

From Struggle to Inspiration with Sam Jalloh

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I am Paul Lubbers, senior director of coaching education and sports science for USTA player development. And you're listening to compete like a champion.

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J: Welcome to Compete Like a Champion. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA player development. Today we've got a very special guest on the podcast, Sam Jalloh, who is an author, international tennis coach, physical nutrition and mental coach to his students. Sammy, welcome to the podcast.

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S: Yes, thank you Johnny and thank you everyone at the studio and um, yes, it's a great opportunity for me to be here today. So excited to share my life journey with you guys as much as, like I said, learning some things from you guys. So thank you for giving me the opportunity.

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J: Oh well thank you for taking the time. Sammy, we've known each other a long time and you just came out with a book, "How tennis saved my life: play tennis, not war". You also were invited to do a Ted Talk in Manchester recently, which we watched and it was absolutely fantastic, giving us a very candid look and insight into your upbringing and basically how you got to where you are now and you're able to use tennis as a vehicle to stay alive. And so we're really excited to have you maybe share some of that and you know, and we hope the listeners out there, the book has just come out. I hope you take a listen to it. It provides some great perspective. But yeah. So Larry, what'd you think?

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L: Oh, that was impressive. What a, what a story. I'm excited to jump in here because I think that, you know, us being in tennis all the time, we see one view of it, but this really just shows how sport can, and specifically tennis, can make a difference in someone's life, which is awesome.

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J: Absolutely.

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S: Definitely.

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J: Absolutely. So, Sammy, there's just one rule. You're not allowed to divulge any secrets from my past on this podcast.

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S: Okay.

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J: But, so we can give the listeners here an understanding of who you are, what you do, where you've come from, why you do what you do, why don't you just give us a brief introduction as to what you do.

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S: Okay. Uh, first of all, my name is Samuel P. Jalloh and I'm originally from Sierra Leone, born in 1982. As we all know, or if you don't know that Sierra Leone is a very wealthy country by natural resources, but say, due to

mismanagement over the decades, we've had a lot of troubles in Sierra Leone. So I am one of 11 children and my parents had 11 of us. Being the child number eight and the only boy to survive my first birthday which three of my brothers born before me died, uh, due to lack of medical facilities in the country. So at that time my parents were extremely poor, never been to school, uh, never had any educational background and they both had two to three jobs and they work 8 to 10 days a week. I always make a joke about this. And um, so yeah, so it was really tough, like I said, being the eighth child. My parents, obviously had three boys before me that didn't survive. So they had a traditional belief that there was evil spirits causing the death of their male child. So because of that, they decided to give me a girl's name when I was born, so I was named Porre, which means a girl. And so I found out when I started primary school and a lot of the kids were laughing at me when they call my name. So went back home and asked my parents about this. And then obviously they asked me not to take any notice about whatever other kids say. So growing up in my area, Tamber Town. And Sierra Leone, the area where I was born, it's actually one of the poorest neighborhoods or is there worst slump in the capital city where 98% across the people who lived there have never had any education. And there is no running water, there is no television for us by then. There is no roads, there is no good house for people to sleep. And we basically sleep in a corrugated house, which were so rusty and old, an 8 foot by 10 foot house. And so I had my siblings and other people, you know, friends and family that comes in sleep with us, so we all slept on the floor, you know, like a bunch of sardines and we didn't have a bed. Yeah. There's no bed, no nothing in the house. Basically just an empty, you know, I call it [inaudible] house. So, but we managed to survive through the mosquitoes, the winter season, which can be treacherous, a heavy rain, monsoon rain. And most nights our parents would wake us up and you know, uh, put cups and things on the roof, so just to stop the water from leaking on us and things like that. So yeah. So my childhood in the beginning was really tough.

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L: Wow. That's, that's some serious conditions right there, my friend. And you know, I think it's really impressive that you were able to, to find your way to tennis and the difference it made in your life. And you know, you talked about that in the Ted Talk and you know, how did you first sort of come to start in tennis because that, you know, would seem like maybe soccer or some other sports would be what kids are playing in the streets, but you ended up playing tennis.

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S: Yes. Uh, it's a very long story but I'll try and put it in a very good way so the listeners can understand it. And because also at the age of six years I was adopted. Now the reason why I was adopted because my dad had an offer for the corrugated house where we live. They all know of the place and he was an old man, 65 years old and he had his mom who was 86, and so they made an offer that if my dad gave me a way to them so that they can look after me, they will make the rent three times cheaper. And by then my dad obviously had no choice and he didn't even think, whatever, he just said to the people, yes, you can have him. Now, the reason for this was because my dad wanted me to be the kid that he wanted me to be [inaudible]. So, and they didn't want me to end

up like him because my dad's salary was less than \$10 a month, you know. So he wanted me to have education. So I move in with my adopted family. It was tough, uh, constant beating and whipping and punishment for whatever mistake I did was part of the deal. But then at primary school we had a popular game in Sierra Leone called hand tennis, which you play bare hand. And so I become very good at playing hand tennis. And then eventually when, I was also six the day I got adopted, few months after that my mom and dad they separated. So my mom moved to a place called Hill station. So after a few attempts to run away from my adopted family, I think they find it interesting that maybe if they let me go see my mom every two weeks, that will calm me down a little bit and come back home. So for every second weekend, they would send me to go see my mom and just on the side of where my mom lived, just 10 yards from a little house that she lived, there was three tennis courts. there's still three tennis courts that was built in 1944 by the British colonial people. So you know, I fell in love with the sport tennis. But that time it was only mainly white people that I see play with a few little kids who are like [inaudible]. And then the other kids who also play something called a board bass because we couldn't afford or they couldn't afford to, you know, to get a racket. So all the kids would cut a piece of plywood and then they would use that to play. So every weekend I would play tons of that. And within a few months of the visit, back and forth to my mom, you know, I end up becoming one of the best board bats, you know, playing in the club. And then at the age of nine years old, I run away finally. And then I move up to my mom because I wanted to play tennis and I choose tennis over most other sports even though at that time I was, you know, started practicing martial arts and also I was doing football, which is very popular in Sierra Leone and probably around Europe as well. So, and then, uh, from board bat, one afternoon there was a Lebanese Sierra Leonean guy and he came to play, you know, a usual evening match and I had one of my best friends who I'll talk about later and who influenced me to actually continue to play tennis. And we were playing board bat. And so he taught me how to play board bat and then I become probably better than him. And at this they were playing this match and [inaudible] was close to 40 degree heat on the concrete floor and three of my toes were actually bleeding to the point where this guy just sat there. He couldn't believe that I wouldn't stop because my toes were bleeding because I didn't want to lose to him. He didn't want to lose. So we ended up playing best of five sets and I won the final set and then the Lebanese guy walk up to me and say, boy oh boy, if we can get you a racket, you will definitely be a national champion. And so from then I was looking at it like, well, if he's saying it then it must be that I have talent to play because I love tennis, but we couldn't afford, you know, a racket. So eventually I, we managed to get a proper Wilson wooden racket and I started with that and I was hitting on the wall and all this kinds of things. So ever since my love for tennis, you know, just took off from there.

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J: Sammy, it's incredibly impressive how, how you were able to take your passion and figure out a way and problem solve, basically figure out a way how you could, could continue to try and nurture that passion further. Give us, so out of all of this, how did it then progress? How did you, how did you move on into reaching high levels in the sport? How did you then go from there to then

now living in England where you know, you're coaching a lot. I know you also coach out in Spain, you travel with some players, but how did that transition happen for you to go from there to the UK?

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S: Well, first of all, again, at the age of nine years old, when I moved into my mom, 9-10, I had, you know, one of the, the young kids was saying, you know, I met so and so and they went to play the ITF junior and they're coming back, you know, and then the conversation continued and then he said, you know they give them 250 US dollar allowances and then they give them national tracks with shoes and all this kind of thing. So here I am as a poor kid thinking that, wow, 250 US dollars, that's quite a bit of money for someone like me. And, you know, like I said, my entire family had never had such a money like this. But, um, and then when the kids actually turn up from the ITF junior in Togo, and I saw one of the guy who I really admire Amador, he had nice shoes on, he had very good, those days we had metal rackets, so he had nice metal racket and ITF issue out also their own rackets to the competitors because you know, a lot of the kids in Africa that compete were very poor. So I saw it and uh, since then I said, you know what, I'm going to play this game and I'm going to make sure that one day I'm part of the national team because I so admire and wanted to wear the national tracksuits. And also I wanted those 250 US dollar, which will help to pay my school fee. And then also 150 US dollars would help to sustain my family for six months. Because given the fact that my mom was so poor, she caught wooden [inaudible] for food. So my, my why, because I always ask players what is your why for playing tennis or doing what you're doing. My why was because I wanted to feed my family and I wanted to be able to pay my school fee and also for the national tracksuit. So that really, really pushed me to continue to play. And I remember when I had a, I was 12 years old when I had my first Prince Racket. Somebody gave me a Prince racket, which I slept with the racket. I wouldn't even let go of this racket. I walked to school with my racket back home to make sure that I don't lose it. And then we couldn't afford to get strings. So what we do is we go to town, we buy the shark fishing line, so those shark fishing line we'll put on the rackets and if your string break, you have to patch it because you haven't got enough string. But I think one of the things is we were very competitive because I have a goal to make it to the national team. We have rich kids, we have poor kids, middle-class, get all kinds of children and ours at the bottom list of the poorest, cause I learned to play tennis without shoes and never had shoes. So anyway, going forward, in 1995 I had my first opportunity, when I was 13, to play in the nationals and through the nationals in each category on the 14, 16, and 18, they choose the two finalists to go represent Sierra Leone. So for me that was, my aim there was to make it to the, you know, to the final at least so that I can get a shot, I can get the 250 US dollars and my national track suit, so my dream will become true. So playing in 1995 in the quarterfinal, one of the sponsors [inaudible] was an American, actually commonly [inaudible], [inaudible], and other resources in Sierra Leone. So they sent one of the guys down to look at the tournament. And so this guy stood outside looking at me, playing close to 40 degrees, best of three sets. And I had no shoes on. So I won the quarter final, came out and then he said, to one of the coaches, why is he playing without shoes and a coach must have said to

him, well, he can't afford one. So the coach called me and said, Sam, do you see the white guy I was talking to? So I go 'yeah', and he said, he's going to bring you a gift tomorrow. I go, what is that? He said, He's going to bring you shoes. And so I'm thinking to myself, wow, that's a good thing. Maybe if you bring me shoes, I don't know because I wasn't sure about the shoes. But anyway, I'm there for the semifinal, I turn up and this guy brought me this pair of shoes, you know, beautiful shoes and I stick them on and here I was going in the first set, I realized that this is the wrong idea because I couldn't move even though, as anyone who knows me, that running and moving around the tennis court was one of my strengths. And here I was, you know, I couldn't move and the shoes were absolutely killing me. My feet were heavy, I was missing my step. So I lost the first set and I was a bit angry with myself because I knew all I needed to do was to win that semi-final, get to the final, my family will be fed for six months and I will pay my school for you. And then of course I would go represent my country and then wear the national tracksuit. Second set at 3-all I went to the empire, please can I just take them shoes off because, they're really killing me and he look at me. I could still remember the coach look at me like I'm so ungrateful that somebody has given me shoes, but I wasn't appreciated. But that wasn't the case. The case was, my feet were so slow and I couldn't move. But anyway, I lost in the third set and I was out crying, outraged, frustrated. I walked four miles home with the shoes laced together all the way to my parent, to my mom, you know, crying and frustrated and all this kind of thing. But one of the good things I learned about, um, losing in a very early stage that if you lose, you learn a lot of lessons and giving up obviously it was never a part of my upbringing. You know, my parents have taught me, if you start something, you must finish it. Whatever happened that you decided to start, you must give it everything that you want. So even though I was frustrated, I was lost, you know, because I'm looking at my mom goes to the jungle every day to, you know, maybe gets 50 cents or \$1 a day just to help to sustain us. You know, it was a very, very tough thing. So I was competing against myself and not just the other player so that I can get a way to feed my family. But fast forward after that, you know, uh, I didn't qualify for the national team until in, uh, 1998 when I was 16 years old. So finally I played again another terrible round Robin match where I ended up making it into the final and beat the same guy that I lost to in my first try in 1995 who came from a bit middle class and he got everything, racket, whatsoever. And then I remember the joy of, you know, everyone celebrating and said, wow, you've done such a good job to make it into the national team. And ever since after that and I went from my first international ITF tournament in Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria and you know, it was a long journey, long fight, but you know, three or four years of trying paid off in the end because I was absolutely giving it everything, not just that I wasn't good enough to make it. It was a point that some of the time when I qualified, the tennis association hasn't got any money. And then the civil war break out when I was nine years old and sometimes we'll have war going on for six months. So everything was just completely mixed up and also surviving close to that. And I was a victim of the war being captured, being bitten so many times by the foreign soldiers and my best friend, obviously was shot in front of me. So I managed anyway to go uh, in 1998 for the ITF tournament and we finish in Nigeria in January '99, but I ended

up becoming a refugee in Canada for three months because we couldn't go back to Sierra Leone because of the war. And three months later we did manage to go to Sierra Leone and then went for a few more tournaments. And then when I turned 18, I played some futures and then in the All-African game we formed a Sierra Leone Davis cup team, but unfortunately we didn't have the funding. And then I met my wife Tracy in Gambia in 2001 when I was 19 and she was on holiday and by 2003 she has been to Africa about 25 times to see me. So she got bored and tired and then she said, well, you have to come over to England because I can't be coming all the time to see you in Africa because I was competing all over the place. So yeah. So in 2004, I moved to England and in Southport and then, uh, by the way, Johnny, just to remind you that you and Chris are my two oldest friends in the whole of the United Kingdom, because I met you guys just the same two weeks when I came to Southport and I was asking my wife to say, Oh, is there anyone that plays tennis in this village? And I remember they said to me, yes, you have to go to the clubs and ask. And then when I asked, I was given, you know, your dad's contact and then yourself and Chris and ever since we've become friends. So yeah. So tennis has really paved my way. I was also one of the best national goalkeepers when I was 14, 15. And my destiny was football, but I remember going to the coach, the national coach for football, and I tell him, sir, I'm giving up football and playing tennis. And this guy basically thought I was drunk and he said to me, are you going to play tennis? Who in the world in Sierra Leone has ever played tennis and you know, so, so he was very angry with me and he said, if you're drunk, I'll wait until when you're sober, then I can speak to you about for now, I don't know this word about tennis. So anyway, I gave up football, the guy was the second best goalkeeper, become the national goalkeeper and he played for Sierra Leone in the African Cup of Nations and all these things. But, now, believe it or not, he is a national volleyball coach because he grew up close to, I think Nell is seven foot tall. So his balance was really bad in the end, so he stopped after when he got past 20 something, he couldn't goalkeep anymore because he was too tall and too [inaudible]. So yeah. So ever since I played my last international tennis tournament [inaudible] All-African game, which by the way, thanks to you Johnny, because if you remember, I trained with you and Chris and then you told me about the girl who was playing for Egypt. He, I think he was late to come for the tournament. I don't know whether you were both in the same uni or so, but you did said I should look out for her. I met the dad at the All-African game, which Malik Jesu was in that tournament with me and a guy called [inaudible] beat Rafael Nadal in the 2002 I think junior Wimbledon semi-final. So, and after the all African games I decided it was too expensive, too tough. Of course tennis, as we all know, is a very expensive sport, but I had the opportunity to train with yourself, your brother Chris and Ken [inaudible] who's still playing today and so many other players and then go on to become a coach. But over the years, I've enjoyed my time training with, I was also hitting partner for Micah Russell who an American retired and so many of the players and then become friend with Rublev and I was hitting with Rublev for two years whenever I see him for Wimbledon and things like that and [inaudible] and they come very good friend with Michael, Michael Campbell. So me and Michael Gamble, we went out drinking. Anyway, I'll save that for later. But tennis has

really taken me to some places we have met great friends and outside as I stopped competing, you know, like I said, I've become a coach. I've worked with so many world-class players like Alexander [inaudible] who was one of the best British players and also today I'm actually traveling. I finished in Canada and Chile a few months ago with an American player called Elijah [inaudible], who's now 400, just moved to the top 400 in the ITF junior and working with another boy doing mental coaching. With another boy who's 140 from Colombia and just finish a mental coaching with a girl who was in China playing for Taiwan. So she goes to Kenya tomorrow. So yes. So my life in tennis has been tremendous in a way, even though with a difficult start, the war, poverty and all this things. You know, I was stringing my racket bare hand without a stringing machine, even when I was playing in the futures in Africa. So all this kind of thing. But I appreciate it because they make me become who I am. So here we go.

[19:49](#)

L: All right Sam. Well that's quite the story and I tell you what, I think it would be inspiring to a lot of people who read your book or hear this or the TedTalk. You know, I'm wondering, you know, you dealt with so many obstacles, so many barriers in your life, and they just seem to keep coming at you and yet you persevered. I know you mentioned you wanted to be able to provide for your family and getting on a national team, but what were all the things that kept you going? Cause there had to be just some tough times where you thought, like this is it, I can't do it anymore. And so many other people probably, you know, who were striving to be an athlete or to achieve something finally gave in because the environment just kept knocking them down, right? But what really kept you going? What can you provide our listeners in terms of that willingness to stick with it and keep going when everything was probably telling you like, man, this isn't going to happen.

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S: Yes. Uh, I think one of the things is, from the environment where I was born, like I said, giving up is never an option. It doesn't matter. Adversity is just part of our daily life because I was born very, very poor. So I knew there was nothing for me. Everything that I wanted, I have to really work really hard to find them. And again, my parents, like I said, my dad had two or three jobs and my dad never had a day off. Same with my mom. So when I look at them and I look at my situation, they always motivate me to say, well, you know, look at what they're going through. And my why, like I said, was defeat that. So even when I fail, I have a setback, I never look at it as a failure. I look at it as just an obstacle that I have to climb over to the next level. And because they said, you're never a failure until you stop trying. So if I would've stopped, then my opportunity that came in in 1998 would have never come close because I've seen a lot of my colleagues who have been the same. Some of them taking drugs, a lot of them were forced to go into child soldiers and a lot of them died in the war and things like that. So I didn't want to go through this where there's alcohol and people were smoking weed, marijuana and taking jobs become part of the culture because of the civil war. So given my environment and because I have a why that I really want to get my family out of this situation. So giving up was not an option. So I was never going to stop until, like one of my favorite quotes is a football team in Ghana, their motto is never give up until the bones are rotted.

So that was my kind of attitude that I would never stop trying until I get what I deserve or what I want. Because sometimes life doesn't give you what you want, but you get what you deserve from what you put into the hard work. So this was the kind of thing that kept me going is thinking about my parents, the situation that they were in, and I never felt sorry for myself that I will do whatever it takes, you know, to make it out of here because I knew if I can get to the national team, 250 US dollars. I'm not joking, 250 US Dollars was quite a lot of money for my family and at that time it would definitely help sustain them. And, and believe it or not, when I qualified, I actually got over 300 us dollars. So, you know, given some 50 US dollars for the first time to my dad and then my mom 150 US dollars and then paid my school fee and then use some of the money for travel, you know. So that was the reason why I never gave up because I saw what condition the country was in and the civil war wasn't helping and I wanted to play for Sierra Leone and I also wanted to live and go to school. And so like I said, that really kept me going.

[23:14](#)

L: You know, I hear a couple of things, Sam. One is that you normalized adversity when adversity came and it, it, it came so often for you it's like okay there it is. I mean just going to get around and get over it and I'm not going to get hung up on it. And then it also seems like your desire to succeed was so strong and you were never going to give in that it must overcome some of the other things. The negativity, the peer pressure to drink to smoke, to you know, to, to become extremely anxious because you know I see a lot of American players and, a lot, I see some American players who feel a lot of pressure to provide for their family because, they're not in your situation, but their family isn't rich and trying to pay for a very expensive sport and they end up putting like, you know, an 800 pound gorilla on their back and they can't play. And how did you, how did you deal with that Sam? Cause you had to feel some of the pressure of wow, what a chance that I have and yet, you know what if I don't do this,

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S: The question with me was I never had questioned myself, what if I can't do this because there is always a possibility for everything. And my dad once said, if your lungs are capable of putting some air through your nose, that means you've got a life to live, you've got a chance to make it to a better situation. So for me, I never had doubts in my mind that I will get out of this situation because I know what my work ethic was and I know that nobody can out-work me when it comes to working. And excuses were never a thing. Dealing with pressure is one of the things that I like. That's why I choose tennis. Otherwise I could have just played team sports. But I saw this, I like to be my own, like I describe to people that I like to be like Rambo and I like to fight a lot to be a one man army. I like to go out there and do my own thing and when I go to play tennis, my negative situation actually helped me, you know, to be able to perform the way I wanted to perform. Even if I lose the match, okay, I gave it my all that [inaudible]. You know what, I'm coming back next time and this is not going to happen. And I remember when I beat the guy to go to the national team, I told him right in his face, I said, you're going around telling everybody you're going to beat me all the time. But that was the last time you ever beat me. And believe me, we played about five, six times even in the futures in San

Diego and he never got more than three, four games out of me. So again, it's just my upbringing. I think some of it is part of your genetics that you're born, you know, with certain things. I'll give Federer for example, you look at his tennis, there's a lot of things that a coach would teach him what to do. But a lot of things, a coach, there is no coach that can teach you certain things. It's just your instincts and the way you were born. You know, there's certain things that adopt to what make you the person you aspire to be. So for me, dealing with pressure is something that I love. Anything that is pressure, I like it. Anything that makes me feel nervous, that make me feel that I have to do certain things, I absolutely love it. And I will give you another example. I remember when I first came to England and because for me, my serve is my biggest weapon. I mean when it was tested in Senegal, I think I served 139 miles an hour. And I remember when I first came to England, I was training with Ken and there was a guy called Frederick I think, [inaudible] or Frederick who was a Danish kid. And he said to me once and he said, son, are you angry? I go, no, I'm not angry. I'm just, I'm just very serious because I look like this guy who was so angry. The way I serve, the way I play, the way I act, and he just thought I was so angry all the time. I wasn't angry. It's just my own personality from where I come from and the way I'm used to compete, because there was no coach to tell you, oh you gotta be this, you gotta be that. So for me, you know, dealing with pressure, I never say it like a pressure because I wanted to do it for my parents. They didn't put the pressure on me to say, Oh, you have to win tennis. I mean, my, my dad said to me, if he ever saw me play a rich white man sport, meaning tennis, he's going to amputate all my fingers. So for him, playing tennis was not part of what he wanted me to do, but that was all inflicted by myself because I wanted to do this and I wanted to help my dad and surprise him and tell him, yes, you know, I actually made it out of this rich white man's sport. So you know, I could handle the pressure. Yeah.

[27:23](#)

J: My chest had a few close calls with some of those balls coming off Sammie's racket.

[27:27](#)

L: I can imagine. That's a huge serve. Now it certainly, you know, when you think about this from your upbringing and it sounds like, uh, your parents, you know, had a perspective that allowed you or the environment allowed you to make tennis yours and it was yours and it was something you wanted to do. No one was forcing you to do it and you had just, just extreme passion and seriousness about it. Now you work with kids who potentially have, I'm sure have a lot more resources than you grew up with. And yet you have this perspective of having next to nothing and living in a corrugated home. And how do you work with those who maybe have quite a bit and, and yet be able to, cause it sounds like, you know, you have such a good philosophy on life and on sport. How are you able to work with those that, you know, maybe are a little bit more entitled because they have everything that they need and because tennis really is a sport of, of those who can afford it in most cases. And this why this story is just awesome. How do you work with those that maybe, you know, they necessarily may not have to earn everything that they have or you know, things come a lot easier for them?

[28:34](#)

S: Yeah, it's a good question. And this is something, I'm actually writing a new book called tennis madness.

[28:41](#)

J: I like that.

[28:41](#)

S: Yeah. So yeah. So I think that the biggest problem for me in terms of dealing with children, I've worked with so many kids from various countries, Eastern European kids, who usually you think they're mentally tough, yes some of them are. But because I think as country's economy grow, like in England or in Europe, in America, that kids don't have the same value of everything that I did when I was a kid. You know, I never had shoes until I was 13 years old as somebody had to give me shoes. So when I have shoes, I see shoes in a different way than they were. They just see it as a necessity. It should be there. Now for me, if I would change anything into how kids compete, I'll take parents out of the equation. I think a lot of it has to do with the parents and, I'll give you an example. I was in Chile with a player, so here this player was 15 years old. We just finished and one thing I noticed is their mom was actually taking the socks off from the kid and I'm sitting there and I'm looking at this, I go, am I seeing what I'm seeing or am I just imagining what my eyes are seeing. When you have parents who encourage their kids that they do everything for them. They put the breakfast in the table and everything and do this and do that and the kid just sits on their mobile phone all the time. It's very, very difficult to get them the competitive habits and a short word for that is, I said in my book that I'm writing that you know parents treat their kids like house cats, but they want the kids to go out and compete like a lion. And I said it's a very, very difficult thing to get the kids to motivate because every day they wake up in the morning, their mom put the breakfast in the table even though they can ask the kid, can you not do your own breakfast when you're 13, 14 years old, start doing your breakfast, start doing this, [inaudible], carry your own bag. These little little things I think is what is missing today with the kids. So as a coach it's very difficult sometimes for me to get the kids to understand that you know, this is what they have to do. This is how much hard work they have to do. This is how disciplined they have to be. For example, when I teach the kids, they're not allowed to use mobile phone on the court from the warmup until we finish. They're not allowed mobile phones, they're not allowed to do certain things and they can ask questions when necessary and we can get along like this. If they don't abide by these certain rules, then for me, I said, no, no, because there's a lot of other kids out there who want to make it. So it's a variety of a lot of things that I struggle with with the children. But the most thing that I do, I try to be more of a inspirational coach than just try to be a tennis coach. It's why I can be able lead them and say, if I can come from Sierra Leone without tennis shoes, without racket using fishing line and I have to create a bat just to play and come out of there and play the tennis that I play and also manage to be able to teach tennis. Can you imagine where you can be with all these resources, the coaches, the technology, the racket, the ball and everything that you have. You can be 10 times more better than I did when I was playing tennis. So it's, it's a very, very, very hard environment to work with the children. But I love the challenges. Like I said, I try to educate them more about life than just tennis so that when they

can understand how life works and then their tennis will definitely be better than most of the children will be.

[31:52](#)

J: And I know we've talked about this various times in the past. We've kind of gone through different phases of our lives. But I think just to kind of clarify here, when you talk about the parents, you're more talking about them taking a step back so that their kids can create that independence to be able to do things for themselves. Because just, just like you, I mean you had a, you know, what sounded like a very supportive mother that you had. They were able to ingrain an attitude and you from an early age that was basically enabling you to be the person you are today. And I think that's an important message that I think we can give to our parents here is, you know, don't underestimate the value of the mindset that you can set in your kids in early ages, but knowing when it's giving them the opportunities to create independence and do things for themselves is actually what's going to help them be better competitors on the court.

[32:39](#)

S: Yeah. Yeah.

[32:40](#)

J: That's basically, you know what I heard in what you just said there.

[32:43](#)

S: Yes, exactly. Okay, I was speaking to a lady from Taiwan as well.. So I normally have a session with the parents and then also with the kids. One of the things I said is there's something called force and push. Now somebody said, was it different between force? Force is kind of when you say [inaudible] and what you have said, okay, you have to do it. You have no choice. Now push is something you say, okay, I can push you, but under your willingness. So parents, what I want them to understand is you can force your kid to play tennis. It's not going to work out because you'll reach a certain age where the kids are gonna give up. But you need to support them by pushing them to say, okay, if you can do this, you're willing to do this, you're willing my job as a parent, obviously I drive you to your tennis club and still pay for whatever I have to pay for. But the rest of it, I'll leave it with the coaches to deal with that and let the kid become very independent. You know, if tennis is a single game, when you go on the courts, the coaches and everybody has done their job, you have to do this by yourself. So why not teach them these values even in everyday life? Because surviving in tennis is the same as surviving, you know, on a normal daily basis. Your opponent is trying to take what you want, you're trying to take what your opponent wants, and only the strongest, the fittest, the one who can control the emotions can come through this. We see it with Federer, with Rafa, with all the other players who are making it into tennis. So parents need to understand the value of independence. Doesn't matter how young their kids are, it doesn't matter how old he is. Coaches should do their job, parents should do their job and then leave the kids to be independent and let them learn to be a lion on the court rather than a house cat on the tennis courts.

[34:16](#)

L: I love it. It sounds like you got a good tagline for your book there, Sam. And this idea of, you know, push, we found in research, did some research with Dr. Dan Gould at UNC Greensboro and then Michigan State where we found that,

you know, parents providing an optimal push ended up developing their child in a very positive way.

[34:34](#)

S: Yes.

[34:35](#)

L: So I, you know, I think, again, that challenge is the dilemma is when you have everything that you need at your fingertips, you often want for nothing. And you don't have that lion competitive mentality on the court. Sam, are there things that you do in practice, for example. I know you're trying to be an inspiration, a role model for the players that you work with. Are there things that you do when your tennis coaching on court to try to instill this lion kind of competitive mentality that you're talking about?

[35:06](#)

S: Yes. And one of the first things I do is, this all comes from teaching them mental training. And one other thing I'll always do, I play games with a kid where I say, first of all, every player that I coach, everyone at every level, I always ask them a question, what animal do you aspire yourself to be like? If they start telling me I want to be a tortoise or a snail, now we start having some problems.

[35:26](#)

L: Yeah, yeah. You do. In tennis, that's a problem.

[35:30](#)

S: Yeah, that's a serious problem. So I always, they always ask me why. I said, okay, first of all is, you ask me what animal I would choose. I choose two animals. One, I'm a lion. When I'm eating, I'm done with everything that I have to do. I can be as lazy as possible. Relax. I can be joyful, laugh and joke with everyone. But when I'm hungry, trust me, not even the elephant could stand in front of me. So this is the perspective. One of the first things is I let them choose what animal they aspire to be [inaudible]. So when we come on court, when certain things are not going right I go and I say, remember if you are a tiger, act like a tiger. If you are a cheetah, act like a cheetah and my second animal for myself, I'm a chameleon. A chameleon obviously they have the ability to adapt. If they come to the room and it's green, they become green. If they go to this side, that is yellow, they become yellow. Now when I go to play on a clay court, I never once complain and say, Oh, I can't play tennis on a clay court. For me it doesn't matter. It's a clay court, it's a clay court. You're a tennis player. That's what you want to be. So these kinds of mentalities, what made Rafa win Wimbledon, US Open, Australian Open and on the clay when they come from the clay court? You know, this is why Federer coming from Switzerland has managed to win every Grand Slam, because they have the mentality of I'm going to play tennis. I'm not going to make an excuse. I'm not going to complain and this is who I'm going to be. If you look at Rafa's shoes, you see that they have the El Toro, which is the sign of the bull and the bull obviously is a symbol of Mallorca and Spain. And when you look at the way Rafa play tennis of course he acts like a bull, like an angry bull. So this is another way I handled the player to choose an animal which they like and then to reflect and I'll ask them questions say, how do you see yourself if you choose to be a lion? What are the qualities that the lion has that you think you also have this quality? Do you have that

killer instinct? Do you have that competitive instinct where if there are some [inaudible] cheetah hunting something over there, and you're the lion, you will go there to dominate and take that food and become what you want to become. So it's a lot of practical things I do with the kids on court. You know, obviously working on their technique and tactical side is very important, but also is the strength in their mind. The way they think, the way they process things. And I will give you another clear example. I was in Bulgaria with a kid and Holly keeps shouting to me, coach, it's a bit windy and the lines are too bad. So my answer to that is if you ever mention the line and the wind, again, I'm just going to go home. When you decide to come and play tennis, you can tell me because I don't have time for these kind of complains. Of course you're a human being, the lines are going to be bad. It's going to be windy. Without the wind we can never survive on this planet. So what are you complaining about? You know, so think about playing tennis just like your opponent is trying to win under the same condition. You try to just be 1% of your opponent and get on with it. And I tell you, he won the match and came to me and said, coach you know what, from today I give you so much credit. I will never ever complain about these things. So with, that's what we call adversity. So dealing with adversity and dealing with this sort of issues is something I always, always practiced with them, even when we're on court.

[38:24](#)

L: Well, I love how you, you get that messaging in Sam, you're not the victim. You're the writer of your own story and you've certainly lived that and you've modeled it and you can inspire young people to do the same. So I just think that's tremendous and certainly, uh, you know, you're doing great work and providing value to a number of people. So that's awesome. Now, as we move forward here, uh, what do you think, you know, going down the road, what do you see yourself doing for the next 20, 30 years? You see yourself being a coach, you're getting into writing books now, where does sort of this journey take you next. Where does the story go?

[39:01](#)

S: Well, the first thing on my list, obviously my goal is obviously to be always physically fit enough to be able to look after my family, which are twin daughters, you know, and my mom, wife, friends. So that's always the first thing. My second biggest goal is to become one of the best motivational speakers on the planet. Uh, which I have started doing that now and I can see my roots go into that because I think today in society we forget some of the values. And in England today we have a lot of mental issues with young children and we have a lot of kids with knife crime and all these kind of things. And I think what we've done, because our society and empowerment are so improved with technology that we don't speak to each other very much these days. You know, and I want to be of help where I can be able to go to a school, a tennis club, I could go anywhere on the planet and share my life journey and say, you know what, if you have those, your lungs is capable of getting breath in and out, like my dad said to me, you have, you know, a time for you to be able to change your life around. And also I want to continue a line up about four to six books that I'm doing at the minute. So some of them about tennis, some of them about my life journey continue and other things about environmental issues. I

don't want to sound politicians, but you know, things that I've learned because I've traveled to almost I think over a hundred countries now and I've seen a lot of things that humanity, we need to be able to unite. We need to be able to share our life journey. Because when I go to America, everybody treat me like a family. I go to, you know, Middle East people treat me well just because of tennis because of, you know, this one thing called tennis. So I would love to continue writing and coaching is obviously always going to be, you know, I would never leave tennis obviously and I would like to coach and continue to help, you know, the younger generation. I enjoy coaching competitive players. I love that side too, to give my own input and help strengthen their mental aspect, you know, to help them become a better person on the planet. And also I did a foundation work in Africa where I help underprivileged children until sport and education. So we've done a lot of that for the past 10 years. I've done it in Sierra Leone and in 2012 I started in Ghana where we help, we collect tennis rackets and balls and strings, whatever we can get. Tennis shoes and clothing and then we find a way to raise some money and then ship it to Africa. And I will go and do coaching calls with coaches and players camps and then I will run tournaments and all these kind of things. So I would love to continue to that until I die. So motivational speaking, continue writing. Coaching obviously is always going to be my foundation and then also helping with my foundation in Africa and all sorts of parts of the planets.

[41:40](#)

J: Sammy, that's unreal. And, and one thing, obviously you've got a very inspirational story, but what I found extremely remarkable is what you're doing now. Like you mentioned with your foundation, what you do with your work at the Liverpool international, which is the exhibition on the grass, the grass courts leading into Wimbledon and all the people that you help, you know, you're very driven to basically to be servant leadership. You want to lead through example. You want to inspire, you want to motivate and that is the forefront of your mind. And you know other, other things that you do personally for your family, for your mom. Now I remember one story, you know, you were telling me you were going to go away for for a few weeks, maybe it was a month you're going to go back home and build your mom a house. He said, Oh, I've gotta... You know, and then I just found that pretty cool. And you know, I guess from my perspective, Sam, I'll thank you from my end cause as you said, I mean when you first came to Southport, you know, yeah you were looking for a hitter, you know, to play and whatever. But you know, same for us. I mean for my brother and I, there wasn't anyone in our town. When you came along, you know, you weren't just a hitter, you were somebody that became a very close friend of ours. You actually introduced me to doing the right things in the gym and getting in the gym. I was kind of a scrawny little lunatic around the court and you actually got me in the gym and it wasn't just working out in the gym. You helped me understand things. You helped me see some of the connections and, and you know, you help me I guess inspire my little sort of Ninja side of me that I have going on.

[43:04](#)

S: I can see that with your little daughter now.

[43:04](#)

J: Yeah, my little terrorist of a daughter, who's was flying around the place. You know, from, from my end, Sammy, I'd like, you know, I always take this opportunity to try and appreciate the people that have helped me. And you know, we've come from different worlds, but you've inspired me massively, you know, and those were formative years in my life when I was 13, 14, when I got first introduced to you. And it definitely shaped a lot of my mindset and approach to things, not complaining about things like the wind and just cracking on with it as you said. And so I picked a lot of these lessons up and yeah, I remember thinking if this guy could come out, like you say, if this guy can come out of Sierra Leone and he's putting a hole through my chest on his serve, then I think I can, I think I can, with all the support and help I've had in my life, that I can make the most of my opportunities. So you know what you've tried to do and inspire people. You definitely inspired me. So I can just thank you for that, mate.

[43:55](#)

S: Thank you very much, Johnny. I always feel grateful and thankful for people to say that. And I just like to share my story because you know, I don't know how long I'm gonna live on this wonderful planet. But I think for me, one thing my mom always told me, and I would never forget this, she said to me, I didn't know you could have a family wherever you go. It doesn't matter if you know people are not, and your brother Chris is like my own brother. You know, we've had great time including you when you were here. And I remember you being a little bit drunk and misbehaving, but you know...

[44:24](#)

L: YES!

[44:24](#)

J: Remember what I said in the beginning Sam.

[44:31](#)

S: That didn't come from me. Definitely. But we had a great time and I also want to thank you and, and Chris who have always been there with me. And even when I'm doing my, when I have a tough time, he's always picked me up and as a human being, we all have our ups and downs. You know, some of us manage it better. Some of the people, not so much and but you know, without you guys as support and everything, a lot of this would not be as easy as it sounds or looks like now. So I just want to also thank you, you know, for training with me, even for the all African game and your brother has always been an inspiration as well and a very good help. So in other words, yes, I want to thank you very much and just to say again, you know, you've been missed very much in Southport. I know you're never going to come back here. You're American now. Well we will give you that? The community in America will need you a lot, but like I said, you can make a family wherever you go. This planet is for us as a human being. It's not for anyone else. Doesn't matter whether you're in America, whether you're in Asia, wherever you go, if you feel home, you're home. And for me, I just tried to do my best and give people the things that I didn't have. That's why I'm doing my foundation, to give the children a much better chance to play tennis and be positive rather than taking a knife and a gun. As we can see, we have 12,000 child soldiers over, you know, suffered in Sierra Leone and I was the victim of the war. So I don't want to ever see that again. Not in Sierra Leone, not on any

part of the planet. So thank you very much. You know, also for giving me this opportunity today to share my life journey.

[45:57](#)

L: Well that's, that's tremendous. And I love that philosophy, Sam. You know, tennis saved your life, but it seems like you're using tennis now to create better lives for the kids that you come in contact with. And I think that's, that's the best way for you to help others and improve the planet man, is to do what you're passionate about and keep sharing that story and your values and, and what you're about. So just tremendous.

[46:19](#)

S: Yes. Thank you. Thank you very much Larry. And thank you everyone there. Like I said again, we all can never be, not everybody was born to be a grand slam champion, but we all can be a champion to use what we have to inspire others. So I think for me, I'm grateful to even be speaking to you guys today. This is the beauty I love about tennis. You know I always make a joke as me being the very dark or black from Africa. I go to places where I play tennis with people in Asia and the middle East and everywhere I'm looking, I say, look at the diversity in the sport, look at how much now we are having fun with each other. Tennis is a great sport and I, like I said, I never know where I could have been without tennis. So I'm forever grateful and hopefully one day I'll meet you guys as well in person and we all can share more stories together. So I'm grateful.

[47:02](#)

L: Look forward to that. Absolutely.

[47:04](#)

J: Well Sammy, thank you so much for joining us and good luck moving forward with everything. I know we'll be in touch and yeah, hopefully I get to see you soon mate whether back in Southport or maybe we'll get you over to America at some point and see you over here. So thanks again for joining the podcast and yeah, let us know if there's anything you ever need from us and how we can help you as well.

[47:25](#)

S: Alright. Okay.

[47:27](#)

J: Awesome. Awesome. Well that's it for today's episode of compete like a champion. Uh, that was an incredible episode detailing a very inspirational guy. Um, if you're interested in learning more about Sam, we're going to put some resources up on the website, his Ted talk. We'll put a link to his book, uh, on Amazon, a book review. So I really recommend going out and buying that and taking a read. And if anyone wants to get in contact with Sam, you can always get in touch with us here at player development and we can put you in touch with him. So, uh, until next time, Dr. Larry and I, and Sam, we're checking out.