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Advantage, Martin

THE DEAN OF UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO'S ROTMAN SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT HAS A COMPETITIVE STREAK—AND NOT JUST AT THE OFFICE BY AMANDA LANG

As the ball slams the court, a tiny puff of clay floats off the surface. The sharp ping of the racquet connecting—like a cork sliding out of a giant champagne bottle—reverberates through the tennis bubble at Toronto's Granite Club. It's 8 a.m. on a bright February day, not as early as Roger Martin usually plays—a self-professed morning person, he's up every day at 5 a.m. and happy to be on the court shortly thereafter. His partner today is his coach, Sonya Jeyaseelan,

a former singles player who represented Canada at the 2000 Olympics. Jeyaseelan prefers afternoon sessions, but is making an exception for this match-up, and the ball is zinging back and forth between them, straight and low, as though strung on a wire.

Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, has a competitive streak, and it shows: There are no fobbed-off shots for this 52-year-old. Every hit is hard and mighty, his forehand a power move that springs out of his rolled shoulder. Occasionally, on a tough return, he lifts a knee up into the air, light on his feet.

SPORTING WORDS

› **Favourite pro tennis player:** Of all time, Andre Agassi. My game emulates his, and he is like me physically—except an infinitely better athlete, of course.

› **What you want to improve:** I am a baseliner and I am working hardest on my net game.

› **Most memorable tennis-playing moment:** I played in the men's singles club championship at the Ojibway Club in 1991 and got slaughtered 8-1 in a pro set in the first round. I worked extremely hard on my game and, about seven years later, made the finals and held championship point three times—and eventually lost in the final. I swore in that moment that I would finish the job. It took me another five years to get to the final, and I won it.

› **Clay or grass?** Clay. I haven't played on grass enough to feel confident on that surface. It is crazy!

He came late to the game, picking it up seriously in 1990 after buying a cottage at Pointe au Baril, Georgian Bay. "I golf, and you can't really golf there. I don't sail, I don't particularly swim well, but every day, there are doubles you can join, so I started to play." But if that sounds like casual dabbling, it isn't. Martin spent three recent summers there, working on writing projects (*The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking* and the soon-to-be published *The Design of Business: How Design Thinking Creates Competitive Advantage*), and he bookended most days with games of tennis. On the court, he actively engages in improving his game—he is focused and disciplined, responding to Jeyaseelan's guiding remarks ("give it more lift," she calls at one point) with the kind of application any coach would like to see.

As befits the man who founded and spearheads Ontario's Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, Martin doesn't like to be bad at things. Growing up in Southwestern Ontario, he played golf and one-on-one basketball with his brother Rick, and learned early on what it's like to be an underdog. He never beat his big brother, but he came to appreciate the value of "hanging in there and fighting a fight." These days, that kind of motivation works to his advantage. He's a come-from-behind kind of player who sometimes surprises his opponents by rallying back from a steep disadvantage.

Before taking on his role as dean at Rotman in 1998, Martin was a director at Monitor, a U.S.-based global strategy consulting firm—also something

of an underdog relative to the bigger players. Martin founded the company's Canadian office, and admits to some disappointment at not being able to transform it into the powerhouse he had hoped it would become. But his time there earned him a reputation that has lingered—and most recently, a consulting gig with General Motors. Climbing into his silver-grey Chevy Malibu after the tennis game, Martin explains that he has a certain pride of ownership: "A few years ago [GM CEO] Rick Wagoner called me and said, 'I heard you know a lot about strategy. Can you help us?'" Martin worked not just on the company's turnaround strategy, but on the marketing of the Malibu, even tinkering with the final design to help it compete against the more popular Asian models in its category. "Its launch was a smash success."

Strategy is always top of mind for Martin, who says that although he's a "banger" by nature, his goal on the court is to consider the field of play as one might a chessboard. For the past few years, he has applied the same strategic focus to the Rotman School, turning it into a top-notch destination that holds its own on a global stage. During his tenure (he was reappointed to a second, five-year term in 2005), he has lured teaching talent from abroad, and students from around the world.

Martin doesn't do things by halves, so he serves on the board of Tennis Canada and heads the Tennis Development Committee (responsible for the Davis Cup, the Fed Cup and others), while also continuing to improve his game. "If I don't hit for a few days, my swing goes to hell in a handbasket," he says. Still, he won the club's B-level singles championship two years ago and now plays at the A level.

And in between matches, he continues to build the Rotman brand. "Canada deserves to have at least one globally competitive business school, and I'd like it to be the Rotman School."

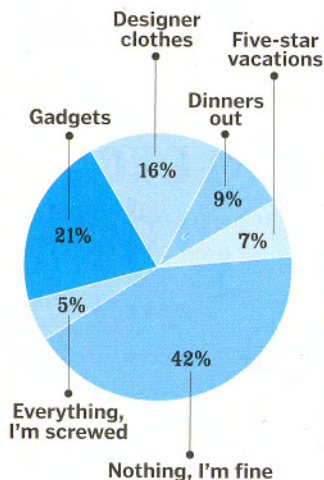
There is every indication he will prevail on that front—and the slow but steady approach that works so well for him on the court may help here. Then again, so might his other strategy: "When in doubt, smash it." **RI**

THE LUNCH POLL

Report on Business magazine surveyed 43 people in the new food court under the Royal Bank tower at Bay and Front Streets in Toronto.

Q

What are you giving up this year?



"Clothes, because I've been a bit of a glutton."
Jane, 50, graphic designer

"Vacations? They're for rich guys."
Em, 40ish, accountant

"Gadgets. I like to travel and feel like I've earned it. And travel's cheap now."
Allen, 34, project manager, financial industry

"Designer clothes. I bought designer jeans the other day, but that's it."

Viki, 49, banker.

"I don't know."

What am I giving up this year?"

Viki's daughter

"Designer clothes."

Viki

"Nothing. I've decided to spend before the crash gets any worse and I lose more money. Besides, the more I spend, the better it is for the economy."

Kathleen, 53, banking

"Nothing, mostly because of my delusional nature. Someone's got to be optimistic."

Paul, 40, legal services