

## What I Learned at Tennis Camp That Also Makes Me a Better Entrepreneur

By Bill Ringle

I learn best when I am fully engaged with insightful discussions, appropriate challenges, clear demonstrations, meaningful exercises, and relevant feedback. When those five elements are in place, the setting hardly matters.

Let me share with you ten lessons that crystallized for me while at tennis camp recently. Perhaps these lessons can help sharpen your business game without the sweat, aches, and blisters that I endured on the courts. See how many of these tips can apply to building a stronger business for you.

### 1. Review the fundamentals.

It's a bit of a paradox that experienced people recognize: sometimes fundamentals are the most advanced form of training. Proficient players in sports as well as business seek advanced strategies and skills, the fundamentals are still the cornerstones of everything that follows. During one of the first morning drills, a coach encouraged me to take my racquet back further on groundstrokes — something so basic that I had overlooked how that abbreviated backswing had sapped power from my swing.

### 2. You get what you ask for, so be clear.

I explained to one of the coaches that I really wanted to work on my transition game at camp in preparation for upcoming tournaments. I showed him exactly the type of deep, high shot I wanted to learn to hit better so we could focus on specific techniques to counter it. When you are eager to grow your business, you'll get better results if you bring specific objectives to the table, rather than just say, "Let's work on marketing."

### 3. It helps to have someone ask more of you than you ask of yourself.

One of the exercises, innocuously called the "11 ball drill" (a euphemism for the "torture drill") is where an instructor feeds 11 balls in a row to various parts of the court with different speeds and spins, and your job is to get every one back over the net as best you can. It's not as easy as it sounds. However, with the instructor's encouragement and the shouts and cheers from

your fellow players, you do make an extra effort and find a way to dig deeper. Though on a less dramatic level, perhaps, better results come from supportive accountability in business environments.

### 4. Set observable performance metrics.

This is easy to see in sports, harder to do in business outside certain arenas. In tennis, you can hit cones and targets, measure speeds and tally percentages of first serves, and so on. In business, it's important to measure the things that you have control over and then prioritize those items that lead to the most beneficial short and long-term benefits. Through working with hundreds of entrepreneurs, I've come to believe that every position within an organization can and must have performance metrics, from sales to customer service to reception.

### 5. Seeing your peers improve is one of the most powerful motivators.

Here's a greatly under recognized and undervalued human behavior dynamic that's made plain on the tennis court. If you see a peer make a noticeable improvement (say greater consistency) by following a tip, you're much more inclined to follow that same direction to get similar results. In a business setting, it's less common only because results often are not as easily observable or changes not as readily shared, outside of public company sales data. However, if you learned over a networking breakfast that one of your

competitors got a new forty-five thousand dollar business contract through an item she had posted on a blog, you'd take the time to review and analyze that blog entry when you got back to the office, wouldn't you?

## **6. Be responsible for creating an optimal learning environment.**

On court the sun was shining at the instructor's back as he described the upcoming overhead drill. Wanting to avoid doing this drill with the sun in my eyes, I suggested letting the players go to the side of the court with the sun at our backs and the instructor could easily feed lobs because the point of contact for him was at waist level. The players benefited by eliminating the distraction and the instructor got to help us in a better learning environment — win-win. It's an automatic consideration that I've developed from working with business groups. For instance, when I speak at business conferences and association meetings, it's very important to me to show up far in advance so I can check out the room set-up, the a/v support, and the staging. Creating an optimal learning experience means paying attention to the details. Wherever you go, be responsible for creating an environment that supports your learning.

## **7. High performers need a place to make mistakes while you learn.**

While I was learning to hit a more aggressive slice, I sprayed balls all over the place. At my club or another home court, I would not likely feel so free to experiment and play like a beginner as I did in camp setting. That's the idea behind business retreats and business coaching sessions — they're private, confidential places where you can let it all hang out for the purpose of reviewing and rebuilding something stronger.

## **8. Use your discretionary time well.**

During a break, do you need to rest and recover or would practicing your ball toss another dozen times be useful? During the business day, each of us has discretionary time, where we have choices to make about how to spend 15 to 30 minutes. Each choice we make has a cumulative effect on the strength of your business over the period of a week, a month, a quarter and a year. Be aware and choose wisely.

## **9. Make friends along the way.**

Spending six hours a day on the tennis courts with a group of people striving to improve lets you witness a tableau of courage, commitment, and excitement. It's fun and you're all going through a shared experience. Friendships naturally develop and grow; I keep in touch with tennis friends I've known since junior high school. Being an entrepreneur not only brings out the same admirable qualities, but also is far riskier and therefore far more important to connect with others as friends and colleagues.

## **10. Style counts and it's all up to you.**

The head pro at this year's camp had a saying that stuck with me about how the service swing is classical music until you get into the back scratch position, then it's rock and roll up to the ball contact and beyond. I liked that. It's memorable and effective. As entrepreneurs, we've got our idiosyncrasies. It's important to remember that and use the ways that we're memorable and effective to increase our visibility and our capacity to serve our clients, and not try to blend into some bland category or behavior.

I hope that you've found these lessons helpful. Remember, the proof is in the results. Go out, practice hard, play hard, and get better results on both the tennis court and in your business.

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Bill Ringle is a business strategist and eBusiness expert who works with high performing entrepreneurs and their teams to increase their effectiveness.

He is the founder of myBusinessGym, a thriving community of best practices for entrepreneurs leading top high-tech and professional service entrepreneurs operating within the 11-county greater Philadelphia region. Bill is also a ranked USTA tournament player and tennis league captain.



E-mail [info@mybusinessgym.com](mailto:info@mybusinessgym.com) with your questions or success stories on how to build a stronger business. Visit [www.myBusinessGym.com](http://www.myBusinessGym.com) to find out what educational programs, business coaching, or targeted training we offer that might be of use to you.