

Lei Hao on Andre Agassi

Andre Agassi is not only one of the greatest professional tennis players of all time, but also a model for personal and charitable successes throughout his life. Upon closer examination, I saw that Andre's approach and mindset towards his accomplishments were quite different during two distinct periods of his career. This discovery, and the relevance of it to our Total Leadership class, inspired me to compose a leadership biography on his life and draw applicable lessons from it.

From the outside looking in, Andre Agassi had it all by 1997. Professionally, he had captured 3 of the 4 most prestigious Grand Slam titles in his sport, the world number 1 ranking, as well as the Olympic Gold Medal. Personally, he was to marry Brooke Shields, a beautiful actress whose previous boyfriends included Superman and the Prince of Japan. In the community, he had won the Arthur Ashe Humanitarian Award for his Andre Agassi Charitable Association. And personally, he was a popular icon who championed the phrase "image is everything."

Yet, despite successes in all of life's domains, Andre's life was volatile and incongruent. He admitted to using crystal-meth during this time. His audaciously colorful outfits and hairstyle were lasting images of his troubled persona. His talent and success at tennis became, ironically, his public stage to vent the hatred he felt for the pressures he had in life. His marriage, predictably, fell apart after only 2 years.

If we set 1997 as a page-break for Andre's life, we would see eerie similarities in his accomplishments before and after this break. Andre won 5 more Grand Slam titles from 1999 to 2006, recapturing world number 1 ranking in 1999 and 2003. In 1999, He married a beautiful Steffi Graf, arguably the greatest female tennis player of all time. Andre won the Arthur Ashe Humanitarian Award again in 2001 for his work on the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, a tuition-free charter school for at-risk children in Las Vegas. Personally, he became one of the most classy figures in tennis, receiving a 3-minute standing ovation after his final match at the US Open in 2006.

As the first player ever to capture all four Grand Slam titles AND the Olympic Gold Medal in tennis, Andre Agassi actually admits to "I hate tennis" in his autobiography. This felt incredulous to me, until he asked an audience of Wharton students that I was a part of, "How many people hate school?" The analogy made sense for a moment, until I realized that Andre's hatred for tennis is deeper. It is in fact at the core of his approach to life and his eventual transformation.

Tennis was a huge part of Andre's life growing up, him having been put through a mindless regimen by his overbearing father. As a prodigy of the sport, Andre felt he could not escape the pressure to win, so he found ways in other parts of his life to rebel, to cry out for attention and help. As a result, Andre lacked focus and a sense of satisfaction, despite all of his amazing accomplishments.

At the brink of collapse, Andre's life went through an incredible transformation witnessed by a world audience. First, he recognized the problem and recommitted himself to improving incrementally, after having fallen to a 141 world ranking. He met and later married Steffi Graf, whose own strong support network and personal understanding of Andre's pains and pressures provided a nurturing anchor for his psyche. Andre leveraged his (and subsequently Steffi's) interest in charity to create a sense of purpose, a leadership vision. He was able to use these new sources of motivation, as opposed to pressure, to compete and win on the tennis court. Concurrently, Andre began articulating his charitable vision to others, rallying philanthropists and business leaders alike to achieve goals that finally brought him a sense of satisfaction and serenity.

The key takeaway for me in this examination of Andre's life is the power of aligning the various domains of one's life to a worthy leadership vision. On paper, Andre was no more professionally successful after 1997 than

he was before 1997. Before the transformation, Andre was successful in spite of his lack of focus in life; after, he was successful *because* of his focus and commitments to meaningful goals.

Relating this concept to our class – while I do not see people in need of as drastic of a transformation, I do believe many of us applied for this class in search of alignment in life. I see tremendously accomplished individuals looking for better order, more meaning, and additional motivation in what they do on a daily basis. I read many inspiring leadership visions that, if acted upon with Andre's incredible discipline and dedication, could translate into tremendously positive impacts on the community. All of these observations bring me to something Andre said that resonated with me. To paraphrase his words, it is to have a vision, have a principle, and stick to it and rally people around it; it is never too late to align or re-align life; it is not easy, but one step at a time and daily improvements are all we can ask/hope for.

I have been blessed to have many accomplishments and fortunate to feel proud of rather than pressured by my current success. Nonetheless, I find myself reflecting after attending Andre's lecture, after researching his life's work. To become a leader, I need a unifying vision rather than a collection of unfocused achievements. Total Leadership has given me the tools to identify and implement such a leadership vision. And now, I will combine my learning's from Andre's work and his words as I approach this class, approach my experiments, and approach my mindset after this class, after graduation.