

# A Life Well Lived



Vijay Amritraj

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**F**or over two decades, Padma Shri awardee, Vijay Amritraj was one of the most famous tennis players in the world. He was Asia's top player for fourteen straight years, and a bulwark of India's Davis Cup team, often as Playing Captain. Over the course of an illustrious career, he beat the world's best, including Borg, McEnroe, Lendl, Connors, Newcombe and Smith. He brought glory to India as only sportsmen who play at the top of their game, but always with dignity, can. When he played, he lifted the sights of the next generation of tennis players in the country, and he made Indian audiences proud as again, only top quality sportsmen can.

Today, Vijay is known globally as a lead anchor and host for ESPN and Star Sports, covering Wimbledon, the US and Australian Opens, and the PGA Masters. He has been brand ambassador for Rolex and Jaguar Land Rover, a Hollywood star, the United Nations' 8th Messenger of Peace and the Davis Cup's Centennial Ambassador. He has carried the Olympic torch on behalf of India, and despite living in the US for 45 years, Vijay is still a proud Indian with an Indian passport.

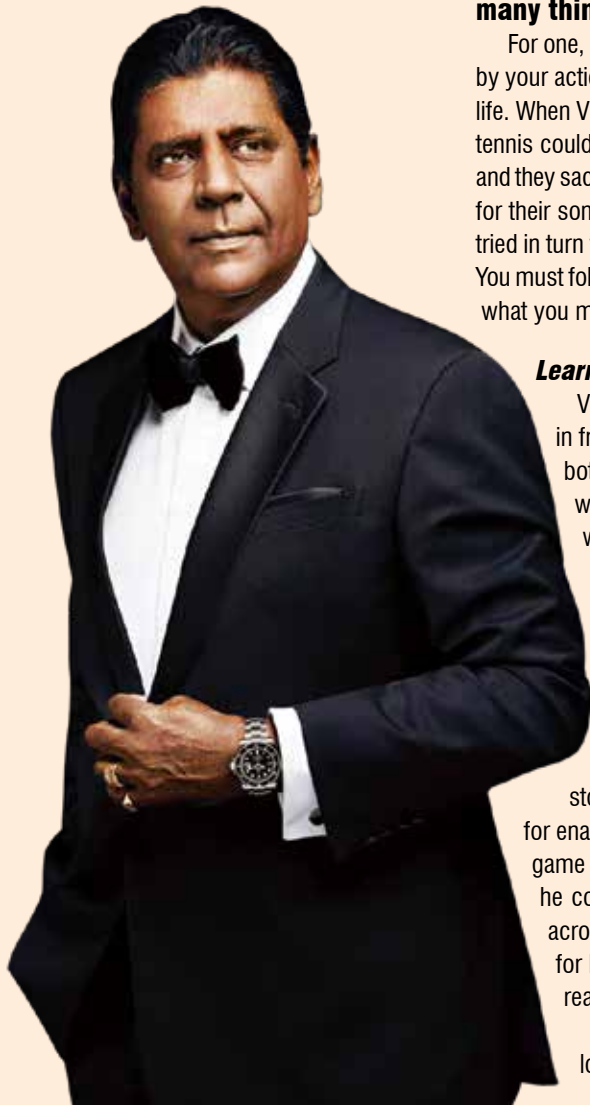
In a freewheeling conversation with IMA members, Vijay Amritraj spoke of his learnings in a life wonderfully lived, where every stage has seen him try to be the best that he can be, lending positivity and strength to the ecosystem around him.

Few realise that Vijay's turn to tennis was born out of need and necessity, not fun and interest. Born with weak lungs and unable to walk even 50 metres without the need to sit down, outdoor sports was the doctor's mandate. Tennis ran in his mother's family and so, the tryst began. Vijay attributes his early successes - winning a college tournament while still in school as a 13-year old playing against a 19-year old - to the unflinching dedication of his mother towards his wellbeing. She pushed every boundary to build Vijay's strength and then, sighting his subsequent interest, to ensure the family did everything they could to have him and his brother live their dreams. The key to Vijay's peace of mind lies also in what he counts as success. To begin with, it was simply to be able to run a 100 metres without falling, then a kilometre and then finally, ten kilometres, all the while with his mother driving the car next to him as he ran.

***The value of selflessness, of family, of dreaming the impossible***

Vijay and his elder brother went on to dedicate their youth to playing tennis. Studying alongside, Vijay trained for hours to perfect his game. They toured the country and then the world with his parents – a father in

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government service, and a mother who was a housewife – re-arranging their lives to accommodate the ambition of their children. His mother started a business – a small factory – to provide for expenses related to Vijay’s coaching.

Few recognise the value of position and money if they are born to it. In the Amritraj family, there was always a deep appreciation of what came their way, because they recalled travelling even to the US on an Air India ticket with 8 dollars in the pocket. You ate dinner the day you won a tournament. On other days, you dreamt of the next day.

Today, Vijay is world-renowned, his boys are well settled, and he has followed every dream he set out to accomplish. But he hasn’t forgotten how to remain grateful, he hasn’t forgotten that for all the comforts of the US, which is a wonderful home to him and his family, he is Indian with pride, a sense that flows outwards to his next generation. His son has played the Davis Cup for India for ten years though he was born and brought up in the US.

### **What do you learn from someone like Vijay Amritraj? So many things, on so many different planes.**

For one, you cannot, at any stage, know who and what you are enabling by your actions – and so, you must just do your best by the people in your life. When Vijay was growing up, his parents could not have realised where tennis could possibly take their son. They persevered because they loved, and they sacrificed because again, they loved. The results have been sweeter for their son than they could have ever imagined. As a corollary, Vijay has tried in turn to be with his children the way his parents have been with him. You must follow the dreams of your child, he says – you simply do not know what you may be enabling.

#### ***Learnings from the game...***

Vijay has often achieved success against all odds, often coming in from a losing position to win tournaments. This was true of him both as a child, and as an international tennis player. Arrogance would be a natural follow-through of this ability, but in Vijay, it was quite the opposite. Winning against the odds has always given him a desire to do even better; prompted him to be better. It has made him more proud of his achievements and yet, he remains humbled by what he calls ‘divine intervention’, which is, ultimately, what will tilt the scales.

#### ***Be grateful...***

Throughout the conversation, the one shining emotion that stood out was gratitude – for his parents and especially his mother, for enabling him to be more than he thought he could be; for tennis, a game he feels gave him belief in himself and took him places where he could ‘never have gone’; for a life that exposed him to leaders across political, economic and social strata through his TV show; for his role as UN Ambassador that gave him insight into the hard realities of natural and manmade calamities.

On another plane, it is just as important to be grateful for the losses you suffer as for the wins. Vijay says it so succinctly,

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'When you lose, you learn. When you win, you look at the next match.' Learn to appreciate your losses as much as you value your wins.

### ***Be inspired...***

Listening to Vijay, one realises anew how critical it is to have someone in your life, who inspires you. In turn, you must yourself try to inspire others – by the way you are, by the way you respond. Vijay's mother is his greatest inspiration. Badly injured in a kitchen fire, she spent a year in hospital, and later went through a 9-hour surgery to repair a lost right hand when it got stuck in a factory machine. The doctors said she would not ever be able to write, eat, or drive – and so, she did all three. Because for his mother, can't really means won't. 'Impossible' is not a word in her lexicon, and that same drive is now in Vijay. It is that drive to excel that propels him into leadership positions coming in from far behind. As the famous Billie Jean King said, "every challenge is an opportunity, and pressure is a privilege". Live this, if you want to excel.

### ***Enjoy life in every stage; every season has its joys***

At the same time, however, you must, must enjoy what you do. Being flexible and agile in the mind is critical here. Vijay has epitomised that like few others, effortlessly moving from his role as sportsman to commentator – few can forget his humorous quips, which brought even the disinterested in to watch tennis – and he was able to do that because he enjoys whatever comes his way. A 'learning' mindset is critical to this. Life and its experiences teach you all that you need to know, on how to conduct yourself, on the difference between right and wrong, on 'who' you really are. If you are open to learning, then every stage of life will add value to you, and vice versa. If you think you know it all, you are then really the most ignorant, and you close yourself to the opportunities that life will bring your way all the time.

### ***Step outside yourself, into the shoes of the 'other'***

Key to this is also the ability to put oneself in the shoes of the 'other'. Vijay's success as a commentator relates to his ability to view his job from the perspective of his audience, and there too, he chose to pick the most disinterested. The corollary is clear – you must also be able to challenge yourself to do the impossible. His challenge, in this case, was how to increase viewership, which he took upon himself. External drivers can be great, but ultimately, passion is self-initiated, self-generated. It cannot be incited.

Vijay's perspective also highlights the importance of surrounding yourself with people who drive you to be better, because they will not always agree with you. You can surround yourself with sycophants, but you lose the opportunity to see yourself, truly, as others see you. When you are by yourself too, you do not really see yourself. It is only from the outside that the view-in becomes clearer. Respecting differences of opinion is crucial – and that is a need not just of individuals, but also of nations. At the end of it all, it doesn't matter if you are the one to put out a hand for reconciliation and say, 'Lets get a drink.' Make things work: life is simply too short.

As the UN Messenger for Peace, Vijay visited Bhuj 48 hours after its devastating earthquake, and countries like Sri Lanka and Bosnia when they were in the throes of war. That brought home to him the kind of anguish so many in the world go through, and the quality of sacrifice and care that multilateral

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agency representatives provide. Ultimately, the people you remember are those that work to bring changes on the ground – whether large-scale or in everyday life; people who try to make your world a better place. Set up in 2006, Vijay's foundation works with over 15 charities on the ground in India, and it is, in his view, just a drop in the ocean. We must each do our part, in whichever way, for one's family, for one's society.

### **Experience life – and not from an armchair**

Experiences teach you more about life than any wise man pontificating. Fill those experiences with time given to loved ones, and to things you love to do. It feeds your soul. Spend time with each other: we must mould the future we want for our next generation for whom we are caretakers of this world. Does that world involve communication via screens? Probably not.

### **Looking to the future**

Today, as Vijay looks at Indian sport, he recognises tremendous capability, but puts the onus on us as families and corporations to do what we can to allow our people to dream, to attempt to achieve the impossible. The government will have many urgent priorities in a country like India that relate simply to survival. Sport must, however, be engaged in: nothing uplifts and unites a nation more than when one of us wins on the international stage. It won't matter that we do not understand the game, but if India is represented, the pride is uplifting, and it is uniting. And that is unique.

It thus falls to us as families to no longer desire to play it safe by our next generation. We must allow them to follow their dreams. As corporations, Vijay believes, quite justifiably, that we must also do more to encourage sport. At a personal, individual level too, Vijay believes in the value of engaging in a physical sport. It is good for the body, and it is good for the mind. The value it brings to families and friendships as you engage in a common activity is also immeasurable.

### **The 5Ds that matter...**

Ultimately for Vijay, what matters most in life is the 5 'Ds', each a link in a virtuous chain. First, you must have the desire to do something. Then you must have the discipline to do it, and that takes real toil. Dedication, then, is the crucial third link. Then comes determination – you cannot take no for an answer, least of all from yourself. And finally, there is divine intervention. If it is meant to be, it will be (but not without being spot on, on the count of the first 4 Ds).

As we close the conversation with Vijay, he recounts an episode from his interview of Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the moon after Neil Armstrong. Buzz had a plaque in his room that read – "Who said the sky is the limit when I've left my footprints on the moon?" So dream the impossible. Impossible is nothing. ■

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*The contents of this paper are based on discussions of The IMA Forum in Mumbai and Pune with Vijay Amritraj in November 2017. The views expressed may not be those of IMA India. Please visit [www.ima-india.com](http://www.ima-india.com) to view current papers and archives of content in the IMA members' Knowledge Centre. IMA Forum members have personalised website access codes.*