

11 Startup Lessons Served Up From the Tennis Court

by Laura Baverman, Contributing Editor

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The UpTake: Tennis is an individual sport, reliant on the talent, skill and toughness of the person on the court. And we think that translates well to startup founders. So read below for some lessons you can learn from the pros on Center Court this weekend at the US Open Tennis Championships.

At the eager age of 6, my tennis-playing parents stuck a racquet in my hand, plopped me in the middle of a clay tennis court and began hitting bright yellow balls at me.

That may sound like some form of torture. But it was the first of many trial-by-fire lessons I'd learn over 25 years playing the sport. Tennis is different than baseball and football and soccer. Those sports require some amount of individual ability and skill, but winning is only possible with the combined talent of a team.

Tennis—at least the singles kind—is just you, and hopefully with some luck on your side. And perhaps that's why it seems so darn much like entrepreneurship.

So, in the spirit of U.S. Open season, bear with me while I relay some of the tips, sayings and lessons that have helped me come to love (and attempt to master) the game. And hopefully they'll give some help to startup founders too.

Stay out of 'No Man's Land.' On the tennis court, this is the spot in the middle of the court where you're too far back to volley a short ball and too close to get to a deep one. Coaches tell you to

commit to a strategy, and this is valuable for new companies too. Early-stage founders need to hone in on one product or industry sector rather than trying to do it all.

Move your feet. And don't stop even when the ball's not on your side. Opponents can be unpredictable and you don't want to be caught flat-footed. By constantly moving, you can be ready to act when an opportunity comes your way.

Study your opponent, and fast. On the court, the best players are quick studies. They pick up on an opponent's strengths and weaknesses, and then capitalize quickly. They also know their own game well, and can adapt it to the person on the other side of the net. Entrepreneurs need to be just as fast at understanding their competition and adapting their strategy to take advantage of a weakness.

Be coachable. Sometimes, people watching on the sidelines can pick up on opportunities you don't see in the thick of a match. Same goes for startup founders, who are often so caught up in the day-to-day operations of a company that they might miss a key strategy. Let others help change your perspective or coach you on a new or better way of doing things.

Have the best equipment. A slippery tennis grip or loose strings can be so distracting in the middle of a match that they cost it. The same goes for the software or hardware that fuels your business or drives your revenue. Make sure it's the best.

Try new things. Some of the best moments in tennis happen when an athlete takes a chance on a new style of serve or a risky placement of shot. Startups can't be afraid to do the same. Those gutsy moves can generate buzz for a company or provide a new angle for success.

Focus on one point at a time. This is so important in tennis, where each point is a new opportunity to get ahead, catch up or fall behind. Thinking too many steps ahead, dwelling on previous mistakes or reveling in past success can distract from playing your best in the moment. For a startup, each move is just as important and needs all of your focus no matter what happened before or what's to come.

Stick with what you're good at. In tennis, there are days the serve is your best shot and your volley suffers. And others, it's the forehand and your backhand suffers. There are so many ways this translates to business. Each client is different, and wants something unique out of you or your product. Recognize that your strength one day might be different than the next, and go with it.

Be honest. On the professional tour, there are referees calling the match. But on an amateur court, tennis is one sport that's as honest as the people on each side of the net. And your reputation, on the court or in business, depends on it.

Take responsibility for your mistakes. After a loss, it might be easy to blame the person on the other side, bad coaching or a bum ankle. But maybe it was just you that made some mistakes. And in any case, no one likes a complainer. Own up, learn and move on.

Be positive, always. Tennis coaches call this mental toughness and most say it, above skill and physical prowess, is what wins or loses a game. Be friendly to opponents even if it's not your best day. Be confident that the next point will be better than the last. And if you lose, promise yourself that next time, you'll work even harder and you'll win.

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Laura Baverman , Contributing Editor

Laura Baverman is a business journalist newly relocated to Raleigh, North Carolina. Before her move, Laura spent nearly four years tracking Cincinnati's growing technology and startup scene for the Cincinnati Enquirer.