



“Lessons” on Business Success

From Former #1 in the World Tennis Player, Ivan Lendl

Special Update: *Since this writing, Ivan has become recognized as the foremost tennis instructor in the world. He is currently serving as Andy Murray's coach. Since Andy began working with Ivan in late 2011, he won his first major – the 2012 U.S. Open – as well as a gold medal at the 2012 Olympic Games.*

As Executive Vice President of Spalding Sports, I had the opportunity to sign Ivan Lendl to an endorsement contract in support of our golf brands. In the years since, I have had the privilege of calling Ivan a friend.



In case you are unaware, Ivan is a former number one ranked tennis player in the world. During his career, he won 94 professional titles, including eight major championships. He spent a total of 270 weeks as the top ranked player in the world, including 157 consecutive weeks. In 2001, Ivan was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame. Today, he pursues golf with the same passion he did with tennis, both for himself as well as with his daughters. Among other interests, in partnership with the Hospital for Special Care, he operates the Ivan Lendl Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp each summer. The camp provides kids with physical disabilities an opportunity to receive instruction in sports such as tennis, swimming, basketball and track and field. My son, Evan, has worked as a volunteer at the camp and has found it to be a terrific experience.

Recently, I talked with Ivan about his approach to developing his skills, assessing his competition, achieving the leadership position and sustaining that position over time to achieve such excellent results in tennis. Ivan also has a keen interest in business, so we also discussed how his tennis career offers relevant and compelling insights to business. Following then are excerpts from our conversation.

Question: How did you approach setting the right objectives for your career over time?

Ivan: When I first started playing junior tennis, my goal was to be better than all other players on the European circuit in my age group. When I turned pro, the top 100 and top 50 were my goals. I turned professional at 19 in 1979, and made the top 20 in my first full year on tour. I was ignorant at first about rankings. All I cared about was playing because I loved playing. By the end of 1981, I was ranked #2 in the world but could not achieve my ultimate goal of becoming #1 for three years. So, I had to change my approach.

The Lesson: There are times in a business's life cycle that focusing exclusively on improving and executing the product or service proposition is the right approach. With excellent execution, results will follow is the right belief. However, as the business grows, it inevitably faces new, better capitalized, more sophisticated competitors. The go-to-market approach therefore needs to evolve.

Question: What did you do differently to become #1?

Ivan: My progress on the professional tour was so fast that I didn't think about improving. Then, when I could not get to number one, I sat down and asked myself what I needed to reach my goal. I identified three areas ... I needed to learn how to play a slice backhand and return left-handed serves better (Jimmy Connors and John McEnroe were key competitors at the time); and I needed to get quicker. So, I found left-handed college players who would serve to me for hours on end. I needed to work on my skills so I could trust my sliced back-hand against Connors or McEnroe in the fifth set of the U.S. Open, if necessary. It was hours of practice and then hitting that shot in lesser tournaments and early rounds of majors before I knew I could hit that shot under the pressure of a fifth set in a major. To gain quickness, I turned to a track and field coach who had worked with Olympic athletes. He outlined several drills that would be right for my goals and I did the drills day-in and day-out without fail.

Here is the issue, you may be able to identify the things you need to do to improve, and a lot of people are able to do that, but you are never sure that you are doing the perfectly right thing. Most people are not able to stick to it. That's the biggest difference I find. When you work on something new, you have to give it a long time. Don't give it two weeks and say it doesn't work. If it doesn't work after six months, then look at things and see if you need to make adjustments. But do not give up too early.

The Lesson: As we have seen from Ivan, even in the face of success – he had become the #2 tennis player in the world – achieving a leadership position requires the willingness and ability to assess your own strengths and weaknesses relative to the competition, the rigor to outline an effective plan of action and the discipline to execute that plan over time. The same is true in business. Whether the business is successful or looking for new sources of growth to improve results, assessment-planning-execution is a critical model. Change can be difficult, so believing in the plan, aligning the organization and relentlessly executing against the plan will enable success. Over time, the plan will change and evolve, but the fundamentals, once put into place, will lead to value creation.

Question: Once you began working on the weaknesses you identified, how long was it before you achieved the desired result?

Ivan: 15 months. I started my work in early summer of 1984 and became #1 after the 1985 U.S. Open, in which I beat McEnroe in straight sets. (Note: Ivan also went on to win the U.S. Open in 1986 and 1987 as well.) The key for me was knowing that I had to make changes to improve. But I also was never quite sure I was going about it in the right way. You can never be 100% sure the changes will work. A lot of guys give up when they don't get immediate results, they don't stick to it. You have to be incredibly patient.

The Lesson: Market leaders are leaders for a reason. They consistently differentiate through product innovation, or provide unsurpassed customer service, or drive down operating costs and therefore prices. Overtaking the leader requires focus and discipline ... and belief. By building upon the core competencies of the business while adding new, complementary strategies, market share gains and leadership can be achieved.

Question: After you became #1, what were the factors that enabled you to sustain leadership for such a long period?

Ivan: It's attributable to several factors. First, you have to believe that you are that good. You did not just get lucky and win a lucky match or two. You have to believe that you are that good and deserve to be #1 because of achievement, not by default. Second, my goal was always to win majors, and winning majors took care of #1. I have seen guys who have had the goal of being #1 and once they achieved it, they had nowhere to go. Setting the proper goals is critical. The third was to always ask myself "how can I get better?" The reason I wanted to get better was so that I could stay #1 longer because my competitors were constantly asking themselves how they could beat me and they worked to improve. Once you reach #1 you can sit back and do nothing, or you can sit back and analyze again. I realized that my competition was changing and therefore I needed to change my practice routine. This helped me to improve and widen the gap and keep them at bay the longest possible time. So, you know, Eddie, there is a correlation between sports and business. There are two kinds of success. One kind of success is to be the best and be happy with that. The other kind, which I believe in, is to know that I am best the best now but I want to be the best three years from now and I was prepared to do what was necessary to do that.

The Lesson: Many businesses can have a single great year, record sales and profits. Then, suddenly, the results soften. The strategies that yielded such strong results are no longer enabling leadership and growth. It is precisely when business is strong that conducting an assessment of all strategies and tactics can be the most beneficial. Success, oftentimes, prevents a consistent push to improve the product or service and how it is delivered. The competition never stands still, the consumer or customer needs continue to change, markets evolve and new dynamics emerge. Developing and executing plans that enable both immediate-term and long-term goals is critical. The old expression, "there is no long term without the short term" is true. However, the long term always arrives faster than we believe and the business must be ahead of those changes.

Question: One fun question about a subject that's getting a lot of press these days ... Roger Federer or Tiger Woods?



Ivan: Roger is so good, you have no idea. Roger and I have talked on many occasions. Tony Roche is his coach, and Tony was mine as well. What you don't see is how hard he works when he is away from the tournaments. He works on his game and his physical conditioning like no one else on tour. The same can be said for Tiger. There are times it seems that Roger loses a set just to make matches interesting for himself, to create a challenge. He is that much better than everyone else. Likewise, Tiger is at a different level than all other professional golfers. I enjoy watching them both tremendously.

Eddie: Yes, but who is better?

Ivan: I like them both. You decide

By the way, when Ivan and I have played golf together, I must admit, he has won the money every time. But I do hit it longer than he does. That really bugs him and I love holding that over him. But he never fails to remind me that it's about who goes home with the money.

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Today's dynamic marketplace requires clear strategies, resource allocation and executional plans in order to realize value. I hope you find "Lessons on Business Success" helpful to you in your business development process.

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We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you about your business opportunities and challenges. Please feel free to contact me anytime.

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