

Open Summary

By Andre Agassi

How do you muster enough determination to persevere with something that you loathe? Does passion fuel success? And, when is it too late to get off the path that's been laid out in front of you?

Open is the captivating autobiography by tennis legend Andre Agassi. It's an insightful look into the life of one of the most beloved athletes of a generation, his battle with secret dragons, and his crippling identity crisis.

Andre Agassi was dubbed a "punk," and the rebel of the tennis scene. Fans copied his signature look, and he made tennis "cool." However, as Agassi says, 'I'm flattered by the imitators, embarrassed, thoroughly confused. I can't imagine all these people trying to be like Andre Agassi, since I don't want to be Andre Agassi.'

We'll briefly delve into Andre Agassi's fascinating story, and how he became a tennis legend that defined a generation. We'll also look at some of the book's lessons about success, determination, and true grit.

Slaying the Dragon

'I hate tennis, hate it with all my heart, and still I keep playing, keep hitting all morning, and all afternoon, because I have no choice. No matter how much I want to stop, I don't. I keep begging myself to stop, and I keep playing, and this gap, this contradiction between what I want to do and what I actually do, feels like the core of my life.'

Andre Agassi was born with spondylolisthesis, which is a back condition

that can cause severe pain. Andre Agassi was also born with an Olympian boxer Mike Agassi for a father, a father, who perhaps created as much pressure as his back condition.

At age seven, Andre Agassi faced hours and hours in front of the ball machine that he nicknamed "the dragon." In fact, the creation of the dragon is one of his earliest memories. At age five, his father pulled him out of kindergarten to go to the welding shop to create the fearsome ball machine. Another early memory is househunting. Mike dragged his family to numerous properties, and no matter how nice the house was, if it didn't have a big enough yard, it wasn't going to work. Eventually, Mike Agassi found the right house, with the right sized backyard. It was the perfect size to fit a full-sized tennis court.

Andre's father built the court from scratch. He worked from nothing more than "a picture in his head," and with a dogged determination, he made his dream a reality. This dream became a prison to his young son.

From very early on, Andre was pegged to be the tennis prodigy. His father tried with his other children, but they weren't "naturals." Apparently, Andre showed a talent for the game very early on. When he was a baby, he watched a ping pong match and moved nothing but his eyes back and forth following the ball. This simple twist of fate was the only sign needed. From that moment, Mike Agassi dedicated his son's life to tennis. He strapped a ping pong paddle to baby Andre's wrist, and encouraged him to hit the balls dangling from the mobile hanging above the crib. And, at the age of three, Andre Agassi was given his first racket and told he could hit anything he wanted.

Matthew Syed talks about prodigies in his book *Bounce*. Drawing on the example of László Polgár, he argues that prodigies are not born; they're

nurtured. We might believe that young talents are naturally gifted, but we often don't see the hours of practice and training they go through. Andre Agassi is no exception. He stood in front of the dragon hitting balls from a very young age, building his reflexes, learning to hit harder, fine-tuning his skills, and learning to hit harder still. Young Andre hit 2500 balls every single day. His father told him that if he did this consistently, it'd amount to nearly one million balls a year.

Andre Agassi saw the dragon as this unstoppable and unbeatable force, and wondered how he could ever beat something that never stops. The ten thousand hour rule is all about consistency and building muscle memory, and it's not only about facing the dragon, but eliminating potential hurdles. One such hurdle in tennis is the net. Mike raised the net 6 inches higher than regulation, to teach Andre to clear this obstacle at all costs.

The tradeoff for the ten thousand hours, the million balls, and the relentless tennis education, was his schooling. Andre was frequently taken out of school to hit balls at the local tennis club, and by taking away the option of education, he became even more reliant on tennis.

Just before the age of eight, Andre began playing tournaments, and he won his first seven. He lost his eighth tournament against a kid who cheated, and this incident makes him aware that he's not perfect. His own imperfection haunts him, and this particular loss tortures him because he knows he could have won if he'd just done everything perfectly like he'd been taught.

Learning To Be Homesick

'The first time I hear this word I ask myself, How can you be sick about not being home? Home is where the dragon lives. Home is the place where, when you get there,

you have to play tennis.'

Aside from the tournaments, Andre Agassi became a hustler and made money off unsuspecting adults. At tournaments his father gave him Excedrin, and on one occasion, he even gave him speed.

At age twelve, Andre was selected to play a tournament in Australia. He's one of only two twelve-year-olds chosen, and he won four tournaments.

After this, things escalated. Mike watched an episode of *60 Minutes* about the Nick Bollettieri tennis school. Mike told Andre that he had nothing more to teach him, and he'd also run out of opponents. Despite only being able to afford three months at the Bollettieri Academy, Andre was told that he has no choice, and he was sent away. Andre recalls, 'a short time later my mother tells me that the *60 Minutes* report was actually an exposé on this Bollettieri character, who was in essence running a tennis sweatshop that employed child labor.'

And, as much as he felt stifled and trapped at home, he learned what homesickness is. Life at the academy was difficult. It was regimented and felt like a prison. However, Nick Bollettieri noticed Andre's abilities and took a special interest in him. Nick phoned Mike Agassi and said he'd never seen anyone come through his academy with more talent than Andre. After that, it was settled. Nick funded Andre, and Andre had no choice but to remain at the academy indefinitely.

Andre began to rebel, but no one took much notice of his pierced ear or pink mohawk. It was only when he was fourteen, and played the final of a tennis tournament in jeans and eyeliner, that Nick punished him. However, Andre knew his value, and with the help of a stuffed panda bear, he negotiated his freedom. Andre Agassi traded a giant stuffed

panda for his education. He dropped out of school and asked Nick to help him focus full-time on tennis.

'You're free Andre. You'll never have to learn anything again.'

In Search of Perfection

'Though I hate tennis, I like the feeling of hitting a ball dead perfect. It's the only peace. When I do something perfect, I enjoy a split second of sanity and calm.'

From a young age, perfectionism crept into Andre Agassi's life. He hates tennis, but he enjoys it when he does something perfectly. Cal Newport's *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, argues that passion is a poor driver of success. Newport suggests that it's in doing things well that we find our passion. However, he also asserts that gaining control, and having a mission are key components of finding fulfillment.

At fifteen, Andre hit his stride, and people started noticing him and referring to him as a prodigy. Nick and Andre made a truce and worked well together, and after much consideration, at age sixteen, he decided to go pro. There's no turning back. He also received his first endorsement from Nike.

Then things started to unravel. Against lesser players, Andre Agassi began losing because he played to their level. He struggled to settle into a groove, and when he went to Wimbledon he hated it. He couldn't come right on the surface, and he didn't like the strict dress code and stuffy atmosphere. His losing streak continued, and then, in a fit of rage and despondency, he gave his rackets to a group of homeless people. He vowed to quit, but first, he committed to playing one last tournament.

The relieved pressure made him play exceptionally well. He reached the final against Ivan Lendl. In the final he got a sound thrashing by the world number one, but he made a huge impression. He doesn't quit tennis. Instead, in 1987 he won his first tournament as a pro.

A Close Shave

Most people remember Andre Agassi for being "The Punisher," and for his bold fashion choices and bodacious mullet. People copied his style, and he made tennis cool. Fans dressed like him and idolized him.

In 1988 his signature look was stonewashed denim tennis shorts. Agassi landed on them because Nike was showing some clothing samples. John McEnroe had the first choice, and he declined the denim offering. However, Agassi lept at the opportunity to wear something so audacious.

Agassi's experimentation was a bid to find out who he was. He didn't choose tennis, but he did have the choice when it came to his self-presentation on the court. It was a watershed moment for tennis, and the media went to town on this new brazen character. He was dubbed a punk and a rebel. The media was relentless and accused him of having no substance, especially after an infamous photoshoot for Canon, which

came with the slogan, "Image is Everything." This slogan followed him around for much of his early career.

Meanwhile, Andre Agassi was hiding a secret. He was losing his hair, and wore a hairpiece. Disaster struck at the 1990 French Open. Agassi made it to the final, but the night before, his hairpiece fell apart. With the help of his brother, they managed to secure his hairpiece, but it was precarious, and distracted him from the match. He lost the game, all the while being taunted by the phrase, "Image is Everything."

When he started dating Brooke Shields, she advised him to shave off his hair. He thought about it and then bid farewell to his trademark, to his lie. With the weight of the lie gone, he stormed ahead and won the 1995 Australian Open. This win moved him to the number one ranked player in the world.

Creating a Team and Developing Consistency

'If I must play tennis, the loneliest sport, then I'm sure as hell going to surround myself with as many people as I can off the court. And each person will have his specific role.'

The press ripped into Agassi for creating an "entourage." Agassi talks very candidly about the isolation he felt on the court, and his need to have other people in his court with him. One of the most influential people he recruited was Gil Reyes. Gil Reyes initially helped him with his conditioning and training, but they developed an unbreakable bond. Gil made him stronger in every sense of the word. Gil Reyes became the father and mentor Andre Agassi so badly needed.

In 1994, he hired a new coach Brad Gilbert. Gilbert was quick to point out

where Agassi was going wrong, 'You always try to be perfect, he says, and you always fall short, and it fucks with your head. Your confidence is shot, and perfectionism is the reason.' With the help of Brad Gilbert, Andre Agassi began to shed his perfectionism and moved towards consistency. He was also taught to attack his opponent's weaknesses, and to play each individual player.

Most crucially, Brad Gilbert taught Agassi about the power of positive thinking. For example, instead of counting up towards a win, the aim should be to count backward from the win. Carol Dweck talks about adopting a "growth mindset," and asserts that we can only learn from failure. By striving towards perfection we become imprisoned in our own minds and crumble under unnecessary pressure. With a changing mindset, Agassi reached the title of world number one, but he felt empty.

Much has been written on what constitutes a meaningful and happy life. A lot of it comes down to goals, but we have to set the right goals for ourselves. After a lot of soul-searching, Agassi realized that becoming world number one was not his goal; it's what other people wanted for him.

He shifted focus and turned his attention to winning the French Open in order to be the first American to win all four slams. Unfortunately, during the final, he injured his hip and lost the match. A crushing loss at Wimbledon against Boris Becker followed. "The Summer of Revenge," was his response, and he committed wholeheartedly to beating Boris Becker. He held true to his goal, and at the 1995 US Open, he beat Becker in the semis. The cost of beating Becker took its toll, and he couldn't match up to Pete Sampras in the final. The loss is crushing. 'All that work and anger and winning and training and hoping and sweating, and it leads to that same disappointed feeling. No matter how much you

win, if you're not the last to win, you're a loser. And in the end I always lose, because there is always Pete. As always, Pete.'

The pain of losing to Sampras caused him to spiral, and he couldn't shake the feeling. He slumped into a depression and battled with his anger. And, despite a nagging feeling, he proposed to Brooke Shields.

In 1996 he won an Olympic gold medal, but the euphoria was short-lived; he continued spiraling and eventually decided to take time off to regroup. Andre Agassi decided 1997 was going to be a new start. However, despite his good intentions, his downward spiral continued, and he turned to crystal meth. Later he became unseeded for the first time in three years.

At a Crossroads

'Maybe doing what you hate, doing it well and cheerfully, is the point. So you hate tennis. Hate it all you want. You still need to respect it – and yourself.'

After a wake-up call, Andre Agassi made the decision to change. However, before he could begin his transformation, he was told that he failed the standard ATP drug test. He's told that he needs to explain how the drugs got in his system, so he wrote a letter in which he lies about how the drugs got there. He grappled with the lie but committed himself to change.

His process of rebuilding started from the bottom. He played in the minors, and he and Gil drew up a plan to set about recreating Andre Agassi. The experience of starting from scratch was humbling. He formed a charitable foundation for at-risk kids, which he turned into a charter

school because he believes in the power of education. This project gave him a new sense of meaning and purpose. He now had something to play for, and raising money for his school, The Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, motivated him.

This newfound passion and meaning resulted in his rankings steadily increasing, but his marriage to Brooke Shields came to an abrupt end.

A Match Made in Heaven

'That's right. Steffi Graf. It's destiny you end up together. Only two people in the history of the world have won all four slams and a gold medal – you and Steffi Graf. The Golden Slam. It's destiny that you two should be married.'

When Andre Agassi won Wimbledon in 1992, he faced the crushing disappointment that he wouldn't be dancing with Steffi Graf at the Wimbledon Ball. He'd been harboring a not-so-secret crush on her since he saw her give an interview on television. Although he didn't get to dance with her, he did talk to her, but she gave him a fairly cool reception.

The Energy Bus and *The Secret*, talk about the law of attraction, and the power of visualization techniques. Ironically, Brooke Shields taped a photo of Steffi Graf, the perfect woman, on the fridge to inspire her to lose weight for her and Andre's wedding. When his marriage to Brooke Shields ended, Agassi's coach Brad, told him to make a play for Steffi Graf. Brad knew Steffi's coach, and he made it his mission to set up a proper meet-cute. After their practice session, Andre sent flowers and set a path towards wooing his dream woman.

Meanwhile, he finally won the French Open in 1999, and his trajectory

was set. On the way back from winning the French Open, Brad wrote, "Steffi Agassi 2001," on a piece of paper and gave it to Andre. The visualization and persistence worked out. Steffi Graff became Stefanie Agassi in 2001.

In Conclusion

'Also, no matter how I feel about tennis, the game is my home. I hated home as a boy, and then I left, and I soon found myself homesick.'

Open is a superb case study and story of the true cost of perfection. Perfection is a prison, and while persistence and practice are an integral part of success, aiming for perfection all the time is counterproductive.

While many of us have read theories on the ten thousand hour rule, prodigies, finding passion, the law of attraction, the search for meaning, and so forth, this is a real-life account of what it means to put these theories into practice. It's a story about resilience, grit, making mistakes, and rebuilding.

We all have our dragons to face, and we can choose to face them courageously or give up and let them win. As with life, the dragon doesn't stop; we need to decide whether to meet it or walk away.

Finally, we need to remember that our minds are often our greatest prisons, and that opening our minds and hearts to the right team is what counts most of all. As Andre Agassi says, 'It's easier to be free and loose, to be yourself, after laughing with the ones you love. The right attachments.'