



OPINION

6 lessons entrepreneurs can learn from watching Rafael Nadal train

Arjun Kalyanpur posted on 12th June 2018

Rafael Nadal recently made history with his 11th championship win at the French Open. What is it like to train with such a great sportsperson, and what lessons can entrepreneurs take from his training regimen?

My son has been training at the Rafa Nadal Tennis Academy in Mallorca, Spain over the past year. Watching him in practice sessions training with Rafael Nadal has been rewarding for me as a parent and a learning experience as an entrepreneur. Here are some of the learnings I've picked up from Rafael Nadal that I feel other entrepreneurs may benefit from:



Never stop learning

The incredible thing is that even though Rafa is world number one, it is as though his glorious past does not exist for him. He is completely engaged in every tennis practice session as seriously as though he is a neophyte. The learning for the entrepreneur is that the hallmark of true greatness lies in the ability to constantly seek improvement and to be open to feedback. This is particularly important for those entrepreneurs who taste early success, which has the risk of making them feel infallible.

Intensity is everything

Nadal's approach to every single practice rally can be summarized in a simple expression – 100 percent. He hits every single shot in every single practice rally as though his life depended on it. Never does one get the sense that this is 'merely a practice session'. Watching him practice is akin to observing Achilles prepare for the battle of Troy. There is the sense that this is a buildup to something major and significant, and therefore ultimately it is. I believe the learning for entrepreneurs is to treat every single client and sales interaction and professional activity, however trivial, as one that can potentially be of significant value, which in fact it can.

Understand your limitations, and work to overcome them

One sees in the practice that Rafa works hard to improve on those aspects of his game that one might consider his 'weaknesses', for example, his serve. Both as a physician and an organization leader, I realize how important it is to use a Quality Assurance process to identify individual weaknesses, from which no one is exempt, and to take corrective measures to benefit patient care and improve organizational performance.

Keep repeating for perfection

Rafa's practice sessions are long and rigorous and marked by long groups of near-identical rallies/drills, which to some would appear monotonous, if not downright boring. However this ability to work on the exact same issue repetitively – to the point of distraction – is the hallmark of true genius and brilliance, as it is ultimately what leads to perfection. This is certainly the case both in clinical medicine and in running an organization, where simultaneous repetition and fine-tuning of a process is a reliable predictor of improvement.

Respect your opponent

Since he was 16, my son has been training regularly as Rafa's hitting partner. The fact is that Rafa could train with pretty much anybody, as behoves someone who is number one in the world. Yet he trains regularly with my son as well as others of his high-performance group and gives them the respect due to an equal during the sessions. The learning for any entrepreneur is that with true greatness comes genuine humility and that one must respect any opponent, even one supposedly weaker or smaller.

Have a mentor

Watching Toni Nadal (and now Carlos Moya) on the court with Rafa during his training sessions engenders true respect for the role of the coach and mentor in the life of a professional, however accomplished. The respect that Rafa shows to his coach, albeit tempered with healthy discussion and even argument, epitomizes the best of any genuine learning environment. Entrepreneurs could benefit greatly from observing this mentor-mentee relationship, which in the case of Rafa and Toni has led to an iconic tennis career, establishing both in their respective roles as firm contenders for the title of 'greatest of all time'.

Observing the world's best sportspersons is a special experience. My own unique situation has given me the opportunity to observe at close range and learn from an icon in his field. The essence of my learning has been that fundamental traits such as intensity, perseverance, humility, introspection, and insight, practised with absolute sincerity, are the keys to success, be it in the sporting arena or in the business world.

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