

Understanding and Controlling the Mental Side of Golf

David Yukelson, Ph.D., Sport Psychologist
The Pennsylvania State University

I. Introduction - Reflective Questions:

- What are the unique psychological problems faced by Golfers?
- What is it like when you are playing great golf?
- What kinds of situations/things cause you to lose your concentration & become distracted?
- How do you go about regaining your concentration once you lost it?
- Understanding why golf demands so much mentally from you - Must switch from analytic, pre-swing decision making mode to intuitive, non-thinking, feel oriented mode during the actual swing itself.

Keys: Golf is a game of overcoming distractions - Must learn how to put your mind & emotions in a position to be successful - Tied to preparation, belief, effort, and willpower!

II. Mental Preparation for Playing Great Golf

A. Motivation and Commitment

- The pursuit of excellence starts with getting to know your own patterns (awareness)
 - Understanding why you play golf - what so you want to accomplish as a golfer? What are your strengths and weakness? Goals and expectations? Personal incentives and things that drive you to want to be good?
 - Must also understand how you react to the ups and downs of competition, triggers that either help or hinder your concentration and focus.

B. Take Responsibility for your mental game

- Challenge yourself to work on areas that need improvement
 - Commit yourself to improving your game, develop action plans for success
- Develop your mental skills so you consistently perform near the best of your ability
 - Imagery, confidence, positive self-talk, pre-performance routines, trust, mental discipline, poise under pressure, etc.

C. Develop a Game Plan That Works for You

- Develop your own mental plan for competing effectively (a game plan helps you be confident, focused, composed, and in control of your thoughts, emotions, attitude, and physical game)
 - Top performers prepare themselves for peak performance in a consistent manner (they adhere to very systematic competition focusing plans and pre-performance routines)
- Think like a Champion: expect to do well, belief in yourself, trust your preparation, and enjoy the love of competition.
- Learn to play the game one shot at a time, one round at a time
- Play each shot to a positive landing area
- Learn to focus on the process of playing great golf rather than the final score or outcome of the match
- Draw on your mental skills when faced with adversity

D. Mental Training Techniques for Golf

- The Importance of Trust: Freeing it up and letting it happen
- Think and Play in the Present (One Shot at a Time)
- Develop a solid pre-shot routine: PLAN, COMMIT, READY, TRUST
 - Process appropriate information and formulate a decisive plan, commit yourself to the club and shot you want to hit, use your breath to get balanced and ready to hit, free it up and let it happen.
 - Develop a signal/trigger/cue that helps you go from thinking to non-thinking
 - Concentration Refocusing: Learn to let go of mistakes quickly
 - Become self aware on the course rather than self conscious
 - Don't allow frustration to undermine you confidence or concentration
- Visualization/Feelization: make your imagery as vivid, realistic, and detailed as possible
 - Focus on what you want to occur, see/feel yourself playing great (good rhythm, tempo, confidence)
 - Mentally prepare yourself for coping with adversity and/or distractions effectively
- Diaphragmatic Breathing: A simple technique to help you feel balanced, relaxed, smooth, & in control
- Confidence as a Matter of Choice: Put your mind in a position to score well consistently
- Constructive Self-Talk: Focus on positive things that you want to occur
- Constructive Evaluation: Monitor your physical and mental game on a consistent basis

E. Seven Habits of Highly Effective Golfers (Dick Coop, 1994)

- 1) Think and Play in the Present
- 2) Can Score when their Swing isn't Working
- 3) Have Learned to Forgive Themselves for Mistakes Made on the Course
- 4) Focus Primarily on the Process, Never the Product
- 5) Play Each Shot to a Positive Landing Area
- 6) Are True to Themselves
- 7) They Keep the Game in Perspective