



EDWARD BOWYER *talks to Boris Becker  
about his successful transition from tennis  
champion to businessman*

## PLAYING TO WIN

Seated opposite me in London's Dunhill Club on a wet winter afternoon, Boris Becker, the tennis player turned entrepreneur, pauses for a moment as he ponders my question. As if making a careful shot selection, he briefly considers Richard Branson as his answer before settling firmly on Ion Țiriac, his former manager and mentor. I have just asked him who he admires most in the world of business and it is not the answer that is revelatory but the reason: 'He was the first Romanian billionaire and he did it all between the ages of 50 and 70.'

For someone considered by many to be the ultimate sporting prodigy, this respect for the late-flowering genius is perhaps surprising. After all, the image most people have of Becker is of the precocious, flame-haired 17-year-old flinging himself around centre-court at Wimbledon. Now aged 42, it is 25 years since he became the youngest-ever Wimbledon champion. And although he still carries a physically imposing presence and looks more than capable of powering one of his trademark serves over the net, the red-hair has an added touch of grey in it, and he is limping a little – a result of recent hip surgery. It is perhaps understandable that he wants to believe that the best is still ahead of him.

'With a lot of athletes who have had great careers, you see them at 40 and they are broken. They struggle with their own identity,' he says. This was never going to be the case with Becker, he is too self-confident, too headstrong. But for many athletes, the pressures of retirement – more insidious and brutal than the pressures of playing – are too great to overcome. After the highs of professional sport, the cheering crowds, the thrill of competition and the clear sense of purpose, returning to the mundanities of everyday life can leave a feeling of emptiness. Ex-cricketers, are particularly vulnerable, with a suicide rate twice the national average in the UK.

Even Becker admits that difficulty after he quit the game in 1999: 'It took me a couple of years to find my way.' Indeed, the immediate years after he retired, seemed to pass in a blur of tabloid headlines framed by two self-inflicted events. The first and most infamous was a brief liaison with a waitress in the stairwell at Nobu, which, culminated in the birth of his daughter, Anna, and precipitated the downfall of his eight-year marriage to Barbara Feltus. The second, and arguably more serious, was a conviction for tax evasion in 2002, after Becker admitted to living in Germany, despite his official residence being

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in Monaco. Together with retirement, the catalyst for this period of turmoil was the death of his father, Karl-Heinz, a few months before his final performance at Wimbledon. The divorce made a difficult situation worse. After losing his main professional focus, to also lose the cornerstones of his personal life proved profoundly unbalancing. As he explains, ruefully, ‘I have never been successful in my professional life when I wasn’t succeeding in my private life.’

That Becker was able to gradually re-focus his life is testimony to his formidable drive and competitiveness. Today, reported to be worth an estimated \$100m, his varied business interests range from his own line of tennis rackets and sports apparel to organising celebrity golf and tennis tournaments. His early moves however, were in real estate, which, like tennis, he discovered he had a natural feel for. His father had been an architect and it is a profession that Becker, like his sister, might have followed had sport not claimed him at such a young age. It would probably have been a successful option, too. Indeed, he estimates he has made more money in property than he ever did winning tennis tournaments.

That he gravitated towards business is understandable. ‘You have to be very disciplined, very dedicated and very focused. Just like in any match, when the going gets tough you need a good set of nerves,’ he says. But that moment of pressure was something that Becker always thrived on. ‘Most people get nerves or cold feet when they are in the position of winning. For me that was the best moment. I just did it.’

As with many sportsmen, the move into business is more as a continuation than change. ‘People forget that sport is a very profitable business. They have a hard time accepting that professional athletes are very young businessmen. Look at the contracts or the prize money that Roger Federer wins. He is running a multi-million dollar business.’

For Becker, tennis was always ‘a game of high percentages’. A mathematical ruthlessness characterised his approach. His major assets included a powerful serve and a strong forehand. If, therefore, he concentrated on winning a high percentage of first-serve points, it would give him the greatest chance of winning. As long as he had the discipline to follow his strategy, his opponents had to defy the odds to beat him.

One notable demonstration of Becker’s principles was against Ivan Lendl in the 1989 US Open. At the end of the match, Lendl was ahead on almost every indicator: at the net, second-serve points and placement winners. However, Becker had a higher percentage of first-serve points (77 per cent to 63 per cent). He won the match in four sets.

The same calculations now underpin his business activities, even if the same crushing victories are not always as predictable. Early in his retirement, Becker spent a time in sports management, and

included, among other notable clientele, footballer Andriy Shevchenko, who had just joined AC Milan from Dynamo Kiev. Tennis was still his main business, though, and around this time, both Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal – still teenagers – were offered to him. But according to Becker they were too young, and although undoubtedly talented, the variables were too great. Sport is a capricious game, a player can turn an ankle or can get into bad company and go off the rails. Unfulfilled talent is the norm. In the end, he couldn’t justify the financial outlay to his business partner. A vast miscalculation, but one he is comfortable with. As Becker says with more than a hint of self-knowledge, ‘I would rather make mistakes than do nothing at all.’

Yet, it is also difficult to see Becker as being comfortable as part of someone else’s entourage. You get the feeling that he is happier as the head of Team Becker. After all, it is the athlete’s selfishness, the dogged pursuit of personal goals that allows them to get to the top. This can also transfer into their private life. As Becker explains, ‘I have to be single-minded and I have to have a partner who understands that. And then it is a game of percentages again. She is giving me something that I want and I am giving her something that she wants.’

With his new wife, Dutch model Lilly Kerssenberg, and a child due this summer, the equation appears to be working. A sense of peace has returned to his life, it seems. In person, he is calm and thoughtful, gentlemanly even. Professionally, Becker has enough interests to keep him fully absorbed, including continuing to build his media brand and a new website Boris Becker TV, where he streams videos showing a more personal and private side of his life.

He has even managed a sideline as a professional poker player. ‘I like it because you can play until you are old and it is a game of logic, to a point. And [when I play] I only think about poker. If I can focus on one thing, it is relaxing for me.’

Relaxed is how he seems generally now. The only time in the interview his tranquillity seems threatened is when I ask him what the biggest misconception about him is. ‘That I couldn’t play on clay,’ he says, leaning back in his chair, his voice raised for the first time, the old fires ignited briefly again, ‘I wasn’t a Nadal or a [Mats] Wilander, but I was better than 95 per cent of other players... I didn’t win a clay court tournament, but to say I couldn’t play on clay – that is an insult.’

It seems however bright the future, there are some things from the past that will always stay with him. ■■

