



**Complete Transcript: HALO Talks with Benj Ecker
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Pete Moore:

This is your host, Pete Moore. And I am pleased and humbled to announce the launch of my one and only book, Time to win again, 52 takeaways from playing and watching team sports to ensure your business success.

Pete Moore:

Those have, you know, me personally, and anyone who listens to halo talks for any length of time, know that I am an avid sports fan and a big believer in the value of team sports. What I've seen over the past 25 years, helping businesses grow raising capital, being an entrepreneur, myself, and coaching and mentoring executives in it's. The lessons learned on the field perfectly apply to business entrepreneurs, executives, managers, you name it. Every company that's a strong company has got a good team. It's a quick read. There's also illustrations in there from our good friend, mark cruelty free cartoon. If you go to integrity, sq.com, enter your email address and we will send you information on the book and the entrepreneurs' survival kit as well. Be great. Take names go halo.

Pete Moore:

This is Pete Moore on HALO Talks NYC on location Dallas, Texas, with my new best friend from Illinois Benji Ecker tennis enthusiast, head of the college park athletic clubs by way of Jeff van Dixhorn. Welcome to halo talks.

Benj Ecker:

Thank you, Pete. Glad to be here.

Pete Moore:

Awesome. So we met a couple weeks ago when I'm become a, a tennis junkie and visited your location. It was packed. It looks like people were very happy. You know, tennis has obviously picked up steam over the last 12 to 18 months, like a lot of other racket sports and, you know, COVID friendly activities. So when don't we first start out with your background, how you got into the industry and we'll kind of riff from there.

Benj Ecker:

Yeah, man, I was an athlete as a kid into all sorts of sports. Did a little bit of everything, baseball, basketball tennis, soccer I, I was a terrible baseball player, but if I got on base, I was the kind of kid that would steal second.

Pete Moore:

I couldn't get a curve ball. So after eighth grade I was like, I need big rock. That's why I started playing tennis, bigger racket.

Benj Ecker:

But my dad was my dad was a coach too. Oh, he, he taught high school math and coached high school, basketball and tennis. So had the sports in the blood. How was that kind of basketball

Pete Moore:

For your how'd that go? So

Benj Ecker:

I didn't, I didn't play for my dad in high school. He wasn't my high school coach. He had gone on to start a business by then, but yeah, it was good. Tennis kind of, you know, I'm in that now, but I only played that as a kid in high school, I was, I was soccer, basketball, and then track and field was my, my main thing. That's what I did in college too. Okay. I was a hurdler.

Pete Moore:

Oh

Benj Ecker:

Really? Yeah. One of my crazy ones.

Pete Moore:

Nice. I love watching those on the Olympics. I'm like, wow. That's not easy. Yeah.

Benj Ecker:

Yeah, exactly. So I, I took a weird route to get where I am. I think I told you a little bit about that before, but

Pete Moore:

Yeah. Tell us about the, the, the religious and the spiritual side and kind of morphing that, you know, running a, a large health operation. Right.

Benj Ecker:

So I went to, to north

Pete Moore:

Path, right? Yeah,

Benj Ecker:

Exactly right. Prescribed north park university is where I went to undergrad. After I finished, I went to Sweden lived in Stockholm, Sweden for a year. Oh, wow. Worked at an international church there. So it was like 40 different nationalities coming together. A lot of immigrant population there interesting experience. I thought maybe I would want to go into that line of work, came away from that going, not for me. Went out to the west coast for a few years, kind of bounced around odd jobs, lived with some college roommates, actually

Pete Moore:

The complete opposite of the Swedish experience, obviously it's like

Benj Ecker:

And then got, can kind of pulled back into the church world a little bit applied for a scholarship at a seminary back in Chicago, got that and, and moved back to Chicago into grad school. There spent seven years at a small church in Western Michigan. Wow. before kind of deciding to blow up life again and moved to Chicago. I, these

Pete Moore:

Are all just chapters not blow up. So just like, Hey, this chapter ended, I got a roll. Yeah. I'm coming back.

Benj Ecker:

It's like chapters of about seven years at a time, but exactly

Pete Moore:

I got the, I got the seven year itch. I'm Benji and now here's what I'm landing that's

Benj Ecker:

That's about. Right. so I came back to Chicago and reconnected with an old classmate of mine. Brian w he was running college park at the time he was running this tennis club. I had no inkling of, of wanting to be in the business world, let alone work at a tennis club. I wasn't a tennis player, but he said, Hey, come work for me until you figure out what's next. And I never left. I I'd

Pete Moore:

Love the good friend. Love the community

Benj Ecker:

Me there. Yeah.

Pete Moore:

So you crash from my couch or I'll give you a job at my

Benj Ecker:

Club. That's for both. Well, and that's obviously I met Jeff Vandort there. He's the owner of that club really grew to appreciate his leadership generosity and see, okay, this is a place where I can dig in. They

threw everything at me. I kept saying yes and found myself in Brian's seat. A couple years later when he made a move to club automation. So here I am.

Pete Moore:

Awesome. So, you know, over the last couple years, obviously a big change in the industry, a lot more people actually going and, and playing tennis, I think is, you know, between golf and tennis, probably like the two most recreational sports that kind of picked up, you know you know, usership or whatever you want to call it. How did you think about that? When, you know, you got a membership base, they want to be safe. You got a lot of new people coming in, you got to deal with all sorts of restrictions. What do you think about tennis as a sport? You know, a lot of people have taken tennis courts from 'em into pickle ball courts, you know, what, what do you kind of, what have you seen over the last couple years and, you know, give us a little bit of insight into how the, how the club works and how you think about it.

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. rack sports are, are on the move right now. People, I mean, you mentioned pickle ball. People are flocking to pickle ball right now. And that's, that's something we're, we're looking at right now. And, but tennis too. Tennis is on the rise. Pickle ball might be eating into that a little bit with some older adults, paddle tennis too. Super popular, a lot of fun. You play it outside in the wintertime, but a lot out of people picked up a tennis racket for the first time or the first time in a decade in COVID. Cause that was one of the few things you could do was a socially distant sport.

Pete Moore:

I'm not sure how COVID doesn't get on the tennis ball and then use the ball. And it goes the other side, but I'm not a scientist, but it doesn't intuitively make sense to me, but let's keep playing tennis. Cause I try and play every day. We,

Benj Ecker:

We looked into that will did Will's scoring good

Pete Moore:

Tennis

Benj Ecker:

Balls.

Pete Moore:

Yeah.

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. They said it doesn't happen spray 'em yeah, we were spraying 'em for a while actually. Doesn't do any good to the tennis ball that's for

Pete Moore:

Sure. I could imagine. Yeah. It's like going out with like an insect repelling or something, you know? Yeah.

Benj Ecker:

But we, we, one of the things we did in COVID just to drive home the, the safety of tennis, we, we put out this graphic that showed not just the square footage of a tennis court, which is generally about 7,200 square feet, but the cubic footage that one person occupies on a tennis court and it's, it's insane. It's something like, I forget, I don't want to say like 150,000 square feet on average and, and did kind of some equivalent and basically be like shopping by yourself in Walgreens. Oh,

Pete Moore:

You're saying basically like on the,

Benj Ecker:

The

Pete Moore:

In terms, inspiration of the exactly.

Benj Ecker:

I gotcha. Yeah. So it's the closest thing to being outside while being inside, right? Yeah. So,

Pete Moore:

You know, when you first have people come in, you know, obviously you want to run your business for immunity. You also want to run your business, you know, for, for, for to be as profitable as possible. How did you guys think about, you know, pricing, you know, usage was really high, so supply demand maybe was, you know, balanced in your favor or did you look at it and say, Hey, look, this is what the competitors are doing. This is what we're doing. And you know, my business is going to run at full capacity, but I'm not necessarily just going to try and, you know, raise price when I want to try and track people here long term.

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. We, we kind of stuck to our model actually. And, and we're a program driven club as opposed to membership driven. We are a membership club, but programs really drive our revenue and we kind of stuck to the same pricing model that we've had all along and made the raises that we probably would've made in, in any other year. Oh yeah. No real big changes there,

Pete Moore:

But you have toured a club it's beautiful club, you know, you've got a functional training area. Yeah. And how have you marketed that messaged it, is it kind of infusing in people, Hey, look, this is what you should do before tennis. This is what you should be doing after, or is it kind of like a completely different, Hey, like does your health club for the people that just want to use a health club? Yeah. Or both?

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. We made major investments, especially in the train space and that's, that's the big challenge right now is how do we communicate to our tennis community? The importance of training off court as well. Right. You train on court you got to train on court or off court in order to keep your on court time prevent injuries. Yeah. Build strength. You're not going to, you're not going to hit the ball any harder by continuing to doing what you're doing on court. You actually might hurt yourself. You need your strength training if you want to, if you want to increase your power. Yeah. So it's education. That that's a challenge before us right now.

Pete Moore:

I loved when during the us open you know, they would ask JoVE, you know, do you seem like you're really in the zone? You know, can you tell us what you're doing? He was like, nah, I can't, I can't disclose that. And I was like, that's kind of a secret weapon. Not telling people what you're doing. Cause then they think like you've got some higher level. Right. You know, like mind coach that no one knows about. And he's like locked in a room somewhere.

Benj Ecker:

Well, he might,

Pete Moore:

He might have one, he might have one who knows. And Tom Brady might, you know, until he is 50 or something who knows what he's taken. I think he's I'm sure he is, but I'm a giant fan and you know, I got to, I hate the Patriots, so that's not going to change. But from a standpoint of you know, getting back to getting back to tennis, getting back to one location

Benj Ecker:

What

Pete Moore:

Have you seen with the community and how have you guys kind of been that support valve to them and how, how do you think the relationship that you have with your members and your, and your tennis players changed over the last 18 months?

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. communication was so vital. I mean, we were shut down for 75 days and keeping that link with, with our community required getting our coaches to change from, in person learning to, to virtual. And we tried some virtual tenants in instruction found out really quickly. That's pretty tricky. People don't want to take tennis lessons virtually. Yeah,

Pete Moore:

I've seen that we machine, maybe that's like the only thing

Benj Ecker:

I maybe

Pete Moore:

Do not break anything in your house, but, but

Benj Ecker:

Being able to provide valuable content to our, our members free charge and, and just keep people active, even though, you know, we were sheltering at home and all that that was, that was vital to, to keep in our community alive and, and, and well, so our coaches did an unbelievable job at that.

Speaker 4:

I want to take a minute and tell our audience about two, all us, some workout recovery products I've been using for the last 18 months from higher dose.com leader in infrared technology for athletes. Like all of us are, we're an investor in the company. That's not why I'm telling you this. I'm telling you this because it works. You got an infrared sauna blanket. I hop in there, I'll listen to some podcast, burn 800 calories, get a mad detox and a P E M F, which is a pulse electromagnetic field crystal mat that I lay on. And I recalibrate my cells to the normalize level, the earth. If you got somebody you like, and you're looking for a pretty awesome gift, they will love it. You could use this code halo 75, get \$75 off and you will not beat this appoint higher dose.com promo code halo 75. And now let's get back to our regularly scheduled program.

Pete Moore:

So, you know, as you look at other health clubs in the area, or you look at other tennis centers do, do, do you look at other pro programming? Like, Hey, you know, we're going to go and compete kind of like, you know, intermural or, you know, back when we were in high school, like, did, is there anything kind of coming down the pike that people should think about either on the tennis side or running you know, a, a high end health club that you think is like the next big thing that, or some things that you're like excited about trying to test out? Yeah.

Benj Ecker:

I, I think the integration between, like I was talking about onto and off court training is even more important. You know, players are, are getting more powerful, they're getting stronger and susceptible to some, some major injuries too. If they're not doing that off court training. So our, we have a coaches development program at CPAC. So a lot of our, our pros get certified to kind of the regular channels, but then we put our coaches through this, this program that we've developed. One of our veteran coaches runs this program. He's like an encyclopedia of, of tennis. It's amazing. And his eight week program, we put all our coaches through this about five to six coaches at a time a cohort. And I think we're, we've graduated two cohorts so far. We've got third one on the way here. And we pulled our, our, our trainers into that too. Our

Pete Moore:

Only for your internal staff,

Benj Ecker:

This is all internal. Okay. So it's similar to, to what they might get at a, a certification, but with a little bit more comprehensive learning and, and with our own culture and values infused into. So that's been super successful in getting our team all on board and getting our trainers aligned with our pros. So everybody's working together. That's so important. Everybody's on the same page.

Pete Moore:

So let's pivot to, you know, you, you're responsible for this tennis center, you've got employees reporting to you. Yeah. What are some of the things that you've taken from, you know, you're, whether it's being a pastor and being in Sweden or whether it's, you know, being on a basketball court, you know, Hey, I got to get, I got to get somebody to produce and I got to attack each one of these people or like yeah. Partner with them to, to get something out of 'em and, and each one of them's got like different motivations or different ways to, to get the best out people. So how, how have you kind of done that from your background and

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. You know, it, it's all people business, right. One of the things we've been focused on recently is this equation. I think it's from the book, the inner game of tennis. I don't know if you're familiar

Pete Moore:

With that. I just, I just the downloaded it, but I haven't listened to you. I got the auto book right here.

Benj Ecker:

So I think that's where

Pete Moore:

This concert should listen to this before

Benj Ecker:

The equation is performance equals potential minus interference.

Pete Moore:

Say that one more time.

Benj Ecker:

Performance equals potential minus interference. Oh. And I so often in coaching, we're so focused on increasing someone's skillset on increasing someone's potential, but a lot of times, the way to make the biggest impact on performance is actually through subtraction. It's through addressing that, that interference.

Pete Moore:

Yeah. It's my top book right there. And again, you tennis audio, but I haven't listened to it. There

Benj Ecker:

You go. It's not very long

Pete Moore:

Like that. Yeah. I like that.

Benj Ecker:

So, I mean, mental health is such a huge issue in sports right now. We've seen some of the top performers in the world at the very top of their game, get sidelined. Their performance went, you know, from the top down to zero because of interference not, not always physical interference, but mental interference. That's something we're looking at. We're doing a program right now with our leadership team. It's a, it's called reboot. It's a 30 day program. And the principle behind that is mostly subtraction and subtracting interference and distraction. Yeah.

Pete Moore:

That's, that seems to be like where Jovix kind of got that, that edge right now on, on minimizing, any interference point to make. And look, I love Naomi and I think she's great for the sport. And I think, you know, if she's very, I've watched her documentary. So I, I understand, and she, she views herself. She's determined documentary that actually bothered me, but I understood what she meant. She felt like she's a vessel for her coach is for her family, for her fans that, so she's almost like a piece of hardware. Hmm. And without any regard for when she's on a court, she feels like I am I'm, I'm just, I'm responsible for everything. And I think that burden has, has hit her to the point where I've never referred to myself, or I've never even heard someone re say to them that say about themselves, that they're a vessel.

Pete Moore:

Right. For other people it's like, so the, the pressure's on her. I guess the question that I have is if you're going to be, if you're going to play at that elite level, like one, you know, I've got this book coming out called time to win again. You know, it's also time to lose some time and learn from, from those losses. And, you know, you might have a bad day on the court, you know, that might not be a reason, you know, when she lost to Fernandez, you know, in the first round that woman ended up being in the finals. Right. Right. So maybe it wasn't interference. Maybe she got out, played that day. Totally. Right. Totally. So I guess the question is maybe we need to allow people to understand, like, you play baseball until, you know, you, you, you, you moved on from that, but if you're going to be a baseball player, you better learn to lose at least 80 games a year. Right. You here. Right. So every other day you're going to lose and you're going to be, feel bad. And then next day you're going to win. And then next. So I feel like maybe failure should be compartmentalized a little more. And your mental health. Yeah. Keep your mental health, but don't blame losses, you know, on your mental health. If you're playing the, in this to lead sport, you know, you're not going to win every day.

Benj Ecker:

Totally. Yeah. And, and our biggest program is junior tennis. We got a thousand kids in our junior tennis program. And I can't tell you how many kids don't know how to, how to lose gracefully. They, they avoid losing it all costs. And it ruins me crazy,

Pete Moore:

Bro. When, when somebody says like, Hey, no, they don't keep score at this soccer intermural. I'm like, what's the, unless it's an exercise and it's an activity. Yeah. Like teach people how to deal with failure. Yes.

Benj Ecker:

Right.

Pete Moore:

And learn from it. There's actually a quote in this book that is this 10 year old chess kid. I got to, I got to put it on, on here. Cause you're going to, like, it might as well get it on here. You know, he lo he's like, he's like 10 years old, he's a chess player. Right. So one he's only 10. Right. And I think you got to have like 10,000 hours to be like a, an expert at anything. Right. So it could definitely, he's probably had not even been a life for 10,000 hours. So as I say to myself, I never lose that. I only learned because when you lose, you have to make a mistake to lose that game. So you learn that from that mistake and, and you, so you learn overall. So losing is the way of winning for myself. Right. Love

Benj Ecker:

That,

Pete Moore:

Love that. Right. This kid's 10 years old. He's the newest chess master. I'm definitely not going to play against him. My casual chess, my 11

Benj Ecker:

Year old beats me at chess. Yeah. Yeah.

Pete Moore:

It's kind of like when you're like you, you play against your uncle or, you know, you know, basketball and then like once you started winning, like he didn't really want to play anymore. Yeah.

Benj Ecker:

Yep. Yep. Cool.

Pete Moore:

So you know, you've got a lot of experience, you've got a lot of different, you know, interesting chapters of your life, you know, give us one, you know, quote or takeaway that, you know,

Benj Ecker:

Oh man

Pete Moore:

Sure. You got tons of 'em.

Benj Ecker:

Yeah. Kind of in the same vein Marcus res sure. Said something like universes change life is what our thoughts make of it. We get a lot more control over how our life goes. We don't have control over outside circumstances. Yeah. But we can control our response to that. And that's you know, we try to teach our kids trying to infuse that kind of thinking into how we how we coach as well.

Pete Moore:

I like that. All right, man. Well, it's great to meet you randomly in, in Deerfield and look forward to having you at the E event and let's keep in touch. Yeah. Congrats on book launch. Thanks brother. Appreciate it. See you.