

RODRIGUEZ VISUALISES THE PRIZE



Maxim P. Weithers, whose mental training helped Miguel Angel Rodriguez win the British Open in May

Mike Dale speaks to Miguel Angel Rodriguez and the man who played a significant role in his astounding British Open victory, maverick mentor and mental coach Maxim P. Weithers

Many key figures have played a part in Miguel Angel Rodriguez's rise to the top echelons of world squash – his father, Angel Mesias (11-time Colombian champion and national coach), his fitness trainer mother and coaches David Palmer, Sardar Ali Khan and Malcolm Willstrop.

Another important influence in his career came to light at Hull's Airco Arena in May, after Rodriguez had become the most unexpected winner in British Open history. It was there he showed reporters his phone screen, which depicted the trophy he had in his other hand. "Everything was mental. I dreamed this," he said.

The British Open trophy screensaver was part of an intricate process of achieving success through visualisation, which Rodriguez had been working on with long-time mentor and mental coach Maxim P. Weithers.

The pair began working together early in 2011 and the partnership paid dividends immediately. At that year's Pan American Games in Guadalajara, Rodriguez won the individual gold medal for Colombia – a big breakthrough for a player who at that point had never been beyond the second round at a PSA World Series event.

Rodriguez explains: "Building up to the Pan American Games, I worked with Max

once a week. We made a vision board with all the things I wanted to achieve. He gave me homework to do – a gratitude book and a daily journal.

"It takes a lot of work, but you have to believe deeply, visualise and be very positive. You have to feel that you have already won the tournament. Every night I was feeling the medal around my neck, hearing the national anthem and stepping up onto the podium."

"The more specific you are with the things you desire, the easier it is for the universe to give you them. I achieved that gold medal because I did the homework. I visualised all the details. All the dreams I have put in my mind, I have achieved them because of this method."

At the beginning, the pair worked on the Colombian's vision board, charting very specifically his future rise up the rankings, when it would happen, the points required to reach world no.1 and who he would have to beat to get there.

Weithers elaborates: "Visualising those specific things prepared him mentally to win. The mental game is won way before you step on court. I actually think pros having a coach with them on tour doesn't really make any difference. The preparation is done way before that. Your mind has already made a decision on what the outcome is going to be.

"Research shows that the visualisation and belief system caused by the neuron pathways in the brain can take up to 90 days to connect. The trick is knowing what to say to yourself, when and how to say it, and the training that goes behind it, such



Weithers (left) and Rodriguez share their delight at the Colombian's success

as body language and micro facial expressions. That's what I do."

Before the win in Guadalajara, Rodriguez had slipped from 25 to 38 in the world rankings due to an ankle injury. Amazingly, he credits Weithers' methods for making a quick physical recovery.

"I think when someone is injured, you can work on your [rehab] training just by visualising how fit you are, your movement, the shoes and socks you're wearing... It's something a lot of athletes do when they are out of competition," he claims.

Weithers explains: "It's a mental approach to healing. Certain chemicals are manufactured in the brain when you sleep, but only at specific levels of sleep, so you have to guide your subconscious mind towards those levels. Basically, within one summer [of working together], Miguel was 100% again. We figured this is working."

They have been together ever since – bonded not just by their success, but also by a mutual love of squash. Weithers was a player of some repute, crowned Caribbean champion three times in a row and lifting the Canadian Junior Open in 1983 (he grew up in the Bahamas, before moving to Toronto aged 14).

After turning pro, he moved for a time to London, where he was coached by Rahmat Khan and trained alongside Jahangir Khan at the height of his powers in the early 1980s. Later, Weithers coached on the summer junior programme at Princeton University for three years and then along-

side Jonathon Power Snr at the prestigious Dartmouth College.

Weithers now plans to share his expertise more widely. He has founded a Level 1 Squash Mental Trainer Certification, an online course for coaches, parents and players that promises to "dive deep into your mental nutrition" and "train your mind to win".

It certainly seems to have worked for Rodriguez, culminating, of course, in his glorious victory over Mohammed ElShorbagy in May's British Open final, with wins over Ramy Ashour, Omar Mosaad, Ali Farag and Raphael Kandra en route.

"At the British, I was feeling lots of emotions," reflects the 32-year-old, who leapt eight places to world no.6 as a result. "How can I explain? It was like it had already happened. It was a deep belief. I was visualising every day, looking at my screensaver of the trophy on my phone. Max definitely helped me a lot."

Weithers sums up his impact on Rodriguez thus: "I wouldn't ever say that it's only because of me that Miguel won the British Open. What I would point out is that Miguel was coached by his dad, other coaches in Colombia and David Palmer in Orlando. He has learned a lot from those people. What has been consistent is that when he does apply the mental programmes that we've done together, he always gets the best results."

The man dubbed the 'Colombian Cannonball' concurs: "Obviously, it's not 100% down to

Max - I have to work hard on the squash side and the fitness side too. But I have watched lots of players in different sports who are very talented and work hard, but are very weak mentally. I think the mental side is the most important. I have a lot of good people around me in my career, but Max, he is the cherry on the cake."

MENTOR HAS HIS OWN MENTOR

Maxim Weithers' methods are inspired by his friend and business mentor, John Assaraf, an American entrepreneur most famous for appearing in the book and film, *The Secret*.

The film features a series of interviews which collectively aim to prove that desired outcomes can be achieved by the power of positive thought. When it was released in 2006, it attracted passionate devotees and controversy in equal measure.

Assaraf's use of the 'vision board' as a goal-setting tool is just one of the methodologies Weithers has adapted and applied to squash. He is now looking to pass on this expertise with his four-stage online course in mental training, released under the brand Maxim Mentor. He says American world no.18 Amanda Sobhy has already signed up.

Weithers practises his mental training alongside running his own exclusive luxury rental and concierge business in Cartagena, Colombia, renting colonial villas and yachts, and conducting private tours. He also has a global online advertising and marketing platform agency.

He hopes to diversify his mental training to apply to other sports, but claims it can be used to achieve any ambition – even materialistic goals.

"When I first started working with Miguel, he was driving a little two-door Mazda," he recalls. "He has a passion for cars and really wanted an Audi sports car, so we designed and created a vision board for it.

"I asked him 'What would you feel if you were in the car? What are the sounds, the smells, the feel of the upholstery? What kind of music are you playing? Where are you driving it?' I told him to go to the Audi dealership the next day, take a test drive and bring back a brochure.

"We added all those details to our vision board. Two years later, he had his Audi.

"The first year I went through this process with John Assaraf, I attracted an additional \$1.4million in sales. Any kind of personal goal can be achieved by following a few specific actions in a very specific order. It usually doesn't come straightaway, but it does come."

For further information on Weithers' mental training course, see Workshop News on page 32.

Rodriguez on the way to winning the British Open in May

