

What Sets "The Top" apart from the Rest?

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J: Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast where we explore the psychology of performance, advanced coaching and sports science through the lens of professional tennis. You're here with dr Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist and coach Johnny Parkes with the USTA player development. All righty. This is Johnny Parkes here with the USTA player development and I'm here with dr Larry Lauer, our mental skills specialists for the USTA player development team USA. And we're here going to be talking about the top of the game and what sets them apart. I guess as we look at the top of the game, we, we look at developing the next champions, right? We see we, we take examples of, of the pros right now and what they bring to the table and how they go about it. Maybe you know, the, the, the cultural philosophy or the values that they live by. You know, what are some of the things that we are, you know, within team USA we're trying to help our athletes with. And especially what do we, you know, what do we, what do we want to try and help out or the younger with the younger generation to help bring them?

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L: Well, I think that's the idea is we look at the top of the game and we use that as a, uh, as a, the parameters essentially, or the model for what we want to teach the young ones. And so watching the Federers and the, the Nadals, the Serena Williams, uh, Sharapova is what are the things that we see in them that we believe, uh, our young kids can do and can, can mimic. And that's really, I think the purpose of today is to talk about what are those things that those, those folks do the top of the game. And what's the difference. And I, I do believe a lot of times we'll talk about forehands and backhands, but honestly, uh, I think we need to talk about their character and the things that they stand for and the way they do things because that I believe sets them apart. I remember an interview with David Nalbandian, and I believe it was Cincinnati many years ago, and I asked, Nalbandian, what's the difference between the top two or three in a men's game and everyone else? And he said, it's their mind.

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J: Yeah. I, um, I read a famous quote, I think it might've been from John Woodard back in the day, but essentially it says, you know, you can win with talent, but to keep winning takes character, you know, and that, that to me was pretty strong because again, I mean, you can look at any player at the game that got on any given week. They can, they can win a tournament, but can they keep winning? You know? I mean, you look at Feds the Federers and Nadals, Djokovic's and those are the world and they've won so many grand slams. You know, how are they able to keep doing that? And the one thing that strikes out to me is, is it doesn't matter what sport it is, the people that are top of their field, they seem to all have the same, let's say, you know, same cultural values or the same, same principles that they, their approach to their sport. You know, and obviously we, we, we know more about, you know, looking at Fed and Nadal being exposed to that. But, you know, what are those characteristics? What are those character traits that these guys have that that provides this level of consistency?

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L: Yeah, no, I think you, you, you look, you start with the professionalism they have to their sport. Uh, we can jump to other sports like a LeBron James and the way he conducts himself, and I know an NBA finals. He, he broke his hand punching a, I think a whiteboard, but that made a difference in those finals because he lost his temper. And I think what you see usually at the top of the game, very professional. And now what does that mean? I mean that's the way I look at that is doing everything that would be expected of someone in that position. That goes in a lot of different stuff if you want to say different parts of your preparation, but top of the game, those folks are prepared every week and I don't think they play unless they're ready.

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J: Yeah. And the one thing that strikes out to me too is there's, there is that discipline [inaudible] I mean we talk about professional discipline, but the personal discipline first, I mean, what, what, what can you say about that? I mean, what do you see and maybe what do you see in some of the top players and maybe what do you see as some of the challenges that we face with, with regards to helping having our athletes understand what discipline is? I mean, I think when we say discipline, we think, you know, okay, well if you don't do this little little slap on the hand or go run an extra lap or something. But you know, to me professional discipline and personal discipline means a lot. Something, something different. But you know, what's your thoughts?

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L: Well, I think that, uh, you know, at the top of the game what you see are very specific routines that these these players are using that you don't see necessarily consistently at other levels. And I think they, they have found a way to be their best consistently. And that's, that's really truly what sets them apart. And then they're committed to that. One of the biggest issues I see is players straying away from what works. So if if getting up at eight in the morning, seven in the morning and starting your training early and getting your day in two sessions, uh, you know, on the court session in the gym, doing your video work, whatever you do every day, you're stretching your massage. The, the top players aren't going to stray away from that. In fact, there's, I mean, there's stories that I've read in the media about Djokovic that he's so stuck in his routine and if he gets off it throws, it's really throws him off mentally. Now I'm not saying that's what we want for our players. We want them to be resilient when we flexible. When something doesn't go well, but we also need to be really consistent with routines and habits. The way we do things from the way we eat, to the way we sleep. I think sleep is one of the biggest things that you know, that our players really need to pay attention to. And, and what is, what does that sleep cycle? How much sleep do you need? Uh, there's many different things. And from a mental standpoint, I believe these top performers have found a way mentally, not only to manage the daily expectation that they're under and the stress of the travel of the media to the, the load that they experienced in practice, to the expectation from their, from their coaching staff or their, their teammates. We talk about team sports, they have found a way, and it comes back to doing certain things every day that allow you to stay in a good place. So expectations to me are one of the biggest things. Roger Federer, every place that he goes, he's expected to play on the final day and win the

tournament. That's a lot of expectation, right? And I believe, you know, I don't know Roger and I haven't spoken to Roger so I'm not going to speak for him. But he has found a way to be able to be okay with that expectation and to, and to really, uh, almost fueled him. Cause now he's, he wants to leave a legacy. Right. But I think the top players they've built in routines that allow them to keep their mind in a good place to deal with the stress and eventually actually embrace what they're doing and joy what they are doing. So we, I mean we can get more specific what those things are,

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J: Well, the thing that you can look at like Rafa and Maria Sharapova, I mean those are two that spring, spring out to mind when you actually visit, you know, watch a match on TV or watch them live. They are so relentless in, in, in their, in their approach, they're so meticulous with, you know, like Rafa has got to have the bottle angled a certain way in the exact same spot and at the French Open you had the commentators that were, you know, almost kind of making fun of him that, you know, this is just, this is over the top. It was ridiculous. You know, he doesn't step on lines, he has to sprint to the baseline. I mean, I look at that and then you look at, Maria always turns around, you know, get maybe gives her a pat on the thigh and she uses a string. She bounces up and down and then she turns to face the court. I mean, you know what they're going to do every single point or at the change of ends every single game. And you look at that and think, well, I wonder what they're like before they even step onto the court. Yeah. Or what they're like when they step off the court because they're there. If they're that detailed and uh, I guess, you know, OCD on the court, you know, what's gone into getting them to that point because obviously they do it for a reason.

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L: Yeah. Well I think part of it is who they are. I mean, these are very detailed people. Um, I think there probably in other parts of their life, so that way too. Um, yeah, that gets harder for a player who usually a young player that is more on the spontaneous side and just kinda likes things to happen, you know, well, you know, I'm show up and we'll see what happens. That's fine. And that if that's who you are, but if you look at the top of the game, again, if we look and see what the top of the game is doing, that's not what they're doing. Right. And so you have to let that be your guidance. So if I am the kind of person who's pretty spontaneous, at least in tennis, I gotta be pretty structured. And then I can build in other times where I'm spontaneous in my personal life, maybe I go and do things that are off the cuff, but I don't do that when I'm speaking in front of the media and I don't do, when I'm on the practice court or I'm playing a match or I'm in my preparation. So the details that discipline, uh, it's hard to express to young person because they've never experienced it before. A lot of them. And for them to buy into that, uh, is challenging. But I think, again, if they're motivated to be one of those flares at the top of the game and they see that then, and I think that's when you get them. And, and I, and that's where having them practice with, the better pros, having to go watch what they do, uh, watching their matches, watching them train, and then the opportunity that some of our players get. And you know, some of our players have had the opportunity to train with Federer in the off season and, or go train and spend

time with Andre Agassi, for example. And those are, uh, essential, unbelievable experiences for our players when they get that opportunity. They need to take it.

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J: Well, I guess Andre and Pete, I mean, they're great examples from, from their era. Obviously they're just before the, you know, the one we're experiencing now. But those guys as well. I mean, we talk about routines. I mean it's only really, I think Rafa and Maria, you know, and players like that really brought it to light. But you, if you go back and watch Andre play or Pete play, they had their own routines. You know, they had their in between points, routines, they had the, you know, they had that too. So it's again, it's those similar characteristics as these players. But you know, going back to what you said is with, with the juniors it's they see that. But you know, when we, when we talk about that and try and help the players create routines and understand those routines, you know, there's always comes back to that. Why? Because again, they can get caught in that trap of all, you know, in order to win, I have to do this with my full handle this with my serve. But actually what might make the difference is being able to stay structured with their routines and being able to, you know, in order to develop that takes work. It takes time.

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L: Yes. I think the way that I would explain that to the players I try to is that there's a way of doing things just like a free throw shooter in basketball that allows you to be at your best mentally, physically, emotionally locked in, ready to play. And this we can be talking about pre-match, we can be talking about between points in the changeover post-match there's a way of doing things that prepares you to be your best and the top of the game. They know what that is. They reflect on their performance. They're aware of the things that help them prepare. And I think, you know, the players that I've been around who are, uh, especially even in hockey, uh, my time with USA hockey, they are very, very specific about the things that get them ready to play and what they do during games. And they don't do anything more. They don't do the extra things that will distract them from really what's important to them and their preparation. Now that doesn't mean they're robots. Everybody's different. They have their own personality. I'm not expecting people to be Sharapova because that may be way too far outside their comfort zone for, how they're going to approach a match. But they could be really more specific about the things they're doing to prepare. So I mean, again, if, if you're looking at the top of the game, consistency, discipline, details, routines, to me, this is a big part of what sets them apart. Uh, you know, if you look at Andre, um, Andre had his things that he developed over time and when it got off course, there were some times it got off course the in between points. Routine was affected, he'd go faster, right? And that's also the key with, I think at the top of the game, is it's not just that they have these routines that prepare them, but when things aren't going well, when there's adversity, they stay with their routines. They don't get off course. And Oh, I gotta, I gotta do something different because things aren't working. They know what works for them and they don't panic. And that's huge. And, and that's where I would say for a young player, a first you gotta commit to something that you believe gets you ready. And you really need to rely on your

coaches and know what that is. You're a mental coach. But then secondly, when things are going bad, look at the top of the game. Uh, Serena's not going to get too far away from the way she does things just because she's down a break in the first set.

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J: Yeah, I, I, yeah, and coming back to that, I mean I always think of, uh, our, um, one of our former colleagues and legends, Tom Gullickson always talks about his three C's. All right? Being comfortable, being confident and have, I'm being competent. And I, I essentially what you're saying there is, is, you know, when you're setting a breakdown and do you change the way that you're doing things? Well, you need to come back to what's comfortable. Cause if you're living in a chaotic world, then it develops this cloud, right? Of uncertainty, this cloud of, of lack of direction. And we need to, we need to figure out how to get through that. How do I come back from a breakdown? How, you know, that's, that's part of the strategy and I've got to come back to what makes me feel comfortable because then that helps me develop the confidence, able to let my competencies deliver. Uh, and you know, those three C's that he's always talked about with players and, and professionals that he's always worked with, you know, it really hits home and so we start, you know, I me personally, I've learned from that and I use it and I talk about that with our juniors. You know, when they give me the why question about the routines and you know, really trying to create that buy in, I said, well, you know, how comfortable would you feel out there on the court is there is going to be times where you're going to be forced to try and be off your, you know, you're forced off your game and it's going to make you feel uncomfortable and you have to come back to something that's going to help you keep you along that road and not completely divert you off that road. You have to be there in order to be able to come back from that set and break down.

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L: Yeah, no, no. I think of the way that Nadal's ball got up high on Federer's backhand that set him off course a while and you really had to, I think, learn to deal with that. And I love the fact in our first podcasts that we bring up, Golly, by the way, one of the, I'll have to let go a legend. Absolute. We're bringing up, Golly, uh, we'll ha we, we got to interview him on this pod. Get Kelly on at some point if, well, yeah, yeah. We'll see if he might be too busy for us, but we'll try. But I, you know, I, I think if you, again, if you're, you're looking at what best players are doing and then you're trying to communicate that to young players, take them and have them go watch them the things that they're doing and see how they're managing things in the practices at a grand slam, at a tournament. You know, I think if you go, if you go to uh, uh, Cincinnati, I'm not going to start picking tournaments and try to market them, but to different tournaments where you can get close to the players or if you have a relationship with their coach or you know, that that entourage the players can get a much better understanding of what the preparation looks like. And then I think as coaches, okay, so speaking to the coaches now, speaking to you, the coach, when you get that opportunity, not only do you need to prepare them for that opportunity to say, look, you're, you're getting the opportunity right now to hit with this pro. I want you to pay attention to the way they do things from the way, what's what

they're doing when they get their bag out in the court, what do they do first? How they talk to their coach, all these things, how they go about the way they go in between drills, a water breaks, how do they treat that? How they deal with times when they're not hitting the ball well? Um, set the player up so their, their awareness is pretty keen. Right. And then find teachable moments during the practice. Okay. See what's happening there. Okay. What's, you know, what is Serena doing right now? And then at the end of the practice debrief, and this is where I think as coaches we probably missed the boat the most as we have a great experience and we're like, okay, done wrap, let's go to our cell phones and figure out where we're having dinner. That's not good enough. You need to stop and talk about what you observed, what you experienced. We know that those that reflect on their experience are far more likely to remember it and be able to access it the next day. And that retention, if you're talking about a 13, 14, 15 year old players wanting to be professional tennis players, you have to be the best learner in the world to be able to get where you want to be. It's still about learning and getting better every day. Yeah. And if you don't set up the environment to do that, you're going to miss out on these opportunities. And I would suggest that again, these players who are at the top of the game, they have found a way, whether it's pretty informal or formal to learn well, so learn effectively. They don't lose lessons. They figure things out and then they keep it now and they're finding ways to get better all the time.

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J: I was, yeah, I was gonna say, this doesn't have to be, it doesn't have to be a formal process. It can be very informed. And actually I think a lot of, a lot of the other learning tennis, you know, can be very structured. We have our, you know, we're on court time when we're off our off court time, maybe we'll go into strength and conditioning, you know, athletic development then we may have a mental skill session. Then we, you know, we have all these different, you know, areas in our agenda and that helps build that structure and routine. But these informal little nuggets of information is really where a lot of the real deep learning can occur. Because again, I mean, Indian Wells was a great experience for me. I've been to Wimbledon plenty of times when I was younger as a kid. And that was huge. But you can't really get that close to the players, you know, unless you're sitting on those first front rows on center court at Wimbledon. But I actually really love just spending the day at the practice courts and Indian Wells. I went there, um, back in 2011 that was huge for me because you could actually sit right there by the side of the court. If you can fight through the crowds, you can sit there and ride by the side of the court and watch the players training. And again, I'm like, are you there just to go look? I watched Rafa play or I watched, you know, all those, you know, Stevie J, you know, warming up or I'm actually watching what they're doing. You know, the learning takes place from being able to see, you know, view, view the players in their natural habitat, so to speak, and to learn from those experiences. And you know, do you think that Rafa is just going to go to a match court and have those, you know, strict routines? No, I mean you watch them on a practice court. He still has his routines that he's going through on there. It's consistent across the board and so that would hit home too. I think there's a certain maybe perception in in our junior world is that we practice one way and then we play another, well no, we

practice the way we play and we play the way we practice. So all comes back through how we best learn and and can take those nuggets information right. We would learn best from seeing and learn through doing. And I guess when it comes back to learning lessons and trying to reach the top of the game, we have to learn from the top of the game, but not just in their match environment but in their practice environments. And being able to take advantage to that I think is huge.

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L: Those are great points. I mean I think if, makes me think of two things. Number one, you ask anybody who's been in a car wreck, usually they can tell you really specific details about what happened in as few seconds during the wreck because it's so emotional. And when we know that with the brain, when the learning is occurring with a lot of emotion, it gets grooved deeper into the brain and it's easier remember? So you're talking about this experiential learning. If, if I had the chance to go hit with Andre, for example, when I was younger, that would have been such an emotional experience that I would have been hanging on every word. I would have remembered far more than I would on a normal training day. That's just the reality of, of human behavior and learning. So as again, to the coach, to coaches listening, you've got to find a way to, to bring emotion into the learning environment. Make it count. Um, last night, you know, I, I coached little league baseball. I don't know how much we're gonna talk about this in the tennis podcast.

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J: Baseball? What's that?

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L: Yeah. Well don't worry you guys, you can't compete with us on that.

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J: So is it your version of cricket?

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L: Uh, uh, don't even start me on that. I don't even know what cricket, what that is so.

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J: Right. Let's get back to the point.

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L: But the boys were, were doing something called soft toss. It's basically feeding hand feeding for hitting a baseball into a net and they're kind of rotely going through it. And, and I saw that and they start, reps started to get worse, right? I said, okay, okay, let's stop. Now this time we're going to treat it like an at bat. And if I think that when you hit it, it's an out, then you had to switch out the next guys in and you could use saw the engagement. Now the guys who were competing like, Hey, I got five in a row before I got out. I got an eight just to level of engagement in these are, these are nine, 10 year old boys. And they had a lot of fun with it. Um, we joked around about it, but so when you can attach emotion to the learning, you're going to get a lot more, uh, memory to it. The second thing I would say is that you want to create a structure in your environment so you can learn better. What does that look like? We tried to mimic that in our camps. You get up in the morning, you do some kind of mental

preparation, you do meditation, you do some breathing, you clear your mind, you start your day off on a good, good space, and then you visualize your purpose. You connect with your purpose for the day. Why am I here? What am I doing? What do I want to get done today? What's today about? Right? And you see yourself being successful and then that is, that is prime. We call this priming. You've primed yourself, primed your brain to think a certain way. If I, if I go to mow my lawn, I have a push mower and I don't prime the gas into the line. That thing isn't going to start. It says like 10 years old and it's not going anywhere. Uh, but if I, if I start today unintentionally and I wake up and I roll out on the wrong side of the bed, low and behold, it might be the finals of an ITF and I have my worst performance and now I have to deal with that mentally that, Oh, I don't perform well in finals. Well, you've, you've created your own boogie man, to be honest, because you didn't really set your day up. But if every day you prime yourself with your purpose and you're focused, and then as you go throughout your day, you stay with your purpose and you keep connecting with it from thing to think. The thing that I, when I go to practice, I'm very aware of why I'm going to practice what my purpose is. And when I go to the gym to train, and I said that word train on purpose for Brent Salazar, uh, that I know what my purpose is. Okay. And then when I, when I go on and I, I go to do mental training, for example, I have a purpose and I have a why. And there's all related to what I'm trying to do as a person and to get better that day. So I think if you know you want to learn faster and it's probably what players to top of the game, one of the best things they do is they learn well you need to really attach emotion and make it matter when you train. And secondly, you need to set up a routine, a structure so that you can learn faster and better. And I think that's through priming, paying attention and being where your purpose throughout today. So being intentional with your purpose and at the end of the day, reflecting on how you did and taking time, and I mentioned this earlier, to visualize, to talk with your coach, to journal about how you did with your purpose, what you learned today, what you want to prove tomorrow. That is in my opinion, Johnny, how someone makes leaps and bounds and not just crawling ahead. We've got to leap. We can't crawl anymore in American tennis. You have to, you've got to jump up and make big jumps along the way. Now we're patient, but there has to be, there has to be growth. And how is that going to happen? Well that's not going to happen by living unintentionally.

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J: Yeah. It's all about connecting those dots for the, for the juniors and, and figuring out how they can get from A to B and, and do it well and, and consistently. And I guess, you know, for them that's a great setup for I guess, I guess the next episodes which we, you know, we want to talk about purposeful practice, purposeful training. Oh, this is great. This has been awesome. Larry. Uh, you know, I know we could probably sit here and go on for hours and hours like we usually do in the office as this time. We've got these nice little, uh, microphones in front of our faces, but I think we'll wrap it up there. Um, if there's a couple little tips you want to give to our viewers here are, uh, coaches, players, parents, give them a few tips for the day or tips for the week.

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L: Well, I think we'll go back to the theme. The theme was what do top players do? And trying to mimic some of the things you can and maybe as a junior player, I think number one, it's, it's really surrounding yourself with people who know what they're doing and they're positive influences who care about you, that put your interests first. But we'll also tell you when you're screwing up, right? We don't want, yes people. We want people who want you to be a better person first and, and they're going to tell you when you're being a jerk and set you straight. Look for those people. Hang with those people. I think secondly, uh, going back to, we talked about a few minutes ago, learn as best as you can. Find ways to, to learn faster and hold that information better and put it into action. Whether that's, you know, we talked about that learning structure. Have a morning routine. Really be intentional with your purpose throughout the day and then reflect on what you do in the evening. Uh, that learning cycle. You can use journaling to do that. I think that's outstanding. You're, you're, you're going to learn faster as a player. Uh, when you do that and as a coach you're going to see a progression go faster with your player when you use that kind of structure. I would also say that as a player, take the time when you have good performances to write out and discuss with your coach about what you actually did to prepare what the performance was like and what you did after. You want to know what you're doing when you're performing well. Right. And how did you get to that good performance? Because consistent good performance is only going to come from awareness. And if you're being unintentional about the way you learn, you are not going to have the awareness that you need to learn faster and retain information better. So take the time to understand how you're performing when you're performing well and, and making sure that you, you get those notes down and then you commit to it. You create a routine. I don't expect young players, you know, we were with a lot of 14, 15, 16 year old players around here. I don't expect them to have Djokovic's routine, but I expect them to have a routine that gets them consistently ready. So those would be some, some important tips I would have. I, I hate even even, I hate the calm tips because they're really more what I would say, um, more in the lines of lifestyle habits, habits. Yeah. That's. and the, I guess the final thing I say is that this whole idea of being a champion, it doesn't come through gadgets and tricks and, and tips. It comes from habits and routines and values and things you do all the time every day. That's where that comes from. And there's no shortcuts to that. There's no magic pill that is going to make you what you want to be. You've got to climb the mountain step-by-step. Johnny, there's no other way.

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J: Well, that's great. Larry. Thank you so much. This has been Dr. Larry Lauer and coach Johnny Parkes. Tune in next time where we'll be diving into more characteristics of competing like a champion.

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L: This concludes this episode of the compete like a champion podcast.

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J: We thank you for joining in. And uh, for more information, go to playerdevelopment.usta.com to contact dr Lauer or myself, coach Parkes go to teamusa@usta.com. And that's it for today's episode of compete like a champion. For more information, visit our website playerdevelopment.usta.com

and you can email us at teamusa@usta.com this is dr Larry Lauer, coach Johnny Parkes signing off until next time.

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[inaudible].