

Inside Your Mind: On the Golf Course

Part One: First you must understand the mind challenge



In this golf series we will not be looking at the mechanics of your swing. We are not going to be giving tips and advice on the techniques you can use for putting, chipping or driving. We are going to explore a far more exciting and less talked about area of golf. Whilst it is far less written about, it is equally if not more important to your game. We're going to delve into the realm of the mind in your golf game.

There is no dispute that the game of golf is as much a mind game as a physical game. It does not matter what level of golfer you are, you'll agree that golf engages you into a mind game like no other.

Golf is as much a game you're playing with yourself as it is a game you are playing with others in your group.

The purpose of this article is to introduce you to the role the mind in learning and performance in golf. We will explore sports psychology, sports science and both conscious and unconscious mind functioning as a way of introducing you to a new way of improving your golf game or learning golf from scratch.

The uniqueness of the sport of golf

- The object (the ball) is totally still
- The size of the ball is small relative to the face size of the club head
- You have time between hits
- No-one else directs the ball back at you as would happen in other

ball sports so there is no uncertainty about play.

- The game is played over a four hour period over which you'll play around 70-120 odd shots depending on your golfing ability. In tennis an equivalent 4 hour game you would play around 1200-1500 shots.

In golf the margin for error is small And hence the pressure per shot is generally high given the margin for error is low.¹

The Performance Gap

Your performance gap is the gap between your optimum potential and your actual performance. There lies a gap with all golfers between what they are capable of and their actual performance in a game. Capable meaning if you've hit a ball 200 yards before then you are capable of doing that all the time. The size of this gap is reduced the higher the level of golfing expertise you have. The gap increases the less experience and/ or less skilled the player is. Improving your game is about closing this gap so that you are playing at your optimum potential. This is what this golf series is all about. How you can close this gap without taking anymore lessons, just practising in new ways. How can you begin training your mind and take control of the mental aspect of the game for marked results.

A typical golfer scenario

You stand addressing your tee shot and you look down the fairway. A water feature to the left and tree's to the right. A nice wide fairway to hit clearly straight down the centre. You go through your pre-hit routine and there is just a seed of doubt as you swing that it is not going to be a good hit as something does not feel quite right.

You see your ball veer dangerously close to the water. You say inside

your head, "See I knew it wasn't right, I knew it".

Then on your next tee shot you stand at the tee. Your internal dialogue says, "Don't do what you did on the last shot, just relax". You take a deep breath and say to yourself, "Ok just relax now". You think logically through your swing technique and mentally explain to yourself via internal dialogue what you need to do differently this time. At the last minute before you swing your internal voice says, "Now don't stuff this one up" and you hit....now you're in the rough.

Frustration sets in as that is two bad tee shots in a row. You know you can hit a cracking tee shot normally so what is going on now. Your fellow players all seem to be hitting well and you feel the need to justify your poor performance.

If you've ever found yourself experiencing this or a similar feeling of frustration, you're not alone. Chances are if you play golf you've had your moments when the internal frustration has just taken over.

What controls movement in the body anyway

There are about 650 muscles in the body, and they are divided into three different types, skeletal, visceral and cardiac. The skeletal muscles move the arms, legs, and spine. The visceral muscles control movements in the walls of blood vessels, the stomach and intestines. The cardiac muscles produce the pumping action of the heart. All the muscles are present in the body at birth, and everyone has the same number of muscles, consisting of the same number of fibres.

In a golf swing or any movement made in the body there is going to be two things going on. Most movements involve the expansion

and contraction of muscles in relation to joints and bones. When one muscle contracts over a joint an opposing muscle will need to relax and extend for the movement to occur.

The muscle contracting and producing the movement is known as the "Agonist" and the muscle opposing and extending is known as the "Antagonist".

An example in the right handed golf swing taken from a physiotherapy website – GolfMed.



On the back swing the right biceps contracts and the right triceps extends (pays out); on impact the right triceps contracts and right biceps extends; on follow through the right biceps contracts and the right triceps extends.²

No-where yet have I found an estimate of the number of muscles estimated to be in use in a golf swing but I imagine it to be hundreds. Hundreds of muscles working in different ways contracting and relaxing as levers to create of movement.

Think about the movement of walking. We do not need to instruct our legs on how to move, they just do it. Ordinarily we do not recognize changes in the walking surface. As we walk we scan about 10 to 20 feet ahead of us. Our observations operate below the level of the conscious mind. Should we begin focusing on our walking what do you think happens? Over fixation of attention is actually a common cause of falling. Try it yourself next time you are walking down a set of stairs. Really focus on telling yourself how to step and see what happens. Chances are you will interrupt the flow of movement.

Just as with walking and giving yourself instructions, our golf swing

can be impaired too by conscious mediation.

So realising that skill in sport is done at an unconscious level is the first and most critical thing to learn and understand about golf and sport. This means that to reach optimum performance levels, learning and performance interventions at a conscious level can actually slow learning and impair performance.

Turning to science for greater understanding

For the last 20+ year's considerable research has gone into golf addressing mechanics, biomechanics, motor control, psychology and physiology. Such attention has been directed toward mechanics that magazines, websites and TV programs are dedicated to the analysis and strategy of golf swings. The golf swing has been dissected that many times in that many different ways that it is fairly safe to say that we've explored mechanics extensively.

In 1979 Tim Gallwey a writer in the field of sports, intelligently noted that "the breakthroughs, if there are to be any, will come from study of the mental aspect of the game (golf)"³. He too believed that for all the research on golf, the mind game was the place where the significant advancement would come from.

Key Background Information

My coach recently told me that his research suggested that a golf swing takes approximately 1.5-1.7 seconds to execute.

The work done by Benjamin Libet's at the University of California in the area of human consciousness found that it takes 400 milliseconds of brain activity to produce awareness. His tests suggest that we are experiencing everything almost half a second after it actually happens. So when someone taps you on the shoulder, you react first and become aware 400 milliseconds later. This suggests that conscious awareness is therefore an afterthought. Or you can put it this way; our subconscious mind (which co-ordinates movement) is half a second ahead of our conscious mind.

In sport therefore the subconscious mind and movement will always be half a second ahead of our conscious thoughts.

Finally scientists estimate that a new thought goes through our minds approximately every 250 milliseconds.

So why is all of this so important to the golf swing? Consider for a moment that you can have around six thoughts during your golf swing and the conscious mind will always be half a second behind the unconscious activity. So ask yourself what the point is in giving ourselves direct instructions on the movement we are about to perform if the unconscious movement is ahead of conscious thought anyway. Could our six plus thoughts during our golf swing be a distraction to our subconscious in its ability to execute a movement for which it is in control of?

Sports Psychology

We've not talked at all about traditional Sports Psychology as yet. Traditional consulting in the sports area has taken general psychology and mapped it across to sport. Upon analysis of the structure and interventions used in traditional sports psychology you discover that it is all based on cognitive work which is conscious mind directed. So given know that the subconscious is 400 milliseconds ahead we've missed the boat if we are working on conscious mind conditioning.

The tendency we have (and this is reinforced by way of common golf instruction) is to tell ourselves consciously how to swing via internal dialogue. An example would be on the driving range as you practice with a 7 iron you might be saying to yourself; "extend on the back swing, rotate like this, begin the rotation from here, don't lift the front foot and follow all the way through". All these instructions are going through our minds as we aim to hit the ball well.

As Gallwey eloquently pointed out our muscles don't speak English so why do we talk to them as if they do.

The complex movements undertaken in a golf swing, our conscious minds will never understand. The muscle function, movement, sequence and timing will always remain in the domain of our unconscious.



It is at this point that it is worth saying; "Don't listen to me". Hear it from others and then make your own judgement.

Have you ever heard athletes or golfers being interviewed and they comment on a successful round or result and they say something that refers to being in a "flow state" in their performance.

The flow state is a state of unconscious performance where the conscious mind has checked out and the body is allowed to function uninterrupted.

"Flow State is an optimal psychological experience. It's when you're functioning on auto-pilot, when everything clicks into place and goes right. It's a deeply pleasurable experience and it's something that's not very often experienced by people; rather it's something that often represents people's peak experiences in a particular area." said Dr Costas Karageorghis, lecturer in sports psychology at Brunel University, UK.

Ekhart Tolle in his publication, *From Stillness Speaks: Beyond the Thinking Mind* expresses this idea brilliantly:

"Artistic creation, sports, dance, teaching, counselling-mastery in any field of endeavour implies that the thinking is no longer involved at all or at least it is taking second place. A power and intelligence greater than you and yet one with you in essence takes over. There is no decision making process anymore; spontaneous right action happens, and 'you are not doing it. Mastery of life is the opposite of control. You become aligned with the greater consciousness. It acts, speaks, does the work."

Stephen Mitchell describes the flow state as; "A good athlete can enter a state of body awareness in which the right stroke or the right movement happens by itself, effortlessly, without any interference of the conscious will."

The First Lesson

So the first lesson in this series is to stop consciously directing your golf game. This may sound easy but get out there on the course or driving

range and just see how you go. Allow your subconscious to take first place in just hitting in the way it knows best without your conscious mind butting in.



All you need to do on the range is to pick your target and see the ball going there and then hit without internal instruction. This involves the conscious mind giving very clear outcome based directive and that is all. Forget everything you know, all that you've been taught and everything that you don't think you know yet and trust in your innate ability to hit freely with fluidity to the selected target. Even on the driving range you want to be selecting a target.

If you are not sure how to recognise your conscious mind interference, just notice your internal dialogue. Don't pass judgement on the dialogue just notice it. Awareness is the first step. Notice when it happens and what it says. Is it productive or counterproductive? Just notice every dialogue that is going on inside your mind. Consider who it is your exchanging dialogue with anyway.

Your conscious mind is the one that provides all the internal dialogue. This comes in the form of friendly advice, self criticism, self battery, instructions and many other forms. Note now that these are all the attempts of our conscious mind to control something that is not actually in its control (muscle performance). So each time you hear instruction and/ or dialogue coming from your conscious mind, recognise that you are not in a high performance state so before hitting you need to change your state.

I hear many of you asking how exactly do I change my state. How do I do this when my conscious mind won't shut up? My best advice to you is to practice different personal states of being. To do this you simply think of a time when you were performing

at your peak level. It can be any time, doing anything. It does not need to be golf. It could be as simply as the last time you drove your car really well. It was natural and easy for you. Absorb yourself in that memory as if you are there now and then hit the ball. Associating to a high performance state is the fastest and easiest way to change your state to one that you know is a high performance state. See then how quiet your mind is. Notice each and every time the dialogue comes back and take that as your sign to change your state again.

Remember don't hit until your in a high performance state. A bucket of ball on the driving range should not be your excuse to belt the balls whilst not thinking about direction, focus or state. Treat each and every ball as if it counts. Then you are treating your range practise the same as your game play and that is worthwhile practise.

Initially this task is a lot harder than you may think but just like learning a martial art, when you allow yourself to surrender control to your unconscious mind, then you'll really begin to see your true potential coming out.

So between now and the next article in the series happy golfing.

Remember to pay attention to what is going on in your mind as awareness will be your first step forward.

In the next part of the Inside the Mind series we will be looking at confidence and self doubt. These are two of the areas which cause most golfers to tense up causing yips, draws and fades.

The Keen Golfers

For the serious golf enthusiasts or anyone who simply wants to learn to play golf, Performance Coaching can help you with accelerated learning and advancing your performance. It aims to help you and close your performance gap. Please feel free to contact us to discuss how we can help you and your game move ahead. It's challenging, it's fun and it will help you far beyond just your golf game.

The Keen Corporate



You may like to consider speaker opportunities on the power of the mind in sport and business. The same principles we apply with our golfers we translate to business. The topics are unique and always provide interesting and fresh views on high performance at work. Many companies are considering having us speak at their golf days to compliment their day's activities. We welcome the opportunity to discuss your ideas.



Martine Snow Performance Coach Become Coaching

Martine coaches social golfers through to PGA golfers. Her passion for the field of human performance drives her in her research and development. Her techniques are refreshingly new and they work.

¹ Adapted from Gallwey, T. The Inner Game of Golf. (1979). Pan Books.

² GolfMed Australia

<<http://www.golfmed.net/products/thebodyandgolf/musclefunction.htm>>

³ Gallwey, T. The Inner Game of Golf. (1979). Pan Books.

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