

Playing Tennis Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Daniel Henry** (January 29, 2026)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

I first picked up a tennis racket at 4 years old at the YMCA in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I then proceeded to have an accident on the court.

I started again when I was 7, but at 9 my tennis coach taped my hand to the racket to change my grip. Once again, I took a step back.

Finally, I started again as a freshman in high school at 13 years old, going .500 on the season, and never looked back. The challenge of catching up to my peers who stuck with the sport during my earlier attempts was too enticing.



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Back then, I had no idea that tennis would become one of the most formative forces in my life, shaping not just my discipline but my resilience, focus and belief in second (and third) chances.

Over the years, tennis became more than a competition. It became my way of coping, processing and rebuilding. I lost my mother, father and grandmother at painfully early stages of my life, pillars who helped define my sense of stability and purpose.

Each loss shook me deeply, and each time, I headed straight to the tennis court. Whether it was when I went with my mom to mourn my dad, with my siblings to mourn my mom or in college with my teammates to mourn my grandmother, I processed it on or near that big blue 78 foot by 36 foot rectangle.

Every time things felt out of control, I went to the place where structure replaced the chaos, and where I could keep moving forward one point at a time.

Those same lessons have carried into my professional life years later, when I found myself facing a different challenge: the steep learning curve of patent prosecution law. Much like tennis, the early days of my legal career were filled with trial, error and perseverance.

And much like those long days and nights hitting balls until my arm was sore, success in my practice has come only through patience, repetition and an unwavering belief that improvement is possible even when progress feels invisible.

The Discipline of Deliberate Practice

Tennis taught me that progress doesn't come in flashes; it comes in quiet, consistent

practice, the kind that no one sees. You can't fake repetition, and you can't shortcut precision.

When I started practicing patent prosecution, that same truth quickly revealed itself. Writing claims, parsing examiner arguments, and analyzing prior art all demanded a level of attention to detail the scale of which I hadn't fully appreciated.

At first, it was humbling. Every office action felt like a test, and researching the associated technologies made me feel like I was behind a curve, just like when I started tennis again the third time.

But tennis had already taught me that refinement happens through rhythm, doing the same thing over and over until the motion becomes natural. As repetition and experience compounded, my outlook on my progress as a legal practitioner also changed.

No patent practitioner is well versed in every single technology that might come across their desk; the breadth and variety of inventions is ever-expanding, especially in the electrical prosecution space. I learned that learning to learn was the greatest skill I can hone, and most important to the practice of patent prosecution.

Visualization as Preparation

Before every match, I used to spend quiet moments courtside visualizing how the points would unfold. I would think about the serve placement, my opponent's likely response and the rally pattern I wanted to create.

I'd see it all play out in my mind long before the first ball was struck. That habit of mental rehearsal has followed me into my work as a patent attorney.

Visualization, I've learned, isn't just for athletes. It's a tool for clarity and confidence in high-stakes legal practice.

When I'm preparing for an invention disclosure meeting, I often find myself mentally walking through the conversation before it happens, anticipating how to frame a complex idea, explain subject-matter eligibility concerns and guide inventors toward claimable concepts.

By visualizing the exchange in advance, I can spot potential points of confusion before they arise and effectively steer the discussion. Often, I will also visualize preemptive subject matter eligibility rejections and arguments based on an invention disclosure and as I draft claims.

That same technique applies when preparing for examiner interviews. I like to picture the dialogue, the tone and the flow of the arguments I'll present. I visualize the examiner's likely reactions and questions, and how to respond clearly without overcomplicating the issue.

This mental rehearsal ensures that when I speak, I do so with confidence and composure, much like stepping to the baseline already knowing where I intend to place the serve.

In both tennis and patent prosecution, success often depends on anticipation and mental clarity. Visualization helps bridge the gap between preparation and performance. It trains the mind to stay one step ahead — not to predict the future, but to feel ready for it when it

arrives.

Finding Strength Through Adversity

After losing my mother, father and grandmother, tennis became my sanctuary. It gave me a sense of rhythm when everything else felt uncertain.

When grief blurred my focus, the court offered something simple and measurable, be it a ball to track, a score to level, or simply a place to express myself physically in ways words can't accurately describe.

That same instinct, to turn pain into purpose, actually guided me toward law in the first place. My first work experience in law was with esteemed attorney Ven Johnson of Ven Johnson Law in downtown Detroit.

It was by shadowing his every move that I learned that my ability to analyze and advocate was valuable, and that my only possible career path wasn't working on the implementation side of computer science. I went into law school thinking with absolute certainty that I would practice personal injury law.

However, thanks to my civil procedure professor, Cynthia Ho (who sent me Marshall Gerstein's summer associate application — the night it was due! — because I mentioned my computer science background), I was exposed to an area of law where my love of learning about technology and aptitude for analysis intertwined.

Patent prosecution, in particular, was appealing to me because it shared that constructive spirit with personal injury. In personal injury, you're helping to make someone who's suffered a loss whole. In patent prosecution, we're helping bring ideas to life and giving them structure.

Having sustained the traumas I did early in life, but wanting to give my practice a constructive focus, I gave myself grace not to pursue personal injury law to satisfy my desire to learn new technologies, leaving that charge to capable and caring advocates like Ven.

Still, entering the patent prosecution field wasn't easy. Transitioning into patent law came with its own set of challenges: a steep learning curve, moments of self-doubt, and the pressure to measure up in a demanding, technical profession. But I'd been there before. I knew what it felt like to be overwhelmed or feel outclassed, and I knew the only way through was forward.

Just as I once committed to becoming the best tennis player I could be, not for trophies or recognition but for growth, I committed to becoming the best patent prosecutor I could be. Every challenge, every setback, was another match to be played and another lesson to be learned.

Seeing the Full Court

The longer I practice law, the more I see how deeply tennis prepared me for it. Both require patience, preparation and perspective, and both can humble you quickly if you lose focus.

The bright side is that it rewards those who show up with intention day after day, willing to learn.

The court taught me that control is an illusion; you can't dictate the bounce, but you can dictate your response. Patent law reinforced that truth. You can't control every examiner or every examination outcome, but you can control your preparation, your professionalism and your persistence.

When I look back, I see a connection in all of it: the long practice sessions under the Michigan sun at Stowe Stadium, the hours spent perfecting a claim draft, and the quiet moments of resilience after personal loss.

Each experience sharpened a skill, deepened a value and reminded me that mastery, whether of sport, law, or life, isn't about perfection. It's about perseverance and resilience.

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