



# NICK BOLLETTIERI

## HE CAN READ PEOPLE

The world's most renowned tennis coach shares his recipe for success.

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**W**hen it comes to superb athletes, it's crucial to discover and nurture their talent at an early age. In the state of Florida, one man has made history by guiding children to become world-class tennis players. His secret? His ability to “read” people.

London, mid-June. It is the week of the most famous tennis tournament in the world—Wimbledon! Along Hyde Park, Kensington Road is jam-packed with rush-hour traffic. Inside the elegant Hotel Baglioni, however, everything is calm and unruffled. We are the only ones who are a little excited. For we are about to meet the man whom world-class tennis

players like Andre Agassi respectfully call the “guru”: Nick Bollettieri, who has made history with his Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida.

We ask the chef at Brunello's, the hotel's Italian restaurant, whether he has seen our guest, but the answer is no. We look around and find Mr. Bollettieri a few minutes later in the hotel lobby. He is sitting in an armchair, with a very modest and inconspicuous air. But then he leaps up, a wiry man in top form. 60 of his 83 years have been dedicated to the sport of tennis.

This legendary coach has altered the course of professional tennis and guided stars including Monica Seles, Serena Williams, Maria

Sharapova, and Jim Courier to the top of the world ranking list. In recognition of his achievements, Bollettieri was recently inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, Rhode Island—an honor comparable to receiving an Oscar.

Bollettieri orders a plain glass of water. And a small portion of pasta with lobster. Sitting across from him is Eberhard Weiblen, the CEO of Porsche Consulting. Weiblen wishes to know what motivates and drives Bollettieri. The guru smiles. “If you had seven children, you wouldn't ask. But seriously, the word ‘retire’ is not in my vocabulary. I always need new challenges: new racket designs, new high-tech materials, new techniques for hitting the ball. Who was thinking about athletes from China or

**Nick Bollettieri shows the young Anna Kournikova how to work on her game during a training session at his Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida (left). He also guided Maria Sharapova on a successful course (right).**

India twenty years ago? An incredible amount of potential is building in those countries, and their tennis players will be taking the world by storm in a few years. We're now paying much more attention to that market."

Bollettieri demands top fitness not only from his protégés but also from himself. His day starts at five in the morning with 100 sit-ups. After answering his e-mails, at seven he is still one of the first to appear on the tennis court. The Tennis Academy he founded in Florida in 1978 is now known as the IMG Bollettieri Tennis Academy. Here, around 225 children and teenagers train while their parents pay nearly 75,000 dollars a year for the privilege. The master knows them all personally, and provides individual guidance. He has his eyes on every single one. Together with his team of coaches and counselors, he has developed a system that shows him the current state of any player at any time and makes his philosophy of coaching possible. But this is still no guarantee for producing winners at Wimbledon. "Talent alone is not enough to become a champion," he says. "To make it to the top today, you need more than total commitment, endless ambition, and absolute passion." The game has changed dramatically. In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, some of the winners of the big tournaments were still teenagers. Today's champions are in their early 30s, considerably larger and more athletic, and possessed of extraordinary fitness—mentally as well. And there's also more competition. "If three percent of my current students make it onto the world rankings, in 70th or 80th place, that in itself would be a major success," the world-class coach remarks.

According to Bollettieri, tennis is the perfect sport to shape children's characters and prepare them to meet life's challenges. "The decisiveness and dedication to excellence that

they learn at the Academy hones a quality that will remain with them for the rest of their lives," he says. For this reason he is also active in community tennis projects, volunteers his time to develop school and support programs, and is helping to structure the promotion of young talent in the US. He is increasingly concerned about excessive motivation on the part of parents, many of whom put their children under pressure, view them solely in terms of results, and thereby often take all the fun out of the sport. It's therefore just as important to him that all his charges successfully complete their education at school in addition to their training at the IMG Academy. "The number 161 in football earns 1.4 million dollars a year. But the world number 161 in tennis has to invest 100,000 dollars a year just to stay in the circus. It's easier to become a leading surgeon these days than it is to get a contract with sponsors."

Bollettieri has an Italian temperament. His eyes are constantly alert, taking in everything of importance around him. He loves to observe people, and to "read" them. He is skilled in spot-on analyses. "When I meet someone who has outstanding qualities, I try to absorb as much of it as possible. I refine it, blend it with my own strengths, and then transfer it to others." Maybe that is precisely what makes him not only a top-notch coach but also a superb speaker.

The mother of success for Bollettieri is motivation. His motivational talks to sweaty athletes in the locker room of the New York Yankees are as legendary as his lectures at Oxford or Harvard or to U.S. troops in Afghanistan. He is often asked what he can offer the business world. "I come from a big Italian family," he says. "As a child I stamped grapes and collected eggs from the chicken coops. I learned not to put myself above anything." This is a virtue he misses in business life these days. "People delegate too many things, and engage in too few activities themselves. You can't lead a company from a desk—the employees at the grass-roots level have to be enthusiastic about a shared aim. This doesn't mean there has to be a huge program in place. It's often the small gestures that have the great-



**Eberhard Weiblen (left), CEO of Porsche Consulting, met with Nick Bollettieri in London.**

est effect: a brief conversation, a pat on the back, a spontaneous e-mail."

Night has fallen over Hyde Park. The waiter hands us the dessert menu. Bollettieri gracefully declines, and orders just another water. No risk, no fun. What sounds like a banal motto is a real agenda for Bollettieri. He deliberately seeks to take the fear of failure from his students. In his eyes, defeats are anticipated, valuable learning experiences. Without them, development is not possible and stagnation is inevitable. He also offers this food for thought in his talks to businesses. "Employees who are scared stiff of making a mistake will never be able to realize their full potential."

Bollettieri wants to realize his full potential the next day, too. And that is why he would like to go to bed. After all, there are only a few hours left until it's five in the morning. And until his next round of 100 sit-ups. ←



**Book recommendation:**  
***Changing the Game***  
**by Nick Bollettieri;**  
**New Chapter Publisher,**  
**Sarasota**