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Context to the nugget conversation

Chris speaks about Roger's ability to context switch instantaneously from one situation to another. He also speaks about how Roger decided to declutter his plate by choosing to play fewer tournaments when he knew that he could get the ATP points he needed by doing will in lesser number of tournaments.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I want to go back to Pierre Paganini, his fitness coach, and you say that he has possibly been a key contributor to his longevity. And one of the themes that really strikes me about Roger is playing the long game. Apart from the awards he has won and the titles he has won, what strikes me is just some of his statistic around the number of games he has completed without retiring hurt, the fact that he has played for so long at that level, can you talk a little bit more about how he has managed to play the long game, what are some of the choices he might have made and what is Pierre's approach, what can we learn from it?

Christopher Clarey (CC): Yeah, some of the things that Roger did are directly applicable to all of our lives in a lot of ways. He met Pierre when he was in the town of Ecublens which is on Lake Geneva which is where the Swiss National Training Center was, Roger went there when he was 14 years old, left home in Basel, left his parents for a couple years to go down there as a boarder during the weekdays, and Pierre was running the fitness program there, so they met very early in Roger's life and formed a deep connection. And when Roger reached number one in the world which was in early 2004 after winning The Australian Open, he had won Wimbledon in the year before as first major and then, he won The Australian Open to kind of back that up, he said that he and Pierre sat down and talked about okay, how do I think long term here, how do we structure my career and my schedule so I can last, and Roger wanted, he loved the game so much and he had a clear vision that he was going to be able to play for a long time and be a factor for a long time, and he wanted to understand through Pierre's fitness expertise how to do that. And some of the conclusions that they made now seem self-evident and many have adopted them but one of the key things was periodization where you are sort of, tennis as a sport is insane, I mean it never ends. They basically have different times, three weeks off at the end of the season, a month after the end of the season if you are a men's pro, it is hardly any time at all to reconstruct your game or to really recover physically enough after 11 months of globetrotting and intense competition. So they decided they would take the meaningful breaks during the season itself and miss some events which is one of the reasons why Roger basically stopped playing Davis Cup most of the time early in his career. After number one ranking was achieved, he decided that is what had to go and a few other tournaments had to go, but they tried to build a block of training in the spring and in the summer where he was not competing, who is working on his game, refreshing his body and not playing too many

tournaments throughout the year. That is a great system if you are a brilliant tennis player who wins a lot because you do not need to play that many tournaments. For an average gentleman pro, to make a living, you need to play 30-35 events a year, it is to make the money you need. So Roger was in that privileged position and now he had that position in the game, he had the talent to be able to play fewer events and succeed in all of them and get the points he needed for his ranking. But that was very conscious on their part. And hand in hand with that, what he realized very early that when he did show up on tour, he needed to be in the right frame of mind. And those breaks helped him in that department but it was not just that, it was also understanding that when he needed to take himself out of the circuit and the grind of the circuit and that is week to week, city to city rhythm, can be very grueling, very enervating, and he recognized early that he wanted to extricate himself from time to time in order to stay fresh, not just physically but fresh mentally. And honestly, I do not think enough tennis players have taken that approach over the years, and it has hurt a lot of guys. And Roger knew that, and he also knew Pete Sampras and heard stories about him and what happened to Pete who was a fantastic player, number one in the world for many years and multiple Wimbledon winner and similar game to Roger's in some respects, and Pete was just burned out by age 30-31, did not want to travel anymore, did not want to go to the grind of the tour, and he was done. And a lot of those guys of that generation were Edberg, Becker, they were all who finished pretty early, Jim Courier finished pretty early. And Roger had a different...

DJ: I remember when Agassi won a tournament when he was early 30s, it was a big headline that he had won a major when he was, I do not know, 31 or something like that and that was a big deal at that time.

CC: Precisely Deepak, he was 33, he was considered an old number one which is what he was but he was a guy who was, wow, he is setting new standards for longevity in tennis. Well, look at how long Roger has played for, it is blown that out of the water, he has gone back to the days of Ken Rosewall and Pancho Gonzales and players of the past who played into their early 40s. Roger did not intend to go to age 40 I do not think, but he intended to play deep into his 30s. Agassi certainly gave him the idea that it was possible. And he also was intent on managing his body through very precise training, not overdoing it. And Roger, in an interview I did with him near the end of his career in Switzerland, I met him over lunch, we were talking about, it is a lot of different things, and we were talking about just what advice he would give the younger players coming on the tour, and he used the image of the clenched fist and the clenched fist was the idea that if you spend too much time like this, I am holding up my clenched fist as we speak. There is too much of that, eventually, your body would break down and your mind would break down. And you need to find a way to let the fist open and the fingers play and relax and be able to really let the whole organism take its ease, take its rest. And he was very very smart and very very good at doing that throughout his career. He had some distractions as time went on with his family, but even before his kids arrived, he was already in that mode where he would not stay at the player hotel all the time, he would stay at the zone hotel. Instead of sticking around the practice courts and the clubhouse, he would go into the cities that he was visiting and explore them, not like everyone like you and me, but he would go out stroll around and look at the sites, maybe visiting museum or so. He felt the importance of that because it allowed him to unclench his fist. And one of the reasons that he lasted as long as he did and, as I said, what is applicable there is to all of us in intense professions we might be in, you need to take that time and not just kind of halftime where you are sort of, okay, I am still on email, I am still doing my messages but really break away and regenerate, and then when you go back to your workplace, in his case, tennis tournaments of the world, you are fresh, you are eager and in Roger's case, that is part of the reason he is so popular. He was able to really come to his workplace and his public arenas with a lot of positive energy because he knew himself well enough to pull away from it when he was not feeling that.

DJ: Hmm. I loved an anecdote in the book. You talk about Wimbledon 2011. You speak about Federer blowing a two set lead with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and losing the match in the quarterfinals, and you say that he goes back, goes back to his home, Wimbledon home, puts his bags down and is rolling on the floor with the twins, Myla and Charlene in a few minutes, and he is in a different world, that just amazes me. Just building on what you just said, the ability that he led a full life and sometimes, these things can help you heal and recharge much faster than if you wallowed in tennis for much longer.

CC: Yeah, and again, that applies to all of us in the sense of how you are able to separate those professional disappointments from your private life and it has helped many athletes that I have known to have a family on the side to kind of put things in perspective. What is interesting about that story in particular is, the proximity of the house to the courts of Wimbledon. When you are Roger Federer, you can rent a house very close to Wimbledon and the club, so it accelerates the timeline. I would imagine a lot of players will come back from their crushing defeat and play with their kids that evening maybe or the next day, but this is literally minutes after he arrives back after this defeat. And that is what is surprising about Roger, it is just the way he can change the chip so quickly in a lot of different aspects. There is a lot of great stories about him, hanging out in the locker room before matches to begin, James Blake, former American player told me the story of just, are you talking of real estate in Switzerland, vacation with Roger where he and Mirka were thinking about going and then the bell rings and at the door you go and Roger is trying to bash your brains out on the tennis court minutes later. So, he is somebody who has been able to change that chip. And maybe, we all know somebody like that in our professional worlds who can kind of go from laughing to serious in a moment, but he was able throughout his career to really really compress that timeline and just change his mood and his world very very quickly. We were talking to Ivan Ljubičić just a few weeks ago and he was talking about, there was one of the aspects, Ljubičić was one of his last co-coaches on the tour and former great player himself and it always just amazed him about Roger, his capacity to just shift from person to person, meeting to meeting, situation to situation kind of seamlessly. And he was not seamless when he was 18 but by the time the man in full was there, it was very seamless and Ivan was like, it would just exhaust me, I would be exhausted living a day in his shoes and he just does it as a natural thing.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The ability to declutter your plate and do the necessary to play the long game and the ability to context switch moment to moment – both are super-powers each of them in short supply with the leaders. But when you combine the two, you get that unique combination of what is the human equivalent of a perpetual motion machine. You can technically keep going till you hit hard physical constraints that come in the way. But many other players hit burnout way before that point.

Very often, when I work with leaders, I urge them to think about how they are framing the key questions around them and sometimes how we frame the question can change the answer. For instance, Federer could have said, how do I maximize my earnings and performance? And that would have led him to a very different answer in terms of the tournaments he participates in. Instead, he chose to ask, what is the least number of tournaments I need to play to preserve my ranking and to play the long game!

Something for us mere mortals to reflect on as we think of pacing our innings for the long game of life.

End of nugget transcription

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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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