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Control Your Attention and You Control Your Game

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Apex Performance

Well, even the great ones lose concentration, react to distractions and stop paying attention! The ability to zero in on one thing at any one moment is actually hard work for the brain. Our brains have a limited supply of resources available for all the myriad functions it must carry out. So in order to achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness at any one moment, our brains borrow “energy” from other regions of the brain that are not critical for the task at hand and use it to get what is needed for this moment, like the razor-sharp focus needed to make that 20-foot putt. You can help your brain do this by shutting down the busy “chatter” in your head that comes from too much thinking about what you are doing.

This brings us to our Attention Rule #1: *Right before and during a golf shot, there is no thinking.* Thinking interferes with the automatic body mechanisms you have worked so hard to develop in order to hit the ball well. When you’re in the act of making a shot, turn off the thinking brain. If you think, you sink. Do all your thinking when preparing for a shot you are about to make – what’s my target, what’s the distance, wind conditions, etc. Once you’re ready to take the shot – silence. Now this is easier said than done. Humans, by nature, like to

solve the problem when they are in trouble. That’s the thinking part of our brain at work and quite often it is what is needed. But once you are about to make your stroke, you have to shut that off and focus on what is most important at the moment, like the ball. That razor sharp focus on the ball will help you not to think.

Attention Rule #2: *Our attention is automatically directed by the brain’s orienting response to external stimuli.* There are certain external stimuli or events that automatically grab our attention – a sudden loud noise when it’s quiet, or the flash of a camera, or a sudden movement by someone when everyone else is very still. Because of their novelty, intensity, sharp contrast to the surroundings, etc., these stimuli automatically grab our attention. So, how do you deal with this natural tendency of the brain? Complete immersion in what you are doing at the moment, the way a child can be so involved in play that nothing distracts or disturbs them. Complete immersion in a task is an attention challenge. With deliberate practice, though, anyone can develop this ability. When you’re working on your game, you have to practice paying attention just as much as you practice swinging your club and hitting the ball. Be very deliberate. Have a very clear target about your focus and concentration when you are practicing at the driving range or in the bunker or on the putting green. Don’t just hit a bucket of balls to groove your swing. Every practice shot should have a clear purpose. That is how you develop your brain to attend.

Attention Rule #3: *It’s about locking in, not blocking out.* How many times have we heard our colleagues say, “if only I could block out . . .” Unfortunately, this is exactly what people mean, that somehow they can train themselves to “block out” distractions when they need to. Good news, bad news time. The bad news, folks, is that you can’t. It doesn’t work that way when it comes to attention. The good news is that we can eliminate distractions, but it’s not by blocking things out. Let’s analyze what we are saying and what it really means from the brain’s perspective. If I ask you to block something out, where is your attention? It’s on the very thing I am asking you to block out because I just directed your attention to it. As you approach the 3rd hole, a par 3 with water in front of the green, you might say to yourself, “OK, I am going to block out that water in front of the green.” The moment you say that to yourself or someone else says it to you, the brain attends to the water. The way to “block” something out is to lock something in, and that something needs to be the real target you’re supposed to be honing in on. So in the example of the water in front of the green, the water is “blocked” out of your mind when the cup or some other target on the green is locked in. Don’t tell yourself to “block” out anything.


Attention Rule #4: *Under pressure and stress, attention automatically narrows.* It narrows so much that it becomes very difficult to perform at your best because you are unable to take in all the relevant information needed to successfully

perform the task. This automatic response goes back to pre-historic times when the sudden narrowing of attention due to a threat was a survival mechanism. When a lion approached, this was no time to be admiring the beautiful leaves or the enchanting forest. No, it was time to lock in on the lion. Unfortunately, this same response mechanism is still with us even though much of the physical threats no longer exist. The brain does not distinguish between real and imagined events. So, when you feel the pressure and stress of a tight match or making a good shot or getting a good score, your attention will narrow too much (to find the lion) and you will miss important information that you need to make a good shot. Take a deep breath, calm yourself, and your attention will broaden again to focus on what is relevant and needed for the task.

Attention Rule #5: Use a solid pre-shot routine. If you want to play well, you must have a pre-shot routine. It's a sequence of events that prepares you for the next stroke. This should include both physical and mental elements. A routine is simply a sequence of steps that progressively directs your focus onto your target and prepares you for the execution of your shot. Each step is an image, or a sound, or a feeling, or an action that brings you closer to your ideal performance state. The images are pictures in your mind's eye of what you want to happen next. If you can "see" it, you can do it. The sounds can be phrases that you say to yourself in order to make yourself feel great ("I love being here," "Breathe and release," "I've made this putt a million times," etc.) The feelings are sensations of the correct execution and/or the specific emotion that you want to feel as you execute – (Controlled swing, good ball address, relaxed body and calm mind, etc.). Once you have selected your target, you can establish a direct path for your mind to use in hitting there. Finally, actions are small movements you can make to unlock tension and to breathe deeply in order to calm your mind and body, allowing you to perform smoothly while under pressure. The path that you take to get to this target is called a routine and it is a critical process for achieving your desired concentration and ultimate execution. With a solid and set routine, your mind is anchored to a process, helping your performance become more automatic and consistent. In summary, routines...

- ➔ Keep you focused on a task; keep you from "over thinking" your performance
- ➔ Aid in preparation (emotional/physical/mental readiness)
- ➔ Help redirect focus when lost
- ➔ Help maintain your confidence

Contrary to popular belief, the first step in any golf swing is attention. What you pay attention to and how you pay attention will affect everything that happens next. The key to playing up to your capability and potential is to be able to focus and concentrate when there are distractions, both external and internal. Anyone can play well when conditions are ideal, but who plays well when there is lots of pressure and stress? The players who can control their attention!



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