

IN SIGHT OF THE SUMMIT

Richard Eaton talks to France's Camille Serme about her new approach to squash, which has taken her to the verge of becoming world no.1

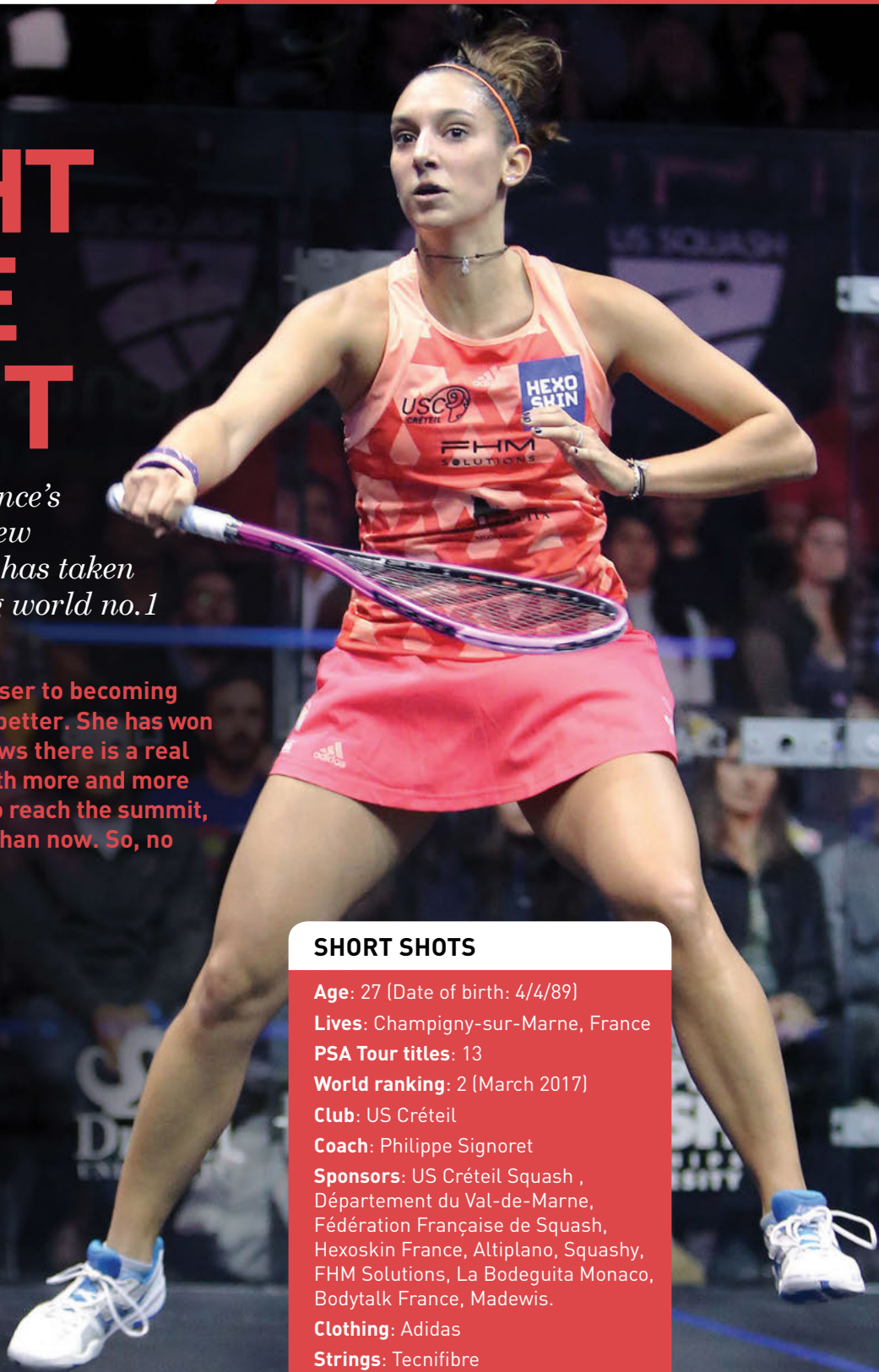
Camille Serme has never been closer to becoming world no.1. She has never played better. She has won three big titles in America. She knows there is a real chance of heading the rankings. With more and more women also playing well enough to reach the summit, there may never be a better time than now. So, no pressure then.

Remarkably, there's not as much pressure as you might think. Serme has been very adaptable in seeking different ways to reduce pressure and now has a range of methods from which to choose. Right now she is trying another, of which more in a moment. The first, and most important, has always been attitude.

"When I start to speak about coming closer to my dream, I think 'oh, come on', and focus on what I still have to do to improve," she said, pausing before explaining: "I know I'm close - but yet still very far." Though not original, the paradox is usefully sobering. It is also typical of her.

Serme is from Créteil, a community near Paris which has grown alongside the Marne river, the subject of many famous paintings, and from her early days she has been a thoughtful accumulator of knowledge which might edge her forward. Her routine, she says, was mostly just school, squash and then home.

As a professional, she listened to orthodox sports psychology, which encouraged clarifying goals, calming positives, reassuring routines and personalised techniques of focusing. Recently, Serme was asked what thoughts came into her head when she was playing well and she answered: "Defending women's squash". Identifying this helped create enhanced awareness of it, with a better chance of using it to her advantage.



SHORT SHOTS

Age: 27 (Date of birth: 4/4/89)
Lives: Champigny-sur-Marne, France
PSA Tour titles: 13
World ranking: 2 (March 2017)
Club: US Créteil
Coach: Philippe Signoret
Sponsors: US Créteil Squash, Département du Val-de-Marne, Fédération Française de Squash, Hexoskin France, Altiplano, Squashy, FHM Solutions, La Bodeguita Monaco, Bodytalk France, Madewis.
Clothing: Adidas
Strings: Tecnifibre

It has clearly been working for her, if results are anything to go by. They include victories over world no.1 Nour El Sherbini in the U.S. Open final in Philadelphia in October and over former world no.1 Laura Massaro in the Tournament of Champions final in New York in January.

Afterwards, Serme climbed to second in the world for the first time. She followed that by winning the Cleveland Classic in February, coming from 2/0 down against Alison Waters in the final. She had become even tougher than before to beat.

A strengthening mindset had previously been evident at the 2015 British Open, where Serme became the first French woman to win the prestigious title. En route she beat El Sherbini and Raneem El Welily, and in the final overcame a terrifying triplicate - a patriotic home crowd, her own nerves and Massaro, the home hope.

Serme handled that better than anything before and gained emotional support by watching her compatriot, Greg Gaultier, at the same stage in the same tournament.

Here was a French player who had overcome many gremlins and been able to take the final step.

Not all of it is in the mind. There have been many reasons why Serme has been able to claw her way up. Notably, she has made herself into a more willing volleyer, improving the option of being able to apply pressure more suddenly.

No longer is she quite so dependent on the qualities of good movement and solid driving, which have characterised her game; she can now open up the court to a wider range of attacking possibilities.

Recently, she has been working on trying to adapt more perceptively to different opponents. This aim requires greater control and accuracy.

“I’ve sometimes struggled to get a perfect length, to get a second-bounce nick,” she admits. “Too often my shots are too long or too short. Sometimes I have a great opportunity and then my volley is too long, and then the rally goes on and on.”

And sometimes it has left her frustrated. Despite this, Serme has determinedly presented a pleasing on-court image, sartorially and emotionally, with plenty of smiles off court too. A brightly positive mindset, she knows, can affect outcomes as much as better accuracy or adaptable tactics.

But even well-tended emotions can occasionally become unruly. Hence, Serme has tried different means of restraining them. Though it provided a target for humour when she revealed her part-time journalism (she can write her own reports now), it eased a particular kind of pressure, that of worrying about winning for money.

Money has nevertheless pushed its way into her thinking. This year’s British Open was the first with equal prize money, giving Serme and many other women a feeling of riding a new wave. Though it’s encouraging, it also creates further urgency, as the standard of opposition will be rising more quickly than ever now.

“Women’s squash is so exciting at the moment. There are at least eight women who can win the [big] titles,” she said. “More than ever, I just have to focus on each match, because I know everything can happen with these players.”

Two painful defeats reminded her of this. First, Serme was beaten by the unseeded Sarah-Jane Perry in the first round of the Al-Ahram International in September,

Camille Serme receives some advice from France national coach Philippe Signoret



despite feeling she had trained as well as ever during the summer. Then, the following month, she lost to Waters, the former world no.3, in the semi-finals of the Carol Weymuller Open in New York. Serme’s career-best sequence since then is a conscious retort to these results.

Setbacks occasionally triggered debates about her attitude to opponents. Her agreeable demeanour on court has not always been admired. “Apparently, I am too fair and too nice on court,” she is reported to have said.

“Some players try to take more space to play the ball if it’s in the middle and I have lost a few matches because of that. I don’t want to be mean, as I have tried already and I can’t do this. But I am working with my mental coach and I am trying to be tougher.”

But being agreeable is a trait which has helped in other situations. Her best quality, very similar to that, has helped carry her further than many people predicted.

“That has always been to work very hard and to try to understand what my coach was asking me to do on court,” she concludes, after being coaxed into discussing her own character.

But her worst quality has made it more difficult to progress without some stock-taking. “Sometimes I’m too hard on myself,” she reckoned. “You want something to be perfect. I want to be perfect. I think I’m like that in life as well.”

Perfectionism can increase stress. Even managed stress reaches new heights when the stakes become higher. And they have never been higher than now, bringing a danger that shot-making accuracy might be eroded at critical moments.

This is another reason why she has been trying a new pressure-reducing technique. It is yoga, which has been described as a mind-body exercise that is effective at reducing stress and improving brain function. Serme seems to agree that it is.

“I have added it to my training once a week. It helps me deal with my stress when I have big matches,” she says. “I have a teacher and I go to her place once a week. We do stretching and I progress bit by bit. I do know myself better.”

However, she still keeps a mental coach and still receives input from her long-time squash coach, Philippe Signoret.

And she retains that same important empathy with which she began the game. “It’s a positive that I still enjoy the game,” she says, identifying the greatest stress-reliever of all. She celebrates too the effect of winning those titles. “For sure, I have more confidence,” she adds.

Despite all this, a vision of becoming world no.1 can infiltrate the mind like a disruptive mirage. That’s why during the last difficult, mind-testing step to the summit she is utilising not only resources which are familiar to her, but something extra which might just tip the balance her way.

Fortunately, Serme has entered the golden years of her career with both room and capacity for improvement. Her 28th birthday comes nine days after the British Open, an advancing maturity which helps her play more perceptively. “I see the game better now,” she says. And that in turn helps her learn how to see more.

Serme started March with a ranking average less than 400 points behind the leader, El Sherbini. “I’m closer to my ultimate dream,” she said. “But the road is still long and the last step is always the hardest.”