



BORIS FRANZ BECKER
(45)

Nationality: German

Coach: Bob Brett

Spot in the world rankings:
former number 1

Achievements: He won six Grand Slam titles and an Olympic gold medal in doubles, and was the youngest player to win Wimbledon at age 17. He won three ATP World Tour Finals. *Tennis Magazine* ranked him #18 on the list of the 40 greatest players in history between 1965 and 2005.

B O B
BRET, THE
MAN WHO
COACHED
CELEBRATED
TENNIS PLAYERS
BORIS BECKER
AND THE CROATIAN
CHAMPIONS GORAN
IVANIŠEVI AND MARIN
ILI, SAYS THAT NO MATTER
THE DISCIPLINE, EVERYTHING
WORKS THE SAME WAY:
THE KEY TO SUCCESS LIES IN
BETTING ON THE INDIVIDUALS
WITH THE MOST POTENTIAL.

THE ROOTS OF TALENT

High performers, whether they are famous executives, presidents, first-class salespeople, great product developers or stars at any profession, have very sought-after abilities, and can execute them anywhere in the world. How do these individuals achieve sustained high achievement? The greatest coaches in history – like Harry Hopman in tennis, Bill Walsh in football or Mike Krzyzewski in American college basketball – are outstanding examples. They detect people with extraordinary performance and create sustained legacies of excellence.

How can we apply the lessons we learn from high-performance sports in the world of business? To explore that question, two different types of coaches, Bob Brett and Roger Martin, tell about their experiences.

Bob Brett dedicated his career to training tennis players with the greatest achievements and recognitions, including Boris Becker (who was the number-one player in the world, and won six Grand Slams), Goran Ivanišević (number two in the world and Wimbledon champion) and Marin Čilić (current number 15 in the global ranking). Furthermore, Brett is a high-performance consultant for

BY JENNIFER RIEL

Tennis Canada, the national administration board of the sport, which is how he met Roger Martin, its president. In his current position as the dean of the Rotman School, in his former career as a partner at the Monitor Company, and more recently as an advisor to executives, Roger Martin has dedicated decades to working with the most high-performing talents in business.

How do you know if someone “has what it takes” to be a tennis champion?

(Bob Brett)

You start with first-class talent, which is a combination of an ability to learn, an ability to read the game, and physical ability. But we cannot ignore desire and character. In general, there are three things that you have to watch in tennis: hands, feet and eyes. In the hands, the ease with which the player hits the ball and it flies off of the racket; in the feet, a certain grace and efficiency in their movement; and in the eyes, a spark, a level of sharp attention and an ability to learn through observing and imitating without needing much detailed instruction.

An ability to learn must be a constant among champions. But the definition of talent varies according to the industry. What do you think of talent in the business world?

(Roger Martin)

Bob seems to have a more nuanced definition of talent in his field than what I had in mine. He has a plan that has worked perfectly throughout his 30 years of experience. When I was younger, I tried to develop too many people that lacked that basic talent. But that was my mistake, not theirs. Now I am more selective. I try to limit my consulting service to first-class CEOs and students with great talent. The challenge is always to identify talent that you can really justify investing in. It is not difficult to analyze the world and find the most talented individuals, but that talent is already very expensive and, often, has already defined ways of working. The key is to find potential. Who has the potential to stand out? In business, it has to do with the ability to work with heuristics, operate with complexity, general rules and intuition, instead of executing an algorithm. In the area of consulting, and generally in intellectual work, a good part of the work requires the application of personal criteria. So

that is what I look for. It means detecting the first weak signs of the potential future.

(B.B.) Instead of focusing completely on past and current performance, the most important question when selecting high-performance players is: “How far could they go?” You want to ask yourself what he or she could build on those promising foundations. When training them, the question is: “What could this individual achieve?” Where are their strengths, and how can they reduce their weak areas to a minimum? It is important to understand how

talented people deal with pressure, what motivates them, how they face failure and limitations, and what they value the most.

There are extraordinarily talented athletes that do not reach championships and brilliant young people that do not triumph. Beyond talent, what other thing do you need?

(B.B.) The attributes that I look for are similar to what my friend Stan Nicholes, the great strength and physical trainer, called “the qualities of a champion.” There are four of them: first, the ability to play at their highest level when needed; in other words, playing at the highest level when the pressure is highest. Second, the ability to surpass expectations or levels of pain to find the strength to be better than ever, and better than anyone would have thought was possible. Third, the ability to overcome difficulties, and work through an obstacle instead of becoming demoralized. And fourth: loyalty, commitment to a team and trainer, and long-term regiment.

(R.M.) There are many parallels with the world of business if we keep this list of criteria in mind. When I reflect about the people that genuinely stood out in my life as a consultant, there are some dominant

elements. A desire to surpass expectations is one. Talented people have a predisposition to seek a great solution for a client when the client would be happy with a good solution. And in terms of overcoming difficulty, I think that it has to do with learning. In life, we hit a lot of walls. When high performers hit against a wall, they see it as an opportunity to learn and grow. In business, in the long climb to the top, if you aren't a learner, you won't go very far.

C H A M P I O N S
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T H E M S E L V E S B Y T O D A Y ' S
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A N E W S U M M I T .



MARIN CILIC (25)

Nationality: Croatian

Coach: Bob Brett

Spot in the world rankings: 9
Achievements: N° 2 in the world in 2005 in the junior category. Winner of a Roland Garros. He is often compared with Juan Martín del Potro because of his style and height.

AN EXAMPLE IN SPORT



Bob Brett

Born in Australia, he is one of the most recognized tennis coaches in the world. He devoted himself to the sport and its leading players for the past 35 years. His most famous period as a coach was between 1987 and 1991, when he coached German Boris Becker, who won the Australian Open, Wimbledon and the U.S. Open.



Roger Martin

He runs the Department of Premier Research in Competitiveness and Prosperity, and is a professor of strategic management at Rotman Business School. His latest book is *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*, which he wrote with A. G. Lafley (Harvard Business School Press, 2013).



Jennifer Riel

She is the associate director of the Desautels Centre for Integrative Thinking at the Rotman School of Business.

In other words, to many people, hitting a wall is the end; but to talented people, it is the beginning. What happens with the other elements that Bob named: playing under pressure and loyalty?

(R.M.) Loyalty is the most important point. If you want someone to invest in training, they can't give up halfway. It would be a huge loss for someone to jump ship when they are halfway into the development process. So, commitment is necessary to achieve great performance.

I wrote about mastery and originality before, and I believe that both are important. Just like Malcolm Gladwell said about the rule of 10,000 hours in *Outliers*; it takes a long time to reach authentic mastery, whether you have been trained or not.

With respect to playing at your maximum level when it's most important, somehow, the business world facilitates this point. Bob can't get on the court with a player during a game; but I can always go to an important meeting with junior employees to give them my support. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that in time, the junior employee will reach higher levels of performance than I have now. They have to play with all of their potential.

Like it is with everything, mentality is important. This is a critical aspect of the difference between champions, those that maximize their abilities, and those that do not.

(B.B.) Champions assume a personal responsibility for their performance. They form a part of — often enthusiastically — an idea from a trainer and do the rest themselves. They accept not having a complete picture of the situation, and they assume the risk of trying anyway. They can work in inconclusive situations, creating a critical part of the initiative and executing it when needed. They are eager to take dominate challenges and see the trainer as a source of general orientation and inspiration, not a source of detailed instructions.

In 1985, Ivan Lendl was the number one tennis player in the world. On occasions, he shared new training routines with me, which he did because he believed that they helped him stay on top. Champions don't measure themselves by today's triumph, but in relation to the possibilities for the future. Instead of being content in their number one spot, they make an effort to do things even better, and to reach a new summit. Being a champion has to do with running the arc: doing one more repetition, using a heavier weight, or taking on an uncomfortable but important opportunity.

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How do you train that individual?

(B.B.) You have to work with what they have, and build advantages from there. There is a big difference between working with professional circuit players and beginners. With young players, there is a larger development window during which the vision of a player can be more creative. On this point, you have to be conscious and in tune with the performance elements of an individual, something that differentiates them from the others and can give them a competitive advantage at higher levels. Where are the strengths — their potential weapons — from a technical, physical and psychological perspective? And then develop these areas until you turn them into a sustainable competitive advantage. That's where there are champions.

(R.M.) All high performers are different, and need a different focus in order to

develop. But long-term training is less ubiquitous in the business world than it is in sports. In tennis, practically everyone needs a trainer to be successful, and the majority of the greatest players stay with the same coach for long periods of time. In business, many stars have informal mentors, but not someone that trains them in the long term. I wonder how much better they could perform if their training was real and consistent. It is an interesting point: much has been written and studied about how to manage and develop executives. But I believe that with high-performing employees, you need much more personalization. Because they are different. They are never going to be the same and they can't be treated the same way. You have to work with what they have, really know what that is and find a personalized path forward.

The idea of training for high performance through an individualistic approach to development is interesting. When it comes to what to work on, how much of that regiment comes from the trainer and how much from the player?

(B.B.) A critical aspect of training is understanding and evaluating what is going on in the mind of the player, with regards to what they can achieve. The player's imagination is critical to success. Coaches can encourage the development of creativity and independent thought so that the player can make effective decisions under pressure. A coach cannot make the perfect play in the perfect moment; the player needs to be able to think in that situation when

they are on the court under pressure. (R.M.) Criteria is a very important part of his focus. Practically all of his philosophy is based on criteria. You seem to accept that there is no universal rule; one successful approach won't always work. Rules are much easier. There are people that say, "I want the rule. Give me the rule that says when I get to work at nine and leave at five, I will have completed a day of work," instead of saying, "No, actually, you have to do something useful."

(B.B.) In high-performance training there is no universal rule. There are moments in which it is not a good idea to say something to a player. It is better to wait until the next day for the right moment; sometimes you have to wait a few months to find the moment where the feedback will have the greatest impact and significance. It has to do with choosing the best moment for the player. On occasions, they're simply not ready to listen to it, and words are wasted if you insist on expressing them in that situation.

When is the best moment to train a player for change?

(B.B.) Starting early is great, but often, the ideal moment to work with a player is when they're frustrated by what they perceive as a failure. At this point, it is more likely that the individual will open up and be more receptive to new ideas. When everything works well, suggesting changes can be seen as too risky because when an individual follows their coaches' advice, performance can actually worsen at first, until they stabilize and later advance. In tennis, you need between six and eight months for changes in the game of a player — whether they are technical, physical, strategic, or even psychological — to consolidate, and for progress to be visible. Then, when you are working with a hesitant player, instruction should be done simply, clearly and with patience. During this phase, the coach's attitude must be characterized by positive reinforcement and a strong orientation, not by frustration.

(R.M.) High-performing employees need a lot of credit. Praise and recognition motivate them, not just money. So they need their instructors to be positive. Let the student assume the responsibility for the success. This is what it means to be a great coach: helping others win.

What do you do and say to achieve maximum achievement?

(B.B.) First, tell players what to do, not what to not do. Many coaches feel tempted to focus on what someone is doing wrong, and that is a mistake.

(R.M.) It's very difficult not to tell someone what not to do. It is like being asked not to think about elephants: we do it immediately.

(B.B.) "No" is negative, while "let's try this" is positive.

(R.M.) It has to do with communicating with a great deal of caution. If what you decide to do is going to be based on principles more than rules, and will treat individuals differently according to their needs, then you will have to explain what they are doing and why.

(B.B.) Also, respect people's right to ask why they should follow a recommended path. A coach whose goal is high achievement wants to produce

independent thought, a strong character and a willingness to run the risk of failure in order to achieve success in the future. A coach is lost if the goal is limited to putting his own thoughts in the head of the player. In critical moments, it is the player, and not the coach, that should have a higher performance. When the player is on the center court at Wimbledon, the coach feels like they are a good distance from the court. Players have to be able to make their own decisions, which come from the conversations and repetition: first during less important events and later during the major ones.

How do you take care of a high-performing individual who has just failed?

(R.M.) High-performing individuals are difficult. They are egotistical by nature or they wouldn't be great: they have a strong will, or they wouldn't try hard enough; they are restless and nervous, because they belong to a world of gladiators where losing is obvious and painful. Great talents often waste things. And when that happens, they ask for forgiveness (after not asking for permission). So knowing how to forgive mistakes is important. ▀

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GORAN IVANIŠEVIĆ (41)

Nationality: Croatian

Coach: Bob Brett

Spot in the global rankings:
former Number 2

Achievements: He was the only player to win Wimbledon as a wildcard in 2001. He won a Grand Slam in 1995, among other prizes.