

Player Profile

Backgammon, Tennis and Investment Banking

By Christine Merse

My backgammon coach, Zdeněk Žižka, who happens to be 23 years old and the youngest grandmaster ever in the sport, recently played in the finals of the Backgammon World Championship in Monte Carlo. Hundreds of us watched from afar as he endured a rough match. There was a backgammon that was devastating, and for the last hour, the score remained at 17-3. Then 19-3. And so on.

None of that was interesting to me. The players were competing at levels that were unfathomable to an intermediate such as myself: (PR around 3 or 4 if you speak backgammon) throughout the tournament. But in the finals match, luck wasn't on the side of "ZZ." If it were the Hunger Games, the response to "May the odds be ever in your favor" would have been, "Not this time."

And that still isn't what was interesting to me.

All through the match, ZZ's demeanor never changed. Calm. Pleasant. Joyful. Playful. When the score was 19-8 (I think), he needed double sixes in what was clearly going to be the last game — one he should have won — and his opponent rolled them. ZZ picked up the double sixes, placed them on his side of the board, and laughed. We all laughed. And when the match was over, he hugged his opponent and his opponent's posse and stayed in the room to help celebrate the day, the match, and the amazing tournament in which they had played.

He emailed me after the match was over to say he was looking forward to our next lesson. After I responded by telling him what an incredible tournament he had, he wrote, "Unfortunate result to finish second, but still very happy and fortunate to finish second." And I believe he was. I watched a number of matches during the tournament, and I didn't see the joy I saw in ZZ in anyone else, except perhaps at the moment they won the match they were playing.

We had a lesson a few days after his defeat, and I asked him about his amazing demeanor and how he approaches it all.

"How are you such a good sport?" I asked. "Does it bother you to lose?"

He replied, "I would have been much more disappointed if I'd made blunders and lost because of them. I would have preferred to win. But my mother taught me when I was very young that every match has a winner and a loser. How you lose is very important to others and no one likes a sore loser. I wanted to be liked, so I tried to lose with dignity and honor."

ZZ has concentration I can only admire from afar. It's so far out of my league, I can't comprehend it. And he's clearly brilliant. Backgammon is not for the intellectually challenged. But it's his attitude that I think makes him shine so brightly. And do not mistake his positive posturing as weak in any way. I told him about an issue during a tournament I was in, and he was very clear about how to stand up and make sure no one takes advantage of you.

Moving on....

I was playing tennis mixed doubles years ago with one of the great currency traders of all time against his wife and my now-ex, H2 (husband number two). H2 was an amazing investment banker, having sealed some of the greatest deals of all time in mergers and acquisitions. He is a terrific negotiator, and one of the skills he taught me in that area is to be comfortable with silence, but I will write about that another time. Silence is a whole other discipline with which I struggle.

Anyway, H2 doesn't always have ZZ's emotional skills when he's not playing his best on the court. After one of his outbursts, GS turned to me and said, "It always surprises me that he does that. He doesn't do it in business. Why would he give me the satisfaction of knowing that he is angry about my shot or that he couldn't handle it? He's giving away the edge." I never forgot it.

Sticking with the tennis theme, I am a lifelong fan of Björn Borg, whose mother told him in the juniors, when he was a tween, that if he threw his racket one more time, she would put it in a closet for six months. When he did it one more time in the finals of Sweden's Juniors Championship, she marched onto the court, took the racket away for six months, and the rest is history. He became the quietest, most composed player on the circuit for the next twenty-some-odd years, and when you consider the fact that his primary competition was the hothead John McEnroe, that's saying something.



Zdeněk Žižka: coach, champion, and author.

So here is the takeaway: How you comport yourself is part of the fabric of winning and losing. It's a weapon in your quest to win. It's part of the strategy for success not because "if you can be anything, be kind," (spare me!), but because it accomplishes two things. It allows you to behave the way you want to be remembered, and it puts you in a mindset to focus on what you need to do, not responding to the inner child stomping her feet and shaking her head. I've known this for many years, but I think I'm only just beginning to understand what it really means.

I do not take for granted those giving us lessons, and I believe you can find your own posse from those around you who mirror ZZ, GS, and Borg. Pay attention to them, and your life will be infinitely enriched. If you are competing, find the player who most exudes these qualities, and mirror them. Copycatting is totally legal, ethical, and paramount to being your best self. 🏳️🇯🇵

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