

## THE MENTAL EDGE

PRESENTED BY



## Take it from a champion: You can become a better player

Even before he won the last two British Opens and this year's PGA Championship, Ireland's Pádraig Harrington never was widely regarded as the best player never to have won a major.

Unlike transcendent talents such as Sergio Garcia (often referred to currently as the most prominent best player never to have won a major), Phil Mickelson and others who have held that ignominious title, the likable Harrington never inspired high expectations among media and fans.

He is a grinder. Even after Harrington became Europe's best player over the last several years, few regarded him as a star. His workman-like approach and down-to-earth nature kept him under the radar.

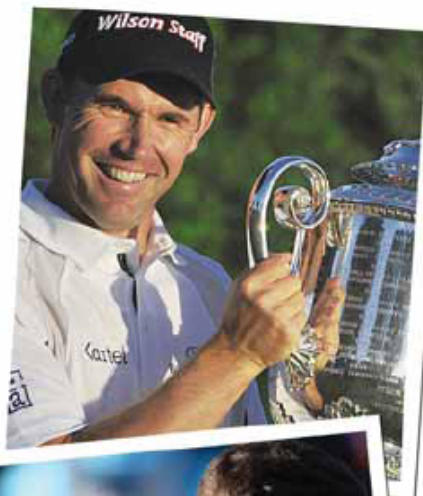
Now 37, Harrington has won three of the last six majors. Despite a less-than-stellar performance at the Ryder Cup, the native Dubliner has been ranked as high as No. 3 in the world—he might deserve to be No. 2 to Tiger Woods—and is arguably the greatest Irish sportsman ever.

Harrington's story is instructive to all golfers. It's a player development story that evolved gradually over two decades. It demonstrates the importance of mental and emotional development as well as ongoing improvement of physical skills. And the lessons are not just for pro golfers; they apply to you, too.

Harrington recognized the importance of the mental side of the game when he was still an amateur.

"I was motivated to seek help maybe outside the mainstream," Harrington recalled recently. "I started working with a sports psychologist when I was 18. At the time—this is 18 years ago—you didn't mention you worked with sports psychologists. It was seen as a weakness."

Over the years, Harrington learned a few key mental principles that have served him well on his steady climb to the top, including:



*It's been a banner season for Harrington, who won two majors, the British Open (bottom) and the PGA Championship.*

- Focus only on what you can control. Forget about the last shot except as it helps prepare for the next one. Don't worry about what other players are doing; that merely serves as a distraction.

- Don't think about the consequences of actions beyond the outcome of the next shot. Doing so can draw one's attention away from the job at hand. During the final round of this year's British Open, Harrington said he did not think

too far ahead. "I never, at any stage, . . . started to think about what it means to win a second Open, defend an Open, win two majors . . . I didn't get into the consequences."

- Do your best and let the results take care of themselves. "That's the only goal anybody should have," said Harrington, "to do as well as they can. You can go out in a given week and play the best golf of your life and not win the tournament; you shouldn't beat yourself up that you didn't win, if you did as well as you could."

- Develop the mental strength to have patience in the face of adversity, be it bad breaks or bad weather.

- Keep learning. "I have always been a learner in the game," said Harrington. "I've always applied myself, looked for what would improve my game, found that, and worked on it to improve it. But it's always taken some time. Many periods in my career, I've had lulls where I've been in between things and come out stronger. I'm looking at this period as one of those that I am coming out stronger with experience."

- "On the golf course, you have to be hard. You can't be soft," said Harrington. Early in the final round of the PGA, it looked to Harrington as if Sergio Garcia was on a roll and might finally win his first major. "I had to try to convince myself not to get into the sentimental thing of, you know, maybe it's his turn; maybe he deserves it; maybe it's his day," he said. "I had to convince myself that, no, it's going to be my day and I deserve to win three majors. You have to be very selfish in this situation."

By making his mental outlook a top priority, Harrington has demonstrated remarkable improvement. Golfers of all abilities can do the same.

Joe Bosco is co-owner, along with Peter Donahue, of the GreenToTee Golf Academy based at Glencoe Golf Club.