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Reflections from a humble and much revered Wimbledon champion

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a review of the post-match interviews with the Australian Ash Barty during the 2021 Wimbledon Championships. Seven transcripts were inductively content analysed to reveal six dominant themes. The analysis provides insight into Barty's mindset and highlights the importance of her coach, support team and role model. Implications for coaches to adhere to sound coaching principles are discussed.

Key words: Ash Barty, mindset, well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the magical journey of Ash Barty to Wimbledon champion. Intrigued with her success, we (the authors) reviewed her post-match interviews (Wimbledon, 2021) to see what light they might shed on her outstanding feat. What were the key factors that might help to explain her success? This paper reports on our review of the transcripts.

PROCEDURE

Copies of transcripts (7) of Barty's post-match interviews were retrieved from the official 2021 Wimbledon website. Ethics application was sought but not required as data was taken from the public domain.

DATA ANALYSIS

An inductive content analysis was conducted to analyse the transcripts. Following Patton's (2002) recommended procedure for analysing qualitative data, key phrases and paragraphs in the transcripts were identified. Those sharing explicitly similar meaning were then grouped into higher order themes. The authors, both experienced researchers, conducted their own analysis of the data that was then shared. Discrepancies between the authors were consensually validated (Patton, 2002).

RESULTS

Six higher order themes were identified in the analysis. These themes were: plan your play and compete for every point; respect opponent and embrace the challenge; competing is fun; dream 'big'; priority to being a good person and accepting the journey will have ups and downs.



DISCUSSION

The findings of the review provide insight into understanding key elements of Barty being a champion.

Plan your play and compete for every point

For us (the authors), one of the most critical insights into Barty's mindset was found when she described her approach to competing, and specifically:

"I think each and every point it's important to try to execute as best you can, keep it simple. Really the score-line for me was irrelevant... It was more about the process of trying to do the best that I could each and every point on its merit, and understand you're going to make some mistakes, she's going to come up with some really good stuff. You accept that, move on, continue to try to bring it back to the patterns we wanted to do".

This description directs our attention to the importance of having a game plan, pro-actively attempting to execute it on each and every point with total commitment, but accepting total perfection is not a reality. Mistakes will be made and one's opponent will understandably make some exceptional winners.

Respect opponent and embrace the challenge

After several matches Barty credited her opponent as an "incredible competitor who brings the best out in me". In these instances, Barty embraces the challenge to play at her best. It appears that she truly relishes, and looks forward to, these pressure matches knowing that they will require her to access the upper limits of her abilities. These are matches when anything less than an exceptional level of commitment throughout the match will not suffice. As described by Barty, "You have to bring your best and be engaged for the whole match".

Competing is fun

Another valuable insight into Barty's approach to competing can be gleaned from her description of "the moment, it's all taking it in, it's about enjoying it". Elaborating on this, Barty described her semi-final match:

"I was really able to enjoy myself today right from the start I had a lot of fun. That was a focus of mine. I wanted to go out there and enjoy playing in such an incredible moment, and regardless of the result, walk off the court knowing that I had enjoyed it and had fun".

It appears Barty embraces a way to find competition fun. For her, the outcome of matches is somewhat irrelevant. It is about 'the process' of being fully challenged and knowing that true satisfaction and enjoyment comes from within and is not necessarily dependent on the results of matches. Successfully competing is a cherished inner experience of being in the present, knowing she have given it her very best endeavours.

Dreaming 'big'

"I just hope I made Evonne proud" Barty told the Centre Court crowd in her victory acceptance speech. The 'Evonne' referred to here is unquestionably known to many of us. It is the legendary Evonne Goolagong Cawley who herself had first won Wimbledon 50 years ago. No wonder Barty referred to her Wimbledon win as an "aligning of the stars" and a dream come true "to achieve her biggest dream".

Evonne has been Barty's inspiration and mentor for many years. She had dared Barty to dream big, advocating that dreams do come true (Cawley & Jarratt, 1993). Yes, they certainly did come true for Barty and Evonne, begging the question whether Wimbledon success would have happened without those dreams. We guess we will never know for sure, but we surmise not. Barty was inspired to commit herself to the holy grail. Evonne had given her a path to follow! As described by Barty:

"... I have worked so hard my whole career with my team and with people that mean the most to me to try and achieve my goals and my dreams".



It has not been a solo effort by Barty, but how refreshing to see a player so opening and generously acknowledge her support team. Again, we see a mindset that is truly inclusive, appreciative and selfless. This comes through a number of times in her interviews, but none so clearly as when Barty credits her team with successfully getting her back on the court after a serious hip injury that had forced her to retire from the recent French Championships. What we can glean from this is the 'power of the team' is greater than the 'power of one' individual! In this regard, Barty described her support team as the "best in the world".

Priority to being a good person

According to Barty,

"I've just tried to live by my values that my parents instilled in me. I mean that's always been my priority, is making sure that I'm a good human being. Being able to learn from my parents and my siblings, my family, was a massive part of my upbringing. I was just extremely lucky that I was able to have an opportunity to learn how to play the game of tennis. But I think being a good human being is absolutely my priority every single day".

This quote says volumes about Barty, the person. It goes to suggest that had Barty not achieved tennis's highest acclaims as Wimbledon champion, she still would have been successful and fulfilled. She would still have achieved inner peace and contentment. Life appears balanced for Barty and there is ample room for both tennis and living in accord with a set of high morals and family and community (including indigenous cultural) values.

Accept the journey will have ups and downs

On a number of occasions Barty referred to the difficulties she encountered, and grew stronger from, along the path to Wimbledon victory. Her time out from tennis after winning Junior Wimbledon as a 15 year old is well documented (e.g.,

Trollope, 2016), as is her recovery from a serious hip injury in Paris only weeks out from Wimbledon (e.g., Battersby, 2021). As Barty says, “It’s just trying to find a way each and every day”. It was apparently not easy at times but, according to Barty, she would not change anything. No regrets. Just learning experiences! She believed there was a ‘silver lining’ in all setbacks.

Practical Implications for Coaches

What insights can a coach extract from Barty’s reflections? We suggest a coach might self-reflect on:

- Developing and shaping a player’s approach to the game by always encouraging fun and well-being; instilling realistic expectations about challenges along the way; and rewarding/acknowledging a player’s efforts to train, prepare for matches and compete for every point (versus match results)
- Arranging, and managing, a support team around a player (the composition of which will depend on the player’s needs)
- Being an outstanding role model who is ethical, professional, honest and sincere

CONCLUSION

The review we conducted provides clues for understanding Barty’s ‘winning’ mindset and the key factors important to her success (e.g., her coach, support team and role model).

As such, there is an opportunity here for a coach to reflect on their own coaching practice to ensure they are adhering to sound coaching principles (Weinberg & Gould, 2019), with a focus on promoting a player’s well-being and developing that player’s abilities, interests and love of the game.

In closing, the tennis community has been captivated by Barty’s charm and humility in her pursuit of personal excellence. She is testament to what can be achieved with the right mental approach, coach, mentor and support team.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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