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Context to the conversation

Katy speaks about Andre Agassi and the approach Brad Gilbert took with him when he was going through a slump. She says that Brad suggested that Andre would have to devise a strategy that is specific to each opponent and come up with a tailored approach to win and this new approach helped Agassi climb back to the top and win many more tournaments. Katy suggests a similar approach to tackling behavioral change.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you talk about tennis, you talk about how Brad Gilbert helped turn Andre Agassi around.

Katy Milkman (KM): Yes.

DJ: And I love the way you connect the dots. I was more of a Sampras fan to be honest than an Agassi fan.

KM: Oh no, no, do not tell me that.

DJ: But I think the metaphor was fascinating. So I would love for you to just maybe connect the dots for us here.

KM: Yeah, I would love to tell that story. We have been talking sort of a million miles in the sky but getting into some of the stories that make the book hopefully fun to read, not just practically useful is one of my great pleasures. So it was so fun to write this opening story for the book to help make the point about how important it is to match our solution to the obstacle we face. And I should say, I chose the story about Andre Agassi and I did agonize it, this was the last part of the book I wrote and I ripped up many previous drafts with different stories. It was particularly fun because I am a tennis player. In a former life, I was a very serious competitive tennis player as a junior and I played in college, so it was near and dear to my heart. But Agassi, for those listeners who might not be familiar with him, was one of the great tennis players, played in the 1990s, was number one in the world for about a 100 weeks over the course of his career, many Grand Slams to his name. But what is interesting about Agassi is he got off to a really rocky start. There were other rocky periods too actually, he had a lot of bumps, but his start was particularly bumpy. And he was this, sort of, phenom in the United States, everyone expected great things because he had been a junior star and actually, he grew up with other famous tennis players you might know, you mentioned Pete Sampras, they were around the same age, Jim Courier is another name that might be familiar to some people, Michael Chang, so all these players came up as juniors and everyone thought Agassi

was the most talented. He looked like he had the most promise and in the early 1990s despite that, these other guys who were winning Grand Slams, were ranked 1 in the world and he was really struggling. He was well known, you know, he had gotten a lot of endorsements because he wore flashy clothes and he, you know...

DJ: You could not miss him on the court, shall we say?

KM: Right, crazy hair, he wore ripped jeans, he wore lipstick to a tournament once, he was certainly flashy, so people knew who he was but he was not doing well. And in the early 1990s, he had a real low point when he was ranked about 30th in the world, his coach of a decade just left him unceremoniously, and he was foundering, was totally unclear how he was going to recover if he was ever going to have much of a career to speak of. And he had this really important dinner arranged by his manager with Brad Gilbert that turned everything around. This is sort of why it is how to change, and it fits so nicely with the book and the point of changing is this moment. So Brad Gilbert was also a pro player at the time. He had written a best-selling book called *Winning Ugly* that had been a New York Times Best Seller earlier in the year. They sat down and Agassi is asking Brad Gilbert for advice on his game, like how do I turn it around, and, sort of, trying to figure out would he be a good coach for him and Gilbert basically tells Agassi he has been playing the sport wrong his whole life. And he has some credibility in saying this. Gilbert, even though he is not reputed to be naturally talented, had done incredibly well. He would have this really successful career as a pro tennis player, often reaching further in tournaments and anyone thought he had any right to, given his natural ability. He was a strategic player and he basically said to Agassi, look, if I had your talent, I would be number one in the world. You are doing it all wrong, you are going out on the court, you are trying to win every point with these flashy shots because you have so much talent, but you never think about who is on the opposite side of the court and you never strategize and figure out how do I let this person lose some points, how do I work their weaknesses. You are always trying to close and always trying to hit the big shot and you are so good that you have gotten pretty far on that, but if you just played a strategic game, figure it out how to tailor your approach to your opponent, you could be the best. And it was this sort of light bulb moment for Agassi based on, you know, and by the way, I should say Agassi wrote this amazing memoir called *Open*, which is the source material for this story.

DJ: Love it, I love that book.

KM: Ah, so good. I highly recommend it. That is how I learned the story and about this pivotal dinner that changed Agassi's understanding of the game. He took Gilbert on as his coach, started playing completely differently. I mean it took a little while to train that way and he had amazing outcomes. He entered the US Open, which is one of the biggest tournaments of the year, one of four Grand Slams and he was unseeded, meaning, no one thought he was going to perform well, he was not going to come in the top 16 was the expectation. And he actually won the tournament playing his completely different style, forcing his opponents to win, rather than losing himself by trying to go for all these perfect shots. He was extremely strategic and he, eventually actually in that same run, reached number one in the world, a position that he went on to hold for a total of a 100 weeks over his career. And again, there were more ups and downs but that was a real turning point in the way he approached the game and completely changed the level he was able to rise to. And I think the key insight is exactly the insight that so many of us miss when it comes to behavior change. The way he changed his strategy of play was to become strategic. Instead of looking for the one-size-fits-all solution to tennis, he started tailoring. And it is exactly what I have seen works best for individuals and organizations trying to create change. There has to be an acknowledgement of what is the barrier and a strategic tailoring of the solution to that opponent that you are up against. And once that happens, your odds are much better, just as they are in tennis. So that is why I open with that story, that is a metaphor and hope it resonates with listeners.

DJ: Lovely, and as Late Clay Christensen would say, one size fits nobody. Sometimes, you might have..., so point well taken.

KM: Right, and it is funny, in business, we think about strategy a lot. It is a great point. Clay Christensen was a great strategic thinker, but we tend to think about it more at the organizational level. And I think that that very basic insight of how important it is to think about strategy is rarely applied to our personal lives, to our personal decision-making, to solving for change at the individual level. And that is kind of a key point at the heart of the book, is we get it in these other settings, we get it in sports, we get it in organizational strategy but at the individual level, it is just as important.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This reminds me of an insight from Prof Tarun Khanna (TK) of Harvard Business School who was on this podcast earlier. He spoke about how companies and individuals need to think about their Strategy.

He goes onto share some interesting insights around how careers of the future are likely to evolve. To tune into that wisdom do go to Play to Potential.com and find Tarun Khanna in the Guests section. Thank you for listening. For more please visit playtopotential.com

End of nugget transcription

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Katy Milkman - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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