities through hard, focused work. Whatever natural abilities these athletes were born with, they could not have been world class or experts without having gone through the experiences as illustrated in the framework based on the literature review summarized in Figure 1 at the end of Chapter 1.

Pete Sampras having worked with the many different coaches and developing his serve. Andre Agassi returning thousands of balls a week with his father as a junior, and then further exploring his abilities at the Bollitieri Academy.

Finally, the performances that these two athletes displayed were not god-given as the myth perpetuates. It should be taken into consideration that these two tennis greats practiced well over 10 years before becoming experts. The 10 year rule is the minimum to attaining world class or expertise. The accumulated hours of practice need to be deliberate. More often than not, if this

is not the case it will take longer than 10 years of work in order to become an expert. When deciding to embark on the road to expertise, coaches and athletes alike need to consider the framework I presented but also be aware of the pitfalls and how to avoid or correct these since the path to expertise is riddled with ups and downs: Physiological, technical, cognitive and emotional and the reaction and coping mechanisms vary from one individual to the next as illustrated by the autobiographies of Agassi and Sampras.

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