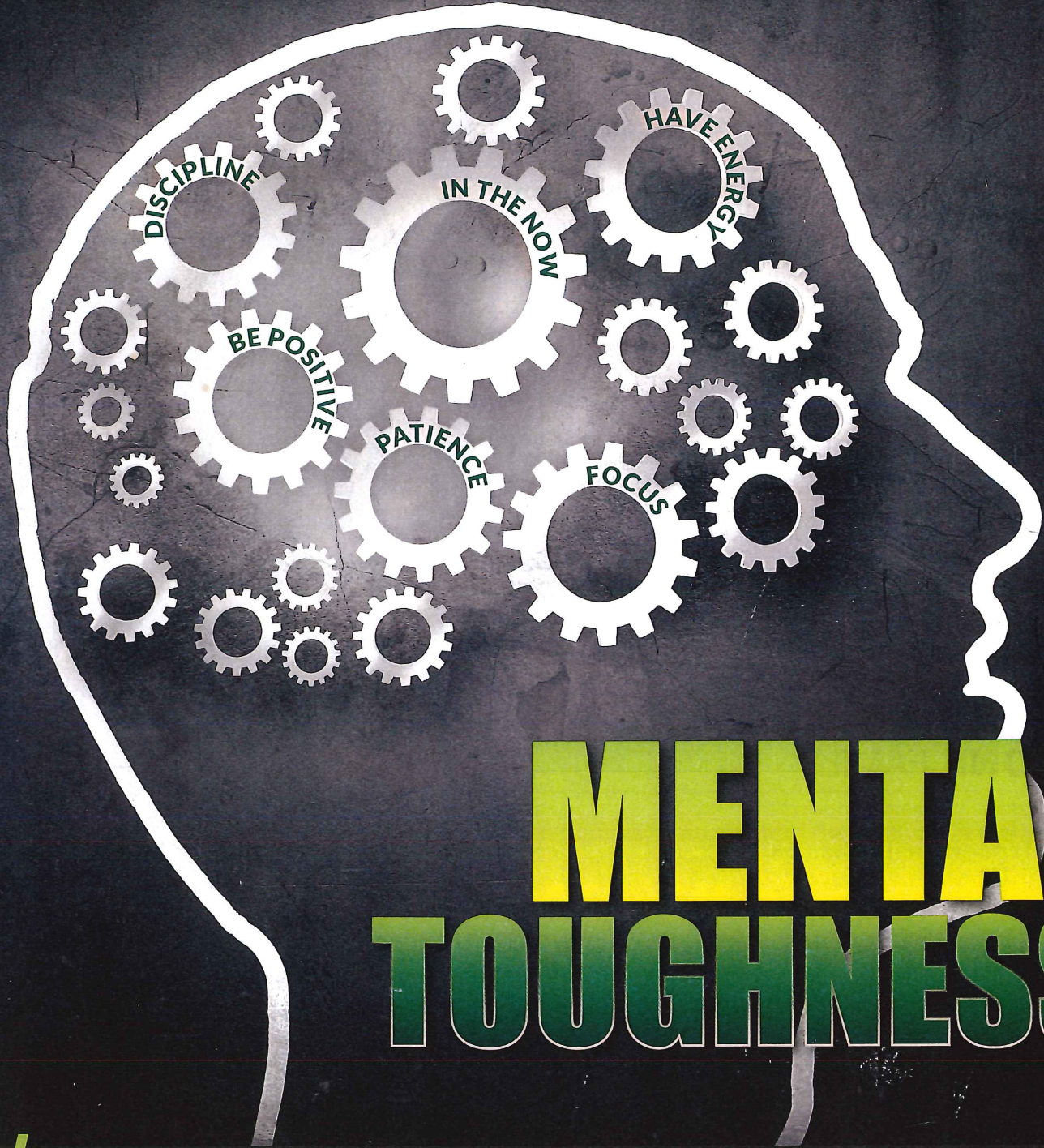


VOLUME 18 ISSUE 4 • MARCH/APRIL 2017

PLATFORM

TENNIS MAGAZINE



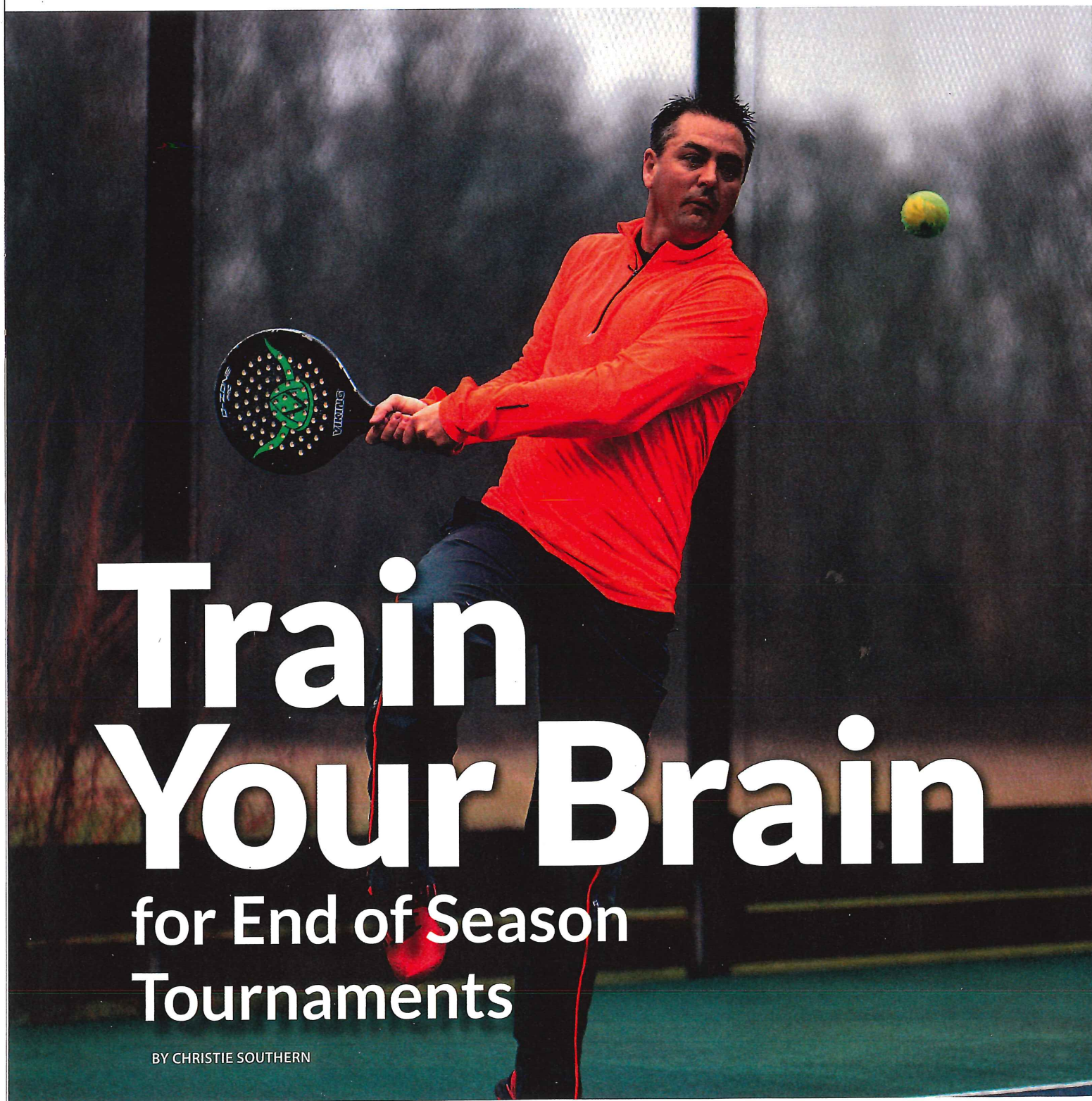
MENTAL TOUGHNESS



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Train Your Brain

for End of Season
Tournaments

BY CHRISTIE SOUTHERN

Have you ever been frustrated by your performance/level of play during competition? Are you not measuring up to what you know to be your capability? The stress of competition, if not properly managed, can prevent athletes from playing their best. For paddle tennis players, match day nerves surface for a variety of reasons, including the high expectations for success players put on themselves (and their partners), the fact that the results will matter in the standings, and/or the fact that there may be an audience watching. In order to become truly game ready, it is important to put some mental toughness strategies in place so that you are your very best on match day.

PARALYSIS BY ANALYSIS

Successful athletes understand that a certain amount of anxiety and nervousness before important matches is desirable in order to get their bodies pumped and ready for the “fight.” They know how to harness this energy into a successful performance. However, too much anxiety can undermine self-confidence and lead to self-doubt, fear, negative thinking, and tentative play—with the result of being unable to perform at their peak. How

demoralizing, after devoting so much time and energy to the sport, to watch all that hard work not be fully realized!

Just let your body do what you have trained it to do

In her best-selling book, *Choke*, University of Chicago neuropsychologist Sian Beilock discusses what happens in an athlete’s brain during high stakes times when he or she is unable to pull out the very best performance—the one he or she is capable of producing given the skill set. Beilock describes how, when the mind starts to race with worries, athletes react by paying too much attention to the details/mechanics of how to execute skills that should just be on autopilot, causing them to ironically “muck it up.” (In neuropsychology terms this is known as “paralysis by analysis,” due to an overactive prefrontal cortex dominating the brain’s function.)

To illustrate, Beilock says, “If a pitcher who knows what they are doing gets on the mound but starts questioning if they can throw the right ball—or how they are doing—there’s a good chance they are not going to strike too many people out.”

Managing emotions is particularly important in paddle because of the rapid shifts in momentum. Also, because paddle is a game of unforced errors, patience and composure are key. The good news is that you can train your brain to be game-ready, much in the same way that you train in order to strengthen your physical performance skills.

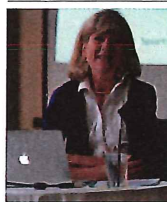
MINIMIZATION

There are a number of strategies mental performance coaches teach their athletes to help them stay mentally tough and avoid this downward spiral in the pressure cooker of competition. One of the techniques I have found to be particularly helpful is the concept of “minimization.” Television viewers saw this concept at work frequently this past year while watching coverage of the Summer Olympic Games, following the exciting World Series Championship season of the Chicago Cubs, or studying the Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta. In all three cases, when the athletes were asked how they managed their nerves, they repeatedly talked about the importance of approaching the event as if it was “just another day.” Michael Phelps, well known for his unflappable confidence, explained, “I tell my teammates to just go out and swim like you do in every other meet.” The Cubs’ manager Joe Madden told his young team during the World Series and in the division and league championship series to “just keep playing the same game that got you here...and have fun!”

Olympic level figure skaters reassure themselves before stepping out on the ice by reminding themselves that “I’ve landed my triple jumps hundreds of times before in practice. I just need to go out now and do that again.” The most elite athletes in the world are telling us that they do best when they mentally approach the biggest competitions of their lives as if it was just another day! In fact, the bigger the event, the more these athletes tell us they need to “shrink it down to size.”

Paddle tennis players who are preparing for end-of-season tournaments can find the concept of minimization to be useful, also. Well before you step on the court, it is important to remind yourself that you are fully prepared and can execute all the shots you will need. Remember that your partner has practiced his or her shots thousands of times before as well. In short, you need to remind yourself that this match—no matter at what level and no matter the stakes—is just like any of the hundreds of practice sessions you have played. The goal is to trust your skills and approach the match with the same kind of confidence, ease, and enjoyment that you experience when playing in less stressful situations. As Beilock would say, “Just let your body do what you have trained it to do.” Finally, it is important that you consistently practice/rehearse this mindset during matches when the stakes are not as high so that you are better able to flip into this “channel” more readily when it really matters.

Like Michael Phelps says, “It’s just another day.” ■



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