

# WHAT MAKES CONNORS A COMPETITIVE GENIUS?

BY JIM LOEHR, Ed.D.

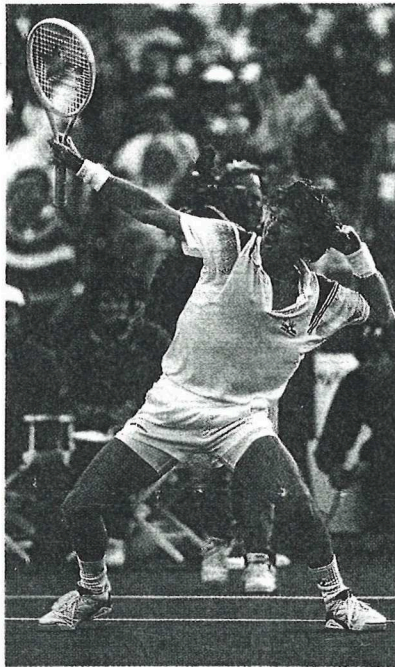
**J**immy Connors has transcended the boundaries of tennis to become one of sports' greatest competitors of this era. His stunning U.S. Open accomplishments (see page 102) captured the imagination of the sporting world like few athletes ever have. To start the year ranked in the 900s and then reach the semifinals of the Open at the age of 39 sends a powerful message to all competitors. That message is: Look what can be done with a strong mind.

Pro sports provide many great examples of physical genius: Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, Bo Jackson. The genius of Connors is his competitiveness. He's clearly not the fastest, the biggest or the strongest. He has said that, for him, playing tennis is 90 percent mental and 10 percent physical. His results prove it.

How does he do it? What makes Connors so much tougher than everyone else? How can he be a better player at 39 than he was at 29? If you want to learn to fight like Connors, here are a few prerequisites:

**Put yourself totally on the line every time you play.** Connors never gives less than his best effort. He demands and gets total commitment from himself each time he plays. He gives all that he has to give both emotionally and physically. He's not afraid to lose and has no excuses in reserve when he does. If he gets beat, he gets beat.

**Never surrender.** To Connors, tanking a match is worse than dying. Against impossible odds or bad luck, Connors never throws



*Mind game: Connors is the master.*

in the towel. You've got to beat him to take him out. The word "can't" doesn't enter his mind. And if he leaves before it's over, as he did at the French Open against Michael Chang, it's because there's nothing left physically.

**Never turn against yourself during tough times.** Watch Connors when he's losing or not playing well. That's when you learn the most about him as a competitor. Connors keeps grinding away until he gets back on track. He never gets negative or fights himself. He conserves his energy to battle his opponent.

**Be prepared mentally.** Connors' bad days won't be due to lack of mental preparation. He does what's necessary to get his mind focused before the match. He practices with the same intensity and emotional commitment that he'll generate in his matches,

and he is careful not to overtrain during competitive periods. Being mentally prepared means managing your life so that you walk onto the court eager, fresh and fully ready to fight.

**Keep your perspective.** Perhaps Connors' greatest competitive asset is his ability to be immersed totally in the battle and then suddenly step outside and see the big picture. It's as if he's a spectator for a moment, watching himself. This gives him a brief break in the intensity and creates a wave of recovery that then allows him to jump back in almost more intensely. It's a powerful tool for managing stress and maintaining emotional balance. When he's inside, he's intense and focused. When he's outside, he's humorous and flexible.

**Never show weakness.** Connors experiences the same doubts, frustrations, disappointments and drops in confidence as his opponents, but he never lets them see it. Connors has learned to be himself on court, to bare his soul, but never show helplessness or weakness. He shows you what he wants you to see—fight, positive energy and confidence.

**Love the battle more than the victory.** What separates Connors from his competitors is his genuine love for the battle itself. He's not addicted to winning as much as he is to competing. As a result, he is capable of carving out a tremendous sense of fun and challenge in the heat of battle. The crazier it gets, the more he loves it. He literally thrives on chaos. Win or lose, he enjoys the process. And in defeat, you have the feeling he really never lost. He simply ran out of time before he found the solution. ●

*The author is a sports psychologist.*