

Talks at GS
Mardy Fish,
Former Professional Tennis Player
Dan Friedman, Moderator
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Mardy Fish: When I started learning about mental health, there's tens of millions of, just, Americans that deal with some sort of mental health issue every day. So, it's important to understand that you're not alone.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Dan Friedman: Welcome to Talks at GS. I'm delighted to be joined today by my good friend Mardy Fish.

As you will be familiar, Mardy Fish is a professional tennis player with a remarkable track record. Mardy has openly shared his experience with his own mental health, which was the subject of a recent Netflix documentary. He is now a mental health advocate, while continuing his work as captain of the David Cup team and working for technology investing company Disruptive.

So, let's start at the very beginning. You know, you started

playing tennis at a very young age. Obviously, you know, this famous photo of you or famous video of you playing when you're like two years old, you know, at your house in Minnesota. You got to an age. You decided to move in, after you go to Saddlebrook, move in with Andy Roddick. Live with his family. You know, the documentary talks a little bit about it and he's in the documentary. Like, what was that like? Like, how did that shape you? Like, what did you learn from that? Did that accelerate your career? Change your mentality a little bit?

Mardy Fish: Yeah. So, I grew up in a city called Vero Beach, Florida. And it's a small town. So, there's not a whole lot of-- you can imagine, not a whole lot of tennis players there.

When I was 15, I went over to Tampa and a place called Saddlebrook Academy. Trained there. If I said I went to school, it was probably a couple hours a day. Wasn't focused that much on school but more on trying to get everything you can out of your tennis abilities. And so, that was kind of the first time that I had gone somewhere or practiced everyday sort of all day, everyday. So, I would hit

in the morning before school. I'd practice in the afternoon. And I would play people that were better than me everyday. And came out of there, certainly, a different player. Certainly, a different player ranking wise. I sort of came out in the top, I don't know, maybe three or four in the country after that year.

So, then it was time to sort of think about what's next. Again, at this point I can probably choose any college that I would want to go to. Use tennis as a tool for a great education. Or maybe something further.

I am a huge sports fan. So, I love all sports. I watch everything and root for pretty much anything. And so, I always wanted to be a professional athlete. And I didn't necessarily care which sport it was. Obviously, tennis was the one that jumped out most for me and for my family, my father for sure. So, that was kind of the pushing there.

And so, then it was, okay, I'm back in Vero Beach and how do I take this to the next level and get to the point where I can see how good I can get as a junior player? And so, I went down to Boca Raton. Andy Roddick and I and two or

three other guys that were really good junior players as well trained with the same coach, basically.

So, Andy and I sort of had this brotherly rivalry, really. I mean, we weren't best friends. We were more like brothers that we'd fight at everything. We'd compete at everything. We drove separate cars to and from school because we thought we had a faster way to go than the other did. So, we competed at everything.

And but in turn, it helped our tennis so much. I mean, in terms of playing junior-- you know, there's a junior circuit that maybe people don't understand. There's a junior circuit just like the professional circuits. So, like, there's a junior Wimbledon. Junior US Open. And tournaments throughout the year.

So, the upbringing was tennis, tennis, tennis, sport, sport, sport. Nonstop. And, you know, Andy was a huge part of that growing up and trying to, obviously, root for your friends and root for him. But, you know, everybody wants to be ranked ahead of everyone. And tennis is a unique sport in that we're only judged by the number next to our

name. And so, we're always constantly trying to improve that number. Or get that number lower. And that was sort of the constant battle throughout my career.

Dan Friedman: So, you turned pro. You're obviously top ten in the world in the Juniors Finals in Kalamazoo. And then I think even your own expectations were probably exceeded pretty quickly after, right? You got to top 20 in the world. Finals of the Masters' Series. You know, silver medals at the Olympics.

Getting so much success so quickly, how did that impact, one, your view of success? Two, maybe how you then thought about training or stuff that was important to you for the next mini [PH] phase of your career?

Mardy Fish: I was 20 and 21 years old when I had my first sort of breakout year, 2003. I started the year around 85 in the world. And I finished around 15 in the world. And Andy finished number one in the world that year. He won the US Open. He beat me in the final in Cincinnati, as you mentioned, a Masters event that's a huge event for us as well. And so, here we are at 20 and 21 years old playing

each other in these monster tournaments and, you know, this is going to last forever, right? You're just going to continue to do this.

And it doesn't quite work like that. Most of the time he-- Andy went on and had an incredible career and continued his success. I didn't. I had some injuries. You mentioned a silver medal at the Olympics. That was something that, obviously, was really special. But kind of out of nowhere I would have these results where I would-- I'd have a great result if I played well. And then if I didn't play well, I'd always lose. So, it was really difficult to sort of maintain that. For me it was really difficult.

And so, I had some injuries. I had some injuries that were because I was unlikely. And I also had plenty of injuries because I didn't work hard enough. And again, it wasn't I didn't think, it wasn't because I was lazy. I just didn't understand the full magnitude of what it took to be as good as the gifts that God gave you. And so, that took me quite a while to sort of realize that.

Dan Friedman: You rededicated yourself to your career

and then your rise from there was just incredible. You went from being 100ish in the world to number seven.

Quarterfinaling at grand slams. And number one ranked American male in front of Andy, in front of Isner. And then qualifying, ultimately, for the London Finals, which is, you know, the pinnacle of the sport. You know, talk a little bit about the difference that-- one, how you got there, you know, and your change in your perspective. And then two, I imagine that opened up a lot of different types of pressures and expectations.

Mardy Fish: Yeah, no doubt. So, 2009 I had to have a knee surgery because I was overweight. And I say overweight, like, I wasn't overweight like, "Look at that guy down the street. He's walking down the street and he's overweight." It was, "That guy's a professional athlete overweight." And so, I always knew that deep down I really wanted to get my fitness to a point where it wasn't an issue in matches.

Tennis is really, really difficult in terms of what it takes to be a great player at a high level. Obviously, it takes being really good at your craft like every other sport. It takes an

incredible amount of mental toughness, like most other sports. And then also, it takes a physical side of the sport that if you're not fit, it doesn't matter how good you are because not every match is going to be indoors late in the year. You know? You're going to play tons of matches, whether it's in Australia, middle of the summer in the US, stuff like that where you're playing in 100-degree weather. I played a match in Atlanta one year in 2010, the final against John Isner, and it was 7-6 in the third. Went three and a half hours. And it was 152 on the court.

So, like, you have to figure out that part of it. And just completely X out that part of it because there's not that many things that you can control in tennis. You can control your fitness. And I didn't understand that. So, I desperately wanted to figure that out.

So, I had a knee surgery. 2009. September 28, 2009. I'll never forget it because it changed my life forever. We hired a chef, my physio and I. We got to where we were calorie counting everything that went in. Guesstimating what I would burn on a daily basis for six weeks. I couldn't-- I was only rehabbing my knee. So, I couldn't exercise, really. It

was just rehab. Icing and stim and all that stuff.

I was one of those guys where my lifestyle changed completely. I stopped drinking. I stopped eating bad things. But everything that went into my body was for a reason. Everything I did outside of tennis was for a reason. Or on the court.

So, if I had training the next day and there was a movie that someone wanted to go to and I didn't want to chance it because I was going to be out till 10:30 pm and maybe that wasn't-- I wasn't going to get enough sleep for my 9 am training, so I just wouldn't go. So, I sacrificed a ton to get and put myself in the situation where I could just X out the fitness side of it.

I went to the French that year and I won my first round in five sets. And I wasn't a great clay court player. I knew I wasn't a great clay court player. And also, it was just my game wasn't tailored towards it. I enjoyed playing on clay. I just sort of stunk on it. And so, I played a guy named Ivan Ljubičić in the second round. I think he was in the top five in the world at the time. But I played him till, like, 14-12 in

the fifth set.

I ended up losing. It was one of those matches where it went over the next day, and we came back 'cause of darkness. And I got off the court and I felt like I could play another five hours, another five sets easily. And I'm like, something's different here.

So, I went to the next tournament was Queens. I was going to go home. And instead, I stayed over, and I went straight to London to start practicing for Queens Club which is a huge event. One of my favorite tournaments of the year. And also, an incredibly prestigious event.

I lost in the final of that event. And there all of the sudden was a couple tournaments in a row that I had had success, which was unique. I went to Newport, Rhode Island and won that tournament. I went to Atlanta the next week and won that tournament. I went to Cincinnati the week after that and made the final of that tournament. Lost to Federer in three really close sets.

So, all of the sudden my ranking dropped to 350. And all of

the sudden I'm ranked, like, you know, top 20 again. So, my expectation changed a lot. They really did. They changed in terms of entering a smaller event like an ATP 250 event, which is, you know, the lower tier events. But real professional events, just not quite as big as the slams or the Masters' events.

And if I didn't win it, I was bummed out. And if I didn't make the quarterfinals of a Grand Slam, which was usually an incredible result for me, I was bummed out. In a nutshell, that's great. Like, you want that motivation. But again, like I was never able to step outside of the whole experience, outside of my sort of bubble and just go, "Look at that, man. That's really cool." And I wish I had because I didn't appreciate it.

Dan Friedman: As you got to these heights and these different expectations and this different stress started entering into your life, you know, you started to struggle pretty much behind the scenes with some mental health challenges. And I think for anyone that's watched the documentary will know that it all sort of reached a crescendo, right, fourth round of the Open. Labor Day.

Monday. Sort of, like, the premier slot, late afternoon, playing Roger. And to the point where you couldn't play.

Mardy Fish: I got to Wimbledon. Made the fourth round there. But was sort of thinking what are these thoughts? What are these uncomfortable feelings? And that's where it started, actually, in Wimbledon 2012. I played throughout that summer. I actually played fairly well. I had some solid results. Quarterfinals of a bunch of Masters' events. Fourth rounds of slams and things like that. So, my tennis was fine. But I was suffering internally because I didn't understand, I didn't know what mental health was, what mental health issues were. I didn't know what anxiety was. I didn't know what panic was. I didn't know what depression was, really. Obviously, I can guess, but I didn't know anyone around me, unfortunately-- you know, no one around me. None of my family members or anything like that had-- or friends had dealt with any severe mental health issues. So, I didn't know.

And so, you know, throughout that summer I'm sort of Googling, like, "what is anxiety" and things like that as I'm continuing to try and play. And expectations are still the

same. And trying to compete at that high level. And I get to the US Open, which is sort of the culmination of the summer. The biggest event of the year for Americans as well. And, you know, that's the one we want to do best at.

And I was always fine on the court. There was always stuff that I had to worry about on the court. Never had any issues. But when I'd step off the court, that was when I really suffered with anxiety. Severe, severe anxiety.

And so, I got to the third round of the US Open that year. Played a guy named Gilles Simon who's a French guy. Long, four-set match. I ended up winning. And that was sort of the first time in that fourth set that it was taken away from me on the court. I had a full-blown anxiety attack on the court. First time.

So, like, it was all that comfort of being on the court and competing, all that stuff was just taken away just like that. So, I'm like, well, how am I going to do this? What am I going to do? I'm supposed to play Federer the next day. Again that guy. On Labor Day weekend. My father's birthday. That afternoon match. It's on CBS with Dick

Enberg. You know? I watched those matches growing up, like, as a fan. And here I am playing the greatest player of all time at the time. And the number one player in the world. And in a real match where I felt like, you know, if I felt good, that's a match I can win.

And we're leaving the hotel and I'm with my wife and my physio and we're trying to-- I'm not sort of an emotional guy or like a crier at all. And I'm balling in the car. And I'm just like, how can I do this? How can I do this?

And to give you a quick sort of under the hood of a professional athlete, or at least a tennis player or an individual sport athlete, we're trained at a really young age to never show weakness. Never show fear. Never tell anyone that you're not feeling well. Just sort of keep going. Don't show that emotion to your opponent because they may pick up on it and end up ultimately beating you because of it. So, that's how I was trained from, you know, six years old, basically.

And I didn't know-- and at this time I had come out with my team these issues that I was having, clearly, because I

was suffering. And we're on our way to the courts. And I don't know how-- I mean, I'm going to go out there somehow and try and play. And I'm going to lose. And I'm going to try and get home. And all I want to do is try and get home and get some help. Find a psychiatrist or psychologist. Just find some help. Period. And get a handle on what's happening.

And thank God my wife is there because she didn't grow up in that lifestyle. She didn't understand that line of thought. And she says to me, "Well, you don't have to play." And that never ever would have crossed my mind because it just was never ingrained in me to go, you know, "Oh, you don't have to do that. Like that's fine." And she said that. And I went-- right away I went, "Oh, you're right. I don't have to play."

And immediately a weight just lifted off my shoulders. I felt better right away. And it was sort of the turning point of my mental health was-- you know, and rock bottom at the same time, was, like, okay, you're not forced to do this thing. You can get help. You can seek help. Let's do that first and let's put your mental health in front of your

carrier. And that's what we chose.

Dan Friedman: I remember the beginning-- you know, when you came back a couple years later and you played, and you talked about it. And at the time, mental health was definitely not something that was a hot topic that people talked about. Everyone feels fine to talk about their physical health. But very non fine to talk about their mental health. Anxiety or depression. And I think that culture is starting to change. Definitely in professional sports. You know, we've seen it with Naomi Osaka in tennis and with various other athletes over the summer.

I don't know, like, we're focused on it at Goldman as well. And I think it's very critical in high performance cultures, like professional tennis or like working at Goldman Sachs, to try and change that culture to make people more open to talk about it. Can you talk a little bit about how you came bac, you know, and some of the stuff that you're seeing today around the change in culture and how you're sort of being a driver and a leader in that respect?

Mardy Fish: You never know what people are dealing with

internally. And that's why mental health is so hard to diagnose, so hard to understand if you haven't gone through it. And educating people on my story and what I went through was, ultimately, important because, A, it made me feel better. It made me feel better when I talked about it, when I was open about it. I wasn't ashamed. I didn't think it was something where this is something that's tough.

I think we saw recently, like you can only-- you're not tough when you're talking about your mental health, even though you're tough when you're going to tell me that you hurt your ankle, which is two and the same, in my opinion.

We saw recently Tyson Fury is the heavy weight champion just retained the belt. And he came out with his issues of depression and suicide thoughts, suicidal thoughts and things like that. Clearly that guy's tough. So, it's not about how physically tough you are.

Everyone deals with stress and anxiety in their own world. I don't care what you do for a living. I don't care if it's played out in front of lots of people. Everyone's bubble and

world is their own and unique. And whether you work at Goldman or yep lay professional tennis or you're a landscaper or a gardener, you're trying to provide. You have stresses and anxieties that are totally normally and totally equal to the stresses and anxieties that I have.

I was trying to be really good at a job. That person's trying to be really good at a job. I'm trying to provide for my family. They're trying to provide for their family. So, my point is, mental health doesn't care what you do for a living, what your last name is. It can take down or-- anyone can suffer from it.

And again, ultimately, I just wanted to be a success story for people that were going through similar issues than I went through. Whether you've heard of me or not, or you used Google to see who I am or not, I wanted to be a success story for people to go, "Well, there's someone that was at their highest point of their job. Was successful. Had it all taken away from a mental health issue. But then was able to go back." And my ultimate goal was to get back to the US Open and play at that same place. Finish my career in the spot that it was all taken away from me. Jump back

into the fire. Play at a high level.

And it wasn't about winning the US Open in 2015 for me. It was the last event of the year-- or last event of my career. And it was for a reason. And I wanted to not fall on my face. But I wanted to show people that you can beat it. You can beat severe mental health issues and come out the other end stronger and more understanding and less judgmental than you were before. So, it's really important to be open and honest with yourself, with your bosses, with your coworkers, with anyone, with your loved ones. And it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay.

Because when I started learning about mental health, there's tens of millions of, just, Americans that deal with some sort of mental health issue every day. So, it's important to understand that you're not alone.

Dan Friedman: That's about all the time we have. You know, obviously, thanks Mardy for agreeing to do this. You know, your story is obviously inspiring. I'm sure there's a lot of people on that will take away stuff from what you said. And yeah, thanks again. Appreciate it.

Mardy Fish: My pleasure. Thanks for having me. If anyone's struggling out there, reach out. Say hi. I promise I'll write you back. And thanks for having me.

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