



Being Able to Start from Scratch Is a Gift

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the hardest things for any of us to do is to relearn something and become infinitely better at it the next time around. Few of us ever allow ourselves to do this because we are in a comfort zone, which often does not allow us to move, improve, and change. People are motivated primarily by two things, pain and pleasure. The desire to avoid pain is very strong and keeps most of us from going outside this comfort zone.

When I was around 14 years old, I was exceptionally good at tennis. I was on the tennis team at a private school my parents managed to send me to, and I always played singles. A few of my peers at the time were even ranked in the state and traveled around during their summers, playing competitive tennis. I never lost against any of these ranked players. The thing about my tennis game, however, was that I picked up my game in parks and other locations around Detroit with various kids; I never had any lessons. I also played a lot of tennis with my father on the weekends. I was wandering around the streets with an old wooden tennis racquet, and just happened to be good at the game.

In contrast to the way I played tennis, my opponents on the tennis court at the private school had the best equipment. They dressed like professional tennis players, and most of them had been taking lessons at private country clubs and other special places, the likes of which I had not seen since the age of 4 or 5. These kids had all grown up playing tennis and learned how to play tennis the right way.

I worked hard to win the games that I won. I did not have the proper tennis strokes, and I only made my first serve around 10% of the time. When it went in, however, scarcely anyone ever could return it.

One summer, my father was going to work in Saudi Arabia for the summer, and he picked me up one evening (my parents were divorced) and drove me over to a local country club. Once we were there, he spoke with one of the tennis pros and then proceeded to write him a check for \$1,000, for him to give me a series of private lessons over the summer. This was a nice, surprise gesture on my father's part. I am sure he did this because he realized that I had a lot of potential in the game of tennis and that, if I were going to get good at the sport, I would need to drastically change my game.

I had my first tennis lesson of the summer and was extremely discouraged. Before the lesson started the [instructor](#) hit the ball with me for several minutes. He then had me approach the net and told me something I will never forget:

"You are at a crossroads right now. With your athletic ability you could probably become a professional tennis player. You could even become a household name. But your game is not sustainable, and you are going to fall apart if you continue to play like this. You need to relearn everything, and it is not going to be easy."

The tennis pro told me that I needed to relearn everything I was doing. I needed to hold the tennis racquet differently. I needed to stand differently. I needed to hit the ball differently. I needed to serve differently. Everything needed to change.

I started doing what the pro recommended and it was as if my entire game had fallen apart. I was playing like a 5-year-old with no coordination. Nothing I hit went in. Nothing I hit had any power. The game did not seem fun anymore.

One of the things he taught me was to not hit the ball hard anymore. Instead, I was expected to hit the ball high and long so it would bounce over my young opponents' heads. This was about the only shot I learned.

I ended up getting extremely discouraged. I did not want to have to relearn all of my strokes. I was emasculated because I was being told I could no longer hit the ball hard, and everything I had formerly loved the game of tennis, I could no longer do. All of the passion that I formerly put into hitting the ball was suddenly ineffective under this new way of playing tennis.

I stopped looking forward to the lessons. Eventually, I stopped going to the lessons completely, despite the fact that the tennis pro would call me on the phone to schedule time with me.

I did not want to play anymore. I simply did not want to change my game.

I never really played a lot of tennis again after that summer. I played in a tournament at a public tennis club that winter and won first prize. However, when I started playing against the seniors and others on the high school tennis team, I realized that they were going to be better than me. This frightened me away from trying out for the team, even though I am confident that I would have made the team, even as a freshman in high school.

The realization that I needed to completely change how I played took my heart out of the game. To this day I do not play tennis. This is because I was confronted with the fact that I could become really, really good at something, but that in order to get there I would have needed to change completely.

The idea of changing completely how we do something is more intimidating and difficult than it sounds. It is almost impossible for many people to do this.

One of the more remarkable things to me is seeing people who have managed to lose a lot of weight and keep it off. All throughout the Midwest, where I grew up, there are countless people who are a hundred pounds or more overweight. Many of these people are my own relatives. Year after year, these people continue to get larger and larger. They suffer from all sorts of health problems related to their obesity, and they visit doctors who treat these health problems, but not the obesity. These people die early and do not live the lives they are capable of, due to their weight issues.

Why do these people continue to gain weight and put themselves through this?

I am going to go out on a limb here: it is because they do not want to change. They need to eat differently. That is it 95% of the time. If you eat less, or eat foods that will not cause you to get fat (for example, low carbohydrate foods), you will not gain as much weight. This is a plain and simple fact. However, these people are generally more comfortable eating a lot of food and not changing their diets. I understand this because I am no different from these people. This concept is no different from

me not wanting to change my tennis game. I was afraid of changing because I would have had to give something up in the process--*a part of who I was, and what I believed.*

Growing up, I saw many people struggle with alcohol and drugs. I have never used drugs in my life, but I saw numerous people start using them. Once people start using drugs, they rarely stop, at least in my experience. I am not saying this does not happen; however, it is generally rare. Why? Because not using these substances, once someone becomes addicted, forces the person to give up his or her way of coping and dealing with the world. Once the person stops using, he or she is forced to deal with the world in an entirely new way.

The person who is overweight faces the same problem. They use food for coping and dealing with the world, and if they are forced to adopt new eating patterns, they will no longer have this ability to cope.

You may be in a position at the moment in which you are eager to change, to become something better and something different. You may want a [new job](#), or a new career. You may be faced with being unemployed and not knowing what to do if you are [looking for a job](#). What all of this is forcing you to do, right now, is to confront the fact that you may need to change--and you may need to do this right away. I am not talking about a small change. I am talking about a fundamental change that requires you to do absolutely everything differently and alter your entire approach to life and the world. Imagine if you had to learn to ride a bike again from scratch without any understanding of the way things could be. That is what is required of you.

I remember when I was on the tennis court and the instructor was trying to show me how to hold the racquet differently and how to approach the game in a new way. I was hitting the ball all over the place and making one mistake after another. I could no longer control the ball. I could no longer hit the ball as hard. The way I had to keep my feet was very difficult compared to the way I had kept them before. My grip was different. All of this was extremely uncomfortable. What I realized was that when I would hit the ball using the new methods suggested to me by the pro, the results were better and more controlled. I did not do this often, but I knew that over time I would be able to hit the ball correctly--if I did not give up. I knew that I ultimately would become a much better player; it was just going to take some time.

There are areas of your life and career that could benefit from starting from ground zero and completely rebuilding yourself. You have so much potential inside of you, and you could do such great things if you would take just a few things you are doing well and allow yourself to rebuild your skills in the correct manner, without employing the bad habits, and without doing things an improper way. You will find you can do much better.

If I had the time in my schedule (and I need to make the time), I would go see a professional coach once a week to help me work on my weaknesses and rebuild. I currently do this for other people and should be having the same done for me. The reason it is important for people to see coaches, psychologists, and others is that these people can help us reframe our model of the world and show us where we are weak. Once we see where we are weak, then we can work toward making new progress and completely rebuilding ourselves.

In the early 1980s, my father purchased a computer that he used to write novels. I would use the computer during the evenings, when he was not occupying it, to write papers for school. One of the most maddening things that happened with the particular computer that he had purchased for word processing was that it always crashed, and I would end up losing all of my files and all of the work that I had done. This could be avoided by pressing the F9 key while I was writing the paper, but I always forgot to do this and ended up losing an incredible number of papers over the years.

What I noticed, however, was that when I lost a paper and ended up rewriting it from scratch, the new paper was always better than the paper I had written before. The new paper would always better explain the points it needed to make, be shorter in the right places and longer in the right places. It would be a much better piece of work overall. The reason was that the new paper would force me to rethink something from the beginning and make the point in a much more effective way.

It is this way with your life and career as well. The most beneficial and helpful thing that can happen to many people is to lose a job. When you lose a job, you are put into a position in which you need to rethink everything and test every assumption. Some people lose jobs in industries in which they are unlikely to ever [find a job](#) doing the same thing again. These experiences can change the world as we know it. They also force us to rethink old assumptions.

I read an article yesterday about someone who got a [job in an automotive plant](#) at the age of 18 years old, making \$60,000 a year. This person is now in his 30s and has lost his job at the auto factory. He knows that he will likely never [get a job](#) like this in an automotive factory ever again. Because he was making so much money at such a young age, he never saw the need to go to college or to do anything like this to improve himself. He knew that, even with a college degree, the odds of his getting as good of a job back then were incredibly slim. So he stayed working at the auto plant and has been there until recently, when he lost his job. Now he is going back to college. Going back to school in his 30s is now forcing him to rebuild his model of the world and start from scratch. How exciting this is! He may have the skills of a brilliant mathematician or something else inside of him. There may be so much more that he can do and contribute to the world now that he is being forced to recalibrate and reevaluate his role in the world. This is an amazing thing. This young man's destiny is about to be reshaped for the future, and his career will never be the same. If he is smart, he will rebuild what he is and what he is doing, and he will become an even better and more productive person going forward.

I could have been a professional tennis player, perhaps, had I been willing to change my model of tennis.

People can only reach their full potential when they are willing to forget what they know and to start from scratch. If you are ever forced to start from scratch, it is often the greatest gift you can receive because what lies at the other side is a better you.