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Guest

Vijay Amritraj is an individual who has donned several hats. He is a former tennis player who competed at the highest levels of the game. He then transitioned after his playing career to become a successful Commentator, Broadcaster, Actor, Producer and much more. In Feb 2001, Vijay was appointed a United Nations Ambassador for peace where he raised awareness on the issues of drugs and HIV/AIDS and in raising funds to fight the spread of AIDS worldwide. Vijay founded The Vijay Amritraj Foundation in 2006. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1983.

Context to the conversation

In our conversation we spoke about his reflections on his journey till date. This included insights around tennis as a career, peak performance, role of resilience, how he thinks about coaching, how he thought about reinventing himself as his playing career was coming to an end, role of his family in him giving back to the wider society and much more.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Vijay, thank you so much for your time.

Vijay Amritraj (VA): It's great to be with you; I am looking forward to it.

DJ: Indeed. I must say there's a belated thank you I want to give you as a person coming from Chennai. I have enjoyed watching the tennis at the Gold Flake Open, which is now the Chennai Open and I remember Rafael Nadal before he burst into the action in the international scene showing up at the courts of Chennai which was a unique privilege. So, a big thank you to you for bringing this sport to Chennai.

VA: No, we loved having him. I think he came three or four years if memory serves me correctly and went on to obviously become one of the best players we have ever seen.

DJ: Indeed, indeed. And no conversation with you is appropriate without starting with Wimbledon. So, I am going to ask you Vijay Amritraj the fan, before you started playing in the courts of Wimbledon, what would you say would be your favourite fan moment at Wimbledon?

VA: Well, I think, it's a dream like for every child, you know, who wants to play a sport and any sport for that matter and tennis in particular for us going there in 1969, my goodness, I was something like

15-years-old and finally making it there to walk through those gates, standing in line for hours to get into the standing room at Wimbledon and just walked through those gates gave me Goosebumps, and I knew that at some point I was hoping I would be able to play in it and certainly do well in it. And to this day, when I walk through those gates at Church Road, they give me the same Goosebumps so many years later. But it's one of those things where, you know, when you talk about the pinnacle of a sport, you know, that was certainly it for tennis.

DJ: Indeed, and for me my favourite was back in 2000, I think, I got the fourth round of Pete Sampras playing Karol Kučera in Center Court.

VA: Okay, well there you go.

DJ: We queued up the whole day and there are these six-pound tickets which were recycled.

VA: Yes.

DJ: And their proceeds would go to charity. So, just a moment when he won the game and the flashlights going off was divine.

VA: Very special, yeah, it's a moment that people remember when they go there.

DJ: Indeed. So, Vijay I want to rewind the clock a little bit and take you back in time where you started playing tennis, and I am given to understand initially it was a means to staying fit but at some stage you started getting good at it. When was the first time you really made a commitment to tennis as a profession and what were the trade-offs involved at that time?

VA: I think the commitment to tennis really had to do with my health, because I was ill growing up as a child but more importantly the doctors advising me to play an outdoor sport, advising my parents and my mother sort of then taking it upon herself to actually put me into the game which was so distant to me from a health perspective and basically to be able to be like everyone else and to try to go to school as a normal child. All of those things were the priority at the time when I started playing tennis. So, obviously the dream of doing well and being the best in India and playing Davis Cup and going to Wimbledon and all of that was really what it was as sort of a pipe dream at the time because we had no one to emulate or follow because tennis went open in 1968 and before me Ramanathan Krishnan was the icon in tennis and he had obviously played Wimbledon on many occasions and had done really well at Wimbledon. But again, the game was amateur, it wasn't professional and so a lot of the major players were certainly missing but it gave us the indication of how revered he was at the time that he played the game.

DJ: And I guess this question comes from a broader observation Vijay where in general there are some careers which are low odds and what I mean by that is the odds of success are low and the people at the very top have a good commercial outcome, but it can be quite hard if you are stuck in the middle. So, I would put arts, music, and a lot of the creative areas including sport in that bucket. So, any perspectives on that front in terms of how people should think about going for the lower risk option versus really giving it a shot and giving it the best and seeing if they come out on top.

VA: I think frankly the lower risk option in sport, especially in an individual sport is lower risk than any other profession you could possibly pick in that... I take that back, I suppose the word is high risk

than any other sport including art and culture and film and music and television and all of that and especially at the time that we were growing up because, you know, obviously a lot has changed over the last 30-40 years. But I think when you look back in time the issue of playing a sport and saying okay, let's commit ourselves entirely to this sport would have been completely ludicrous. You probably or well you (0:05:12) would have had a much, much, much better chance of taking what little economic prowess you had in going to Las Vegas and betting it all on rain (0:05:20). I think that would have been a much better chance of winning because at least there you have a 50 percent chance of a win, where the chances of you doing that in what we chose were practically nil.

DJ: Give us an insight into how you recalibrate what success means, when you had that kind of meteoric rise, how did you really redefine for yourself, what the goal post would be at that stage?

VA: I think it's hard to look back and see what you felt at that particular moment, but I think the more important thing is what it teaches you, that's where the education starts to take priority over success. In that case for me my entire Tennis life has been an education it's not a question of success or failure but it's more of an education of teaching me things that I never dreamt I would get, oh would have gotten from any form of a school or education system so on and so forth.

So I think when you look at it from that angle, I feel that I have been extremely well educated. Not necessarily with the high power of degree or so on and so forth but I think if you look at it from the stand point of what it is taught me about People about Places about History about Civilization about Culture about so many different things that I never would have dreamt of having an option of to be able to go visit or see or be a part of and that doing at that level that was probably measurable today, that was what I take away from that and when you look back at that particular match at thirteen and half year before my fourteenth birthday actually and to playing a guy who's 18 19 20 years old and coming back from two sets to lock down at such a young age and so on, I think those kinds of moments stay with you through life because you are reaching so deep into yourself that you didn't think you had and I don't mean it in just a form of a inspired anyone but more importantly it is an education to yourself it teaches you about yourself and your character and what you are capable of doing, ohh may be I can do more with myself than just kind of or to scale 1 to 10 how was my day today? Was it a 5 or 8 or a 12 and why should it be a 12? And can dig deeper to make it a 12 and I think those kinds of things come when you play a match like that and then it is sort of stood me in good step all the way through my career.

DJ: Did you have that sort of feeling at that point saying, I never dreamt to come this far now I am here now what? Give us a sense of how you took stock of life when you were playing at that very top?

VA: For me the sport was always very much path or way, more of a journey than reaching any pinnacle of the sport or any of that I think it was more a question of, in the early stages it was my health then once I had my initial jump to belief in myself at the age of 13, 14 years old that I could possibly do a lot better and then of course becoming India's No. 1 and Asia's No. 1 and then eventually making it onto the world's stage all of them came fairly rapidly but obviously through a lot of hard work and all of it that people put into time and effort into my talents and tried to reach to the potential that hopefully I reached but I think the more important for me is the fact that yes as much as I was trying to be the best that I could possibly be in this sport at that time every 10 years period was sort of an important aspect for me and I had to be a particular way in first 10 years and

then the second 10 years and then the third 10 years, of every decade of my life and then get the best out of it. From a stand point of being both the best I could be plus also educate myself as much as I possibly could from that particular decade, you can't be in your thirties what you are in your twenties and so on and so forth.

So, as it taught me a lot I knew that I was continuously living in a non-real world but it was also giving me a platform to be able to be better and better as life progressed at a latest stage in my life to be able to use these experiences to be better at that time it might be in a different profession it might be in a different life it might be a different calling, I don't know but hopefully I would have prepared for that through this 20, 22 years of the Tennis circuit.

DJ: That's fascinating you talk about the notion of keeping the learning engine on irrespective of where you are and that's sort of being...

VA: Constantly I think that's the important factor of life, whenever you talk to a doctor he always tells you he is constantly learning irrespective of what specific surgery he does or he is a general physician and so on and so forth he constantly trying to be better because of whether its technology which is improving the profession or whatever else it might be you are constantly learning and every generation starts to pick up more things and every generation starts to be a little more different and how do we be able to be agile and kind of move with the times even if you are in your 40s 50s or 60s it doesn't really matter the question is how do we adapt to what the world is changing to?

DJ: Give us an insight into where do you look for courage, where do you go to get that courage, to win that moment?

VA: Well I think, I generally feel most people have it and they don't know it, and it's a question to being able to find it. It's almost like that terrific film with Harrison ford. They are looking for the lost stock for the covenant which was going to give them life forever and so on and so forth and it trying to find things that you almost didn't think existed and that's what you sort of look for it in yourself irrespective of what job you are doing, in sport there is a lot more clarity to it, especially in an individual sport because it's just you and the another person and it's a question of how difficult the times are how difficult the situation it is whether it's the Weather, whether it's the Heat, whether it's the Humidity, whether it's lack of Nutrition that you might not have taken the last four days and all of a sudden you have got pushed into the fourth set and you are two sets to one down or whatever else it might be and now the question comes is to a, as I did in 1987 Argentina match where I was clearly down and India was down two matches to win and you look back and think what made you get out of it and I think at that particular moment in time where I were at the tail end of my career. So, am retired at the peck already almost 34 years old and the guy I was playing with was 21 he was the guy amongst top 10, he was closing me out very comfortably to shut in the out in that first day and after I manage to squish out the third set 8-6 and we came into the locker room for 10 mins of a break and I was on the training table and the physio was working on me all my team was around me the manager said listen you are done I think you have done extremely well it's time to go home and the doctors also said listen I don't think you should go out there that you have lost a lot of weight and it will be harmful to your health and that's the point in time where we all face in the course of life where there is the fork on the road and there is the fork on the road where one take a right where everything is calm and comfortable, you can go home and lie in the tub and them eventually have a good meal and lie in bed and that's your right turn and that keeps you good you

will always be remembered as a good player and then there is that left turn which you take which is practically impossible to navigate you can't see through the forest there are all kinds of the obstacles in the way which challenges aren't a mountable and you don't have either the energy or the strength or the ability or the belief to be able to take it forward and taking that road is again a very high risk proposition but that's where you are able to test your own self against the question of greatness and so very few people are given that opportunity. So, as the great Belgian King said you know, every challenge is an opportunity and pressure is privileged and very few people have it in those kinds of situations with their such a great clarity this side if safe this side is not this side you will remain good this side you have the potential to be great with the one percent chance, so, do you want to take it? So, you dive head long to it because that's who I was and I am, and eventually you have pulled yourself out of that situation because then tread the line takes you beyond the realm of reality, eventually being done two match on the forth and then winning 6-2 in the fifth by the time you got to the fifth set the Argentinian were already beaten and then they knew that the opponent had swung the forearm and euphoria of the crowd was over whelming I was playing beyond my own capability and the loss was never in any one's mind except winning that particular match. So, then we went out or courts for the David's with final, but I think the most important aspect of that particular match as it was with the one when I was 13 and the half year old is what it teaches you about yourself it's not about winning and losing about that match, yes, I could have loss that match, but I don't think that's the issue the issue is more the question of who are you? What it did for you? And how did it teach you to become a better person and what did it teach you about your character and your own belief in yourself and those kinds of things and I think that's the kind of thing you want everyone to learn from it and it not just the winning and losing.

DJ: How did you deal with failure? Give us an insight into how leaders can cope with failures and bounce back stronger?

VA: Well first of all if someone says to you, it didn't bother than that much than you should be playing this sport in first place, this is the very high risk adventure and Wins and Losses are the part of the game but at the end of the day we all know that we lose more than we win and that's why it makes the wins so important and so wonderful at the same time when you lose and especially when you lose in a tight match in a tight format the disappointment is huge, recovery slow disappointment is huge you are upset but what it does is it tells you to look at it, you look at it again and again and again and not make that mistake again if there is a mistake that you have made or in certain cases like it happened in 1979 against Paul in Wimbledon on court number 1 again I will have two sets to won three won left fourth and lost in five sets, now there was no way I should have lost that particular match and I did and I looked back at that match and I think could I have done something different? And the answer was clearly No. it was one of those matches that won in a thousand times you have to won and that happened to be that one time disappointment, again in 1981 against Connors in Wimbledon two sets to love up three to fifteen, thirty I lost in five sets now when we look back at losses and failures you learn a lot more than you do from successes we are all fairly clear about that because when you win a match you don't think about that match that's done and dusted so you look at the next round as to who you are playing you don't think of the guy that you have beaten whereas when you lose a match you only continuously think of that guy that you lost to and you wonder what I can do to get better to, never let that guy beat me again and it could happen again and again and again as it happened between me and Ken Rosewall he beat six time in a row before I finally beat him in London but it never stopped me from continuously thinking that I need to get better to beat this guy in the particular format which is I ended up doing so I think as far as

failure is concerned it's not really a failure, It is a failure if you don't learn from it and I think that's where the rubs comes in disappointment? Yes! Are you upset? Yes! Anger perhaps not, in certain cases it might be people who are angry, how did I miss that smash? Or how did I miss this pass? And so on and so forth but I think to great extent the failure comes from honestly not learning from it, Lincoln lost so many elections before he eventually became president at United States and he lost literally all of the earlier elections and where did he end up becoming president, it just shows the character of the man so I think when you look at things like that there are numerous examples success that where you actually learn from failure and that's why you are successful not because you took failure so much to hard that puts you back in your seat.

DJ: Give us an insight into how leaders should think about combining peak performance with longevity, how should one's think about ensuring that you don't burn out too quickly in an intense whether it's Profession or sport.

VA: I am not quite sure that you can plan it that simply and say I want to play for 20 years especially in a sport and especially in an individual sport, injury can come and take you in 6 months two surgeries and you are done, an ankle twist it take you out six months all those things are normal setbacks for an athlete, there is no athlete who's gone through in life 20 years without having any kind of hiccup, pitfall and an obstacle that's very much a part of profession has been chosen but at the end of the day for me my greatest achievement was to a flag that long at a very high level and being able to contend in every tournament that I have played to win the tournament nothing short of it even to this day if I happened to be the Asian player with the most number of tour and titles thirty forty years after I played the game without there playing I am still, I still have more titles than any other Asian player which is an unusual record which needs to be broken because we need players of that calibre to play at that very high level. So, I think when you look at things like this and you say the longevity, longevity comes afterwards and yes, I had surgeries I had all kinds of physical issues and so on and so forth but the longer you play of course you have more of a problem post your career where all of these injuries and setbacks and the physical elements that you have had don't just go away one fine morning when because you quit the game it lasts through your life time you just have to deal with it.

I think also a lot had to do with the fact we are also looking for others to follow and I think if we were clearly on the map to keep us in the world group and the Davis cup to be able to contend Wimbledon every year and all of that it would have probably made my exit a little quicker from the sport but not having that at that particular time I received many thousands of letters asking me to continue playing and all of that it spared me onto stage perhaps few years longer than I should have but it didn't reduce my capacity to compete.

DJ: How you thought about the transition as you near the end of your tennis career, how you thought about the different options that were in front of you and how you thought about reinventing yourself. So, give us an insight into how you took stock of life as you were sort of nearing the end of your active playing career?

VA: First of all I always knew that my tennis career was really a stepping stone to what life is really all about how can my tennis career educate me into preparing myself for the rest of my real life and honestly when you say a thirty years old you are too old to play the game of tennis you know you are basically lucky to be starting life at that particular age. So, I think when I got married at 29 to 30

years old and then had my first son right away perspectives started to change whether you like it or not? And even though I was fortunate to played the game for another four five years after that it was very important to me to understand what the future is going to look like and I was not just caring about myself because there were two other peoples to care about at that point in time and then four years later my second son was born and then obviously things changed even further but by that time I was prepared for looking after others were more important than myself so I think that preparation was taking shape as and when yes, the early years would be more trying because you are playing your profession at the same time there were other people tend to and look after and there is that rub because when you are playing on your own its all you and what's good for you and so on and so forth but now there are others and that itself is a challenge in itself and then you are able to address it in a matter of speaking similarly as we did in tennis and then it would teach you how to be that person in your thirties and then by the time I was well settled in that sort of family life and my tennis career took a back seat by the time I ended my career playing Wimbledon for the last time. You don't really know however well you have prepared for anything that you want to do in life whether it's a film industry whether it's a television, whether its other businesses and so on and so forth it's a new venture all together and you are really not educated in that venture so in a way you are getting into the deep end to the pool perhaps without knowing how to swim very well. So, I think all of that took shape when I started doing Wimbledon in 1991 or rather the joining at that time Prime sports which now is a Star Sports across Asia to become a broadcaster from 1991 itself so all of a sudden I was entering into the profession I had no knowledge about and that was an another wonderful challenge but I was blessed with the fact that I have played this sport at the highest level so for me now the challenge was not to win at a sport but win with the audience to be able to get the audience to see the game through my eyes and at the same time induce people and encourage them to play for a variety of reasons so that was the nice transition for me to go onto television broadcasting for the sport that I loved and enjoyed and that given so much to me and at the same time enjoy my new family at that particular moment in time at my thirties and then also from there sort of digress into other areas of life.

DJ: In your understanding Vijay what do you think are the key skills or attributes of a good or a great commentator rather?

VA: It depends. There is variety of reasons why a person is hired to do commentary. The term Commentary comes from basically an analyst looking at the match and making comments on match that's why he has called a Commentator a presenter is a guy who technically supposedly looks good is very articulate and is able to present the game where as a commentator comments on what's going on so that's why you have a presenter and supposedly an analyst who commentates on game the presenter is the one who brings it in takes it out talks about commercial breaks and talks about the facts about these are the stats and so on and so forth ohh by the way Mr. Analyst what do you think of a this particular match why did you lose and why did you win and so on. So, that's the way a team works together as a commentary in presenting a particular sport. Well I would like to add more value to it by saying if there are four people in the home watching tennis match there may be only two people who like tennis and may be the father and the daughter like tennis but the mother and son would go out and do something else now my job at that point in time is to make sure I still keep the father and daughter completely engaged in the match but how do I bring that mother and son into this sport that's the challenge. And then you work out ways as to how you would do it.

DJ: How do you pitch it right given that there are two disparate audiences with very different expectations and may be different levels of understanding about the game? So, how do you find that midpoint which satisfies both segments?

VA: It again comes from the matches, it comes from the fact that you know, what all these peoples go through and you know what questions were asked to me when I was playing by the audiences post matches and before matches, ohh what do you eat before you play? Do you pet the dog, sleep on the particular side of the bed, go to same restaurant you go to all the time, you eat the same breakfast every morning because you won that day there are things that interest people that have a very little to do with the match itself its whether Mary Sharapova took her dog to the same restaurant because she was having dinner with some people and so the dog came and sat next to her dinner and what will the dog have, it's so on and so forth but these things kind of tend to fascinate people who might not be interested in the sport but you can perhaps try to draw the mean and then keep them there because its engaging.

DJ: Give us an insight into the art of asking good questions.

VA: When I started doing television work for Star Sports and commenting on Sports that I knew really well, it was still a challenge because I had not done television before in this so called commenting or presenting format but that was a challenge but the positive aspect of this was the fact that I was dealing with the sport that I knew very well of course I went out to do other sports thereafter, I did Golf for many years, I did Badminton, I did one of the anchors for London Olympics and so on and so forth. So, it taught me more and more as I did more television work because obviously there is a lot more aspects to it than just commentating on match or asking questions because you have got a producer near you, you have got commercials to deal with, you have got segments to finish in a particular time frame and all of that so there are a lot of other challenges that you work with especially with the live broadcast because you are working with the aspects of time whereas in a show that you are trying to create with the content than you have the ability to edit, which in our sport we never had the only thing we had was the second surf so, I think when I look at it that way it gave me a good insight is to what I really need to learn and I would be too able to draw the audience in as well. I think from the stand point of being an interviewer and talking to a guest on the show, when I was doing television for tennis I tried to mould myself a little bit a more on the Dan Maskell's style of commentary, who you worth well before your time, but there was a great Dan Maskell who does news in the U.S., who were very special when they did commentary and they came from the aspects of less is more when you are an interviewer when you are a host of a show the entire show is about the guest, it's not about the host or it's not about the person asking the questions and for me whenever I had a guest on the show it was never going to be a Q and A and it was never going to be a monologue it was always meant to be a dialogue. So, the important this is to be listen to the guest and be able to take questions lay and go from there as to what the Lay man is want to hear the audience is want to hear. Guess you have a string of questions in your head that you want to get to but at the end of the day it still needs to be a dialogue so it makes the conversation more interesting like the Larry King would have done it on CNN for many years and that's what made him so popular because he was an everyday man, wearing his braces and sitting there with someone across the table be a John Lennon or be it a President or a Prime minister and just have a chat with him and that's what it was meant to be similarly with the great Barbour Altos who used to do shows for ABC and those kinds of things made it a lot more interesting as oppose to

saying let me get a quick back let me see what the guy is going to say and or pampering him with the Q & As continuously.

DJ: How you would frame the questions to get to the next level of insight than just the superficial stuff that comes out in a lot of conversations.

VA: It's almost like a Tennis match, when you end up getting into a rally you hit a particular shot so you expect that shot is packed in a particular spot and then you are able to deal with the next shot in Billiards when the guy hits the red ball with his cue ball his able to position that que ball for the next shot and prepare so his position well that this is what he wants and similarly in Q and A it's not very different unless you have beaten that particular segment into the ground and you are not going to listen the answer you want so leave it alone.

DJ: Got it. It's an interesting point to see it as a sequence rather than just a one-off.

VA: Yeah, exactly.

DJ: I guess it's a flow and not a string of dots. And of the various interviews you have done if I had to say two or three that stand out for you in terms of the most memorable interviews? Would you call out two or three interviews that have left a mark?

VA: Of the international ones my conversations with Andre and Steffi Graf together were quite special. We did it from Las Vegas, unbelievable interview, both of them together, which was very interesting, both for them and for me and because the interview was so interesting, they kept going for a much longer period of time than they probably thought they would get off at. My piece with Donald Trump was very interesting because it opened something for me that I had not heard before. And to me that was easy for me to then continue with the questions, whether it's success and failures as we are talking about today, and so on and so forth. One of the toughest ones for me to do was in fashion because I didn't quite know enough about fashion, especially ladies' fashions, where I am talking to one of the greatest fashion icons of my generation Cindy Crawford. And I was doing a one-on-one with her for an hour that was not easy because I wasn't well versed in ladies' fashion even though I had done my homework on it. But to have that... but she made it a lot easier than anticipated so it made it simpler. But the others were all fairly simple also because I knew most of them and they knew me as well so it was more of a dialogue than a Q&A.

DJ: But is there anything different in nature of preparation you would do when you are operating way out of your comfort zone as in this case when you were talking about fashion? Is there anything fundamentally... of course you would cover greater depth and you would read up more but is there any other nuance on what you would do to prepare for such conversations?

VA: Frankly, it makes it a lot more unrealistic when you are studying up more on a person because it's not quite as natural as when you know the person and they can tell and you can tell and you can tell that they can tell. So, it's a little bit more interesting for me when I am talking to someone like Michael Douglas, for example, who was wonderful. I mean it's easy to go through his films and so on and so forth and I was like, hey, how was it when you played Gordon Gekko or what do you think of that wonderful line greed is good and things like that, you know, because you know it so well. But when I talked to Amitabh, for example, Amitabh Bachchan on a pursuit of excellence show, it was easy to talk to him because one, he loves sports, and he loves what I had done in sport and the fact

that we knew each other well. And we didn't talk, we didn't talk about any of his films and we talked on general terms about him coming out of not getting a job in radio and then being able to do what he has done in film in more ways than one; we didn't really talk about all the characters he has played and so on and so forth or the upcoming movies but he talked about life and he talked about life and cinema and the world and that was what made it so much more interesting. The same with A.R. Rehman who's not completely an extrovert in music but he's a genius with his music and it was, you know, honestly terrific talking to someone like that and then bringing out what he really wanted to say.

DJ: Fascinating. How do you go about spotting potential? What do you look for a player who will rise on his way to the top.

VA: In certain cases, it's fairly clear, that you can tell. Especially when the kid is anywhere from 8 9 10 up you could possibly, in some case it's clear but that doesn't mean he is going to make it or she is going to make it that's where the rub comes just because on a scale of one to ten your talent quotient is 9 doesn't mean you are going to make it and the other side of the coin is if the talent quotient is 1 you are not going to make it. The best examples of those are the fact that Hard work will overcome lack of the talent any day of the week and twice on Sunday but lack of work is not going to help an extremely talented guy make it to the top in the similar fashion so hard work is a necessity whether you like it or not, there is no shortcut to greatness but at the end of the day for some people it comes a little bit easier, for some people it takes longer. John McEnroe, what he could do in 30 minutes took Ivan Lendl one week to do but they both did it and they both became two of the greatest players. So, I think it can be overcome so just because you look at a child and he or she is not be able to do A,B,C and of course mine was the perfect example as I was growing up because on a scale of 1 to 10 I was probably a -1 and so you can't say as all the Pundits did at that time, oh don't waste time, effort and money on this child because he is not going to be good at anything, but you know, you can overcome most of these obstacles if there is that will and that belief and to be the people to be able to help you get there, so, I think those things are probably the ones to be looking at as oppose to saying, oh he or she can or cannot make it.

DJ: Give us an insight into how players select coaches, what differentiate the Great coaches from the Good coaches?

VA: So now you are looking at the 0.001 people who are looking for coaches the actual coaching starts in that village where you have to find the right person to be able to teach you. That's where it begins and that's where the toughest ones come from and can you make that little child 5, 6 years old and be able to fuel his/her passion into what they want to become and do you have that drive to be able to get them at that point where they can be able to get someone at the next level so coaching is a very general term. At the very beginning you need the very basic fundamentals you need to be able to get this into your head and get this into the way you play and then get it to the point where you can play under 8 under 10 under 14 and all of that and be able to take you through that system but once you get there you probably need someone to be able to push you over to the next level. And that might or might not be the same person to be taking to you that far. Toni Nadal for example, worked with Nadal all the way from the time he was started playing the game. It's quite unusual that the guy stayed all the way through his uncle but finally when he got up there and when you really sort if in that lead run of players at that point in time I am not quite sure that you can use a coach as a coach you need someone who's been there done that and who knows how to use your

strengths at that four, five, thirty, forty, and what you need to do when you get to that position because nobody is on court to tell you, unlike a lot of the 11 man of 5 man team sports we can pull a guy out and put the next man in. nothing taking away from the team sport but you have that option to be able to do that, what is hear you out there and you are wondering where I have done 5-2 in the fifth, how am I going to figure out, how am I going to get back from here. Now you have to figure out what your bakers and the ad beads and the Lendl's all of them have told you at that particular time, now even if you are Federer and Joe and so on and so forth because it is easier to tell from the outside than when you are on the court and then say to yourself oh this is what I was supposed to do against this opponent as oppose to my semi-final opponent and then be able to draw all on your energies and knowledge to be able to use that piece that your coach has told you three weeks back in Monte Carlo before you got to London those are the great moments where I can see when I am doing television I can see how these guys are thinking at that time.

DJ: Give us an insight into where you see the delta? What are the good examples where you have seen good players become good coaches and what are the examples where people without necessarily a background in tennis being successful as a Coach?

VA: I think to a great extent someone who has not played the game but who understands the game will be able to teach someone to play the game I don't think you can teach someone to win, I don't think you can teach someone to be great all of those comes from within to a great extent but when you need to get from a particular level to higher level I think you need someone who has actually played the game and then when you get to the very top of it you need someone to be able to help you at those moments who you respect and admire because he or she has actually done that I find it very hard to believe that if you ranked in the top 200 in the world today that you can actually have someone who has not played the game teach you how to win a quarter final match in a grand slam I don't think so, that could be wrong there is one outstanding example of where I have wrong which I will tell you in a minute but I do believe that you do need someone, in my case for example when I was growing up and I was playing in the early stages between the ages of winning the Indian championships and becoming on the top 10 of the world 18 months later I was coached by Pancho Gonzales who for me was as high as you can get in the Tennis world and the way he also taught me because I mould in my game in his or he saw me and said oh well you know, this guy I can help because whether consciously or unconsciously my game was similar to his and then at the tail end of my career I went back to someone to be able to keep me in tour a long enough because I felt he was the perfect person who I thought I would play like and so he helped me for few years, helping me stay on the tour perhaps longer than I should have and he kept me playing at the highest level so those things are important when you are talking about coaching, I don't think he has just jump in there and coach a person to a great championship the example that I bring up which kind of beats all the norms and the true guts now he learnt Tennis from a book, text book and then took the mark at the public court and competent in one of the worst sections of Los Angeles and taught this children how to play and the rest is history, I think that's not the good example to use but that's an exception to the room

DJ: So, what in that case worked if you had to reflect on that, what about that made it work for them to be so extraordinarily successful?

VA: I think in Richard Williams case, where the fact that they had the single minded devotions to those two children who were meant to be tennis players which is the way they were literally born to

be number one, number two is he was almost fighting an uphill battle in the fact that he wanted these two African Americans to play a white sport and literally show the world that we can do it and the fact that these girls and boys are making so much money and he thought that this is the way to come out of an economic difficulty which they were in and the biggest risk for them as he always said oh was there a big risk at thirty, forty, five if you asked him that question he would always tell you that , oh there is no pressure on that at all because the biggest pressure for us was to be able to walk out of home to the tennis court make sure you don't get shot on the way, that was the high risk venture for us. So I think you are coming from two different perspectives of the way people thought and Richard was very clear in the way he was able to actually have that belief and work ethic to get these girls to be able to become what they are.

DJ: What is your view on the greatest tennis coach ever, who would be the two or three contenders for that title if there were such a title?

VA: I think that's a hard one to pick because each person, if you are looking at its results, strictly by results then you are going to have with certain people who have had results in that particular area. Guys 1x you know my people who are next number of grand slam people who are next numbers of tour and titles and men or women and so on and so forth or the person with the most number of kids in his academy, I think that's very relative because the greatest tennis coach ever is it someone who actually created the Pete Sampras someone who actually created the Federer and then did nothing, So, it depends on how you look at it and I do believe that there are the coaches at the highest level. You know, whether Toni Nadal is one that comes to mind because he grew up with the rougher but he also has the Bolletticheli of the world you have Bob Brett, so many people who have created great people by just picking them Tiriac picked Boris Becker when he was 17 or 16 years old and as a matter of fact in one year at 17 years away March that year in 1985 he asked me to play doubles with Becker and I said you want me to play with some 17 year old kid and he said well I want you to play with him because I think he is going to be terrific. So, I did, I ended up playing with him and we got to the final that year or the Rotodome tournament and I kept telling him, Boom Boom because that's the way he struck the ball one boom and the second boom and if they came back he was upset so he was very upset so he hit it harder and of course two months later he won Wimbledon so Teriac saw that there after he coached Goran Ivanisevic and Teriac saw that, but his spotting potential was at very high level Like picking a Raonic and saying oh I think I can make Raonic a winner of a major event but that's speaking amongst the very top of the cherry pie, so it's hard to but you have a whole slew of coaches across the board.

DJ: Moving on to a few questions to wrap up this conversation. If you had to pick three moments in sport which have inspired you the most across all sport, which three moments would you pick in all these years?

VA: That inspired me...

DJ: Yeah

VA: ...the most? I think the first one would probably be watching a Muhammad Ali fight. He fought Ron Lyle in Las Vegas 1975 and I was sitting ringside with the legendary Arthur Ashe, you know, I thought it was a different perspective of what the world was watching this man do his thing. I think that when you see sport at its best in that I was at the first seat of the final 100 at the 1988 Olympic Games and I saw these eight runners take off for the 10-second run; Ben Johnson, Carl Lewis, Linford

Christie, Calvin Smith, I think, four of them were sub-10 on that run and in a 100,000-seat stadium you could hear a pin drop and I was wondering as I saw these eight guys take off when I couldn't even hear their feet on the ground, they were literally in the air the entire time and thinking what would have got into these guys doing what they were doing and they gave you Goosebumps. And the third was having worked with him as a messenger of peace at the UN to see Muhammad Ali light the cauldron at the 1996 Atlanta Games and how he fought himself with no help to be able to light that cauldron and the world stood still as he did it hoping against hope that nothing would go wrong and what he had done to be able to change the world to his perspective, you know, having lost five, six, seven good years of his boxing career when he fought against the Vietnam War and going to war in Vietnam. So, I think, those kinds of moment that transcend sport and those are the ones that actually inspire you the most not someone actually hitting a 30-40 point or in any sport for that matter whether a tough one or Indianapolis 500 or the great basketball games that we have seen and so on and so forth. I think, all of them qualify as great moments in sport and these things qualify as great moments in history.

DJ: Yeah, it's a great distinction. Vijay, if you went back in time given the wisdom you have accumulated over all these years, what would you tell your 20-year-old self? What's the word of advice you would give if you could go back in a time machine and talk to Vijay Amritraj when he was 20, what would you say?

VA: No, I think, you know, often people have asked me questions of whether you would have changed things along the way, you know, when you from what you know now and when you are growing up and the good thing is that I don't think I would have changed very much or made any drastic changes. I played the hand I was dealt; I was very fortunate to have incredibly hard-working and inspiring people to be able to allow me to do that. But you need to be able to; there are the parables in The Bible that say that you need to be able to use your talents accordingly to the best of your ability irrespective of what you are and what you are doing. Male female does not matter, age groups don't matter. The question is then your entire life is a living process. And you are never going to be as knowledgeable at 20 as you are at 60 and you are never ever going to be as physically active at 60 as you were at 20. And I don't think you can combine the two. I think the most important thing is to make sure that from the time you leave the early part of your life in your teens to a time when you are looking to either retire or looking to do more things and I think retirement is a bad word in my vocabulary; I think it's more a question of changing your lifestyle to a certain extent, but at the end of the day if the entire journey has not been a thorough education of what your talents truly are then you haven't really lived life.

DJ: Clearly you have moved till long in the journey to give back to the wider society whether it's through the ambassador of the peace or through the Vijay Amritraj foundation. So, give us an insight into how this journey took place in your life?

VA: Oh no it was just a growing up. You know, not being able to do what normal children would do from a physical stand point because there was health issue and then having the kind of dedicated parents that I have had and every parents does the best that they can do for their children there is no question there no arguments there. Both mother and father are something that a child needs as you growing up and some are blessed with that and some have had hardships without that and that's the one that you feel sorry for but I think through that period in time where the parents are asked to do more than just being a parent then you start to trigger things in your mind that saying

may be at some point in my life if I will get to a point where I will be able to lend a helping hand to someone else, you wouldn't think twice. Here is the great anecdote from my late uncle my father's elder brother who was a professor and a teacher and so on and didn't have a much way of money but a little nephew came and said to him one day can I borrow ten thousand rupees from you? And I will give it back to you in six months as a loan he didn't have it he barely had it to be able to give him that money eventually he pulled it together and he gave him the ten thousand rupees and he said don't give it back to me but when you get older and someone comes and ask you for it make sure you give it to them. Now that is the very good lesson that I never ever forgotten it always at the back of my mind where you are blessed with the people who are able to do things for you. And the question is if you have to get into that capability of being able to help others, would you be able to do it? Sure, there are a lot of other outside elements that come in to it, time, schedule, events so on and so forth and all of that but taking all of that into consideration would you be able to say yes? And that was the Idea and I was very fortunate to serve this Messenger of the peace for UN and seen the world the way I never saw it as a tennis player travelling the world and I went to the places I never thought I have been as a tennis player, I have not been. So, that was the real eye opener for me, how well these people and the agencies, UN agencies or 60 other agencies on the ground and what the UNDP does? So, that gave me a lot of inspiration as well from learning how to be able to serve others? It's not an easy thing to be able to do it in the right manners as well so that was the time when I finished my time at the UN, that was initial start of my foundation.

DJ: In summary, what would be the two or three things you would leave behind as perspectives for people to play to their potential?

VA: Well a lot of things we have covered obviously, and I think everyone needs to go to sleep at night knowing that they didn't waste the day, we all know that in irrespective of what we do, if it becomes the chore it takes the more out of you, of you are tend to enjoy what you are doing, which is fairly rare in today's world then you tend to bring more passion to it and then intern the job gets done better. But at the end of it all as you look back at life and I don't mean to be sort of nostalgic about this as much but I think the more important thing is people have asked me how would you like to be remembered? It brings me back to what the first ever African American supreme court justice at the US supreme court said, when they asked them that same question, Thurgood Marshall said that he would like to be remembered as follows: "He did what he could with what he had" which truly really translate to live every day fulfilling your potential and if you can't do that then you are always sort of reaching for something within you that you never thought you had. In one of my interviews one of my guests on one of my talk shows was the second man on the moon Buzz Aldrin who was a friend of mine and when I went to interview him at his home in California, you look at all the various acrylates and so on and so forth like you've seen in peoples home, trophies and plaques so on and so forth the very few things really catch your eyes you go through pictures and this and that but there was just one little plaque in a corner that absolutely caught my eye I never forgotten it and it as very much in the back of my mind when I do things and it was stuck in a corner in his living room and it said, you know we always tell kids, as you grow up better do this where you are fulfilling potential sky is the limit, and everything is always sky is the limit and so that little plaque said, "who sets sky is the limit when I left my foot prints on the moon." So those kinds of things, kind of resonate with me to a great extent and I think that's exactly what children and parents should work together to be able to achieve.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening in to the very first conversation of the Play to Potential podcast series. Hope you found it purposeful. If you wish to share a particular piece, you might find the nuggets of interest. Play to Potential nuggets are excerpts from my conversation with my guest which makes it easier for you to access a particular piece of content in the future. Hope to see you in a couple of weeks, where I will be uploading my conversation with Amish Tripathi, a successful author where we spend time on a bunch of issues but specifically focusing on how he transitioned from a career and financial services after a degree in IIM Calcutta to becoming the successful author that he is today. Bye now.

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Vijay Amritraj - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock 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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