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Playing with Pressure by Louis S. Csoka, Ph.D.

Apex Performance

Much has been written about the “yips” in golf. This article will not be one of them. Rather, it will be about being generally cooler, calm and collected when playing golf, especially in those tight, “must-make-this-shot” types of situations. There are several factors in golf over which you have no control - the layout of the course, the weather, the play of other golfers, especially the play of other golfers.

When you play, of course you will take into consideration the course and the weather, but you cannot control them nor change them. As for the other players, they are basically irrelevant. They have no impact, or should have no impact, on your play. That is both the beauty and the ugly of golf. You control how you play but you are also pretty much all alone with your head!

“So, when you play, don’t worry about the things you can’t control; focus on what you can, which basically is not so much what is happening but your response to what is happening.”

Perhaps a better understanding of our built-in mechanisms for handling threats can help you play better in tough situations. Among other things, we perceive the pressure of playing well or of winning as “threats”. Back in pre-historic days when humans were walking the Savannah, our brains helped protect us by firing up our nervous system whenever we felt threatened (primarily physical at that time).

This automatic response to a threat created the energy and activation of key physiological functions needed to fight or flee the threat. Today, we are still wired for this “fight-or-flight” response. Unfortunately, it also fires when there is no actual “physical” threat but a perceived one as in hitting out of the rough, slicing a drive, or making a key putt.

A certain level of energy and activation is essential. Without it, you would be lethargic and unmotivated to play well. The secret is not to have too much. This is where stress and energy management comes into play. The fastest and most direct route for you to gain control over key physiological functions like heart rate, respiration, and muscle tension, all of which affect your swing, is effective breathing. Most people do not breathe correctly, and under stress, their breathing pattern becomes even worse. Learn to breathe correctly for those moments when you need to calm yourself and regain control. Here are some tips:

- **Breathe slowly. Five seconds in (through your nose) and five seconds out (through your mouth).**

- **Breathe so your lower abdomen expands not your chest or shoulders.**
- **As you breathe, feel your muscles relaxing, any tension disappearing.**
- **Your breathing immediately affects your heart rate. And your heart connects to a number of other key functions that are subsequently also affected.**
- **It doesn’t take much tension to impact the muscles you use for hitting a golf ball, especially for putting.**
- **Practice the breathing often so it becomes routine. You can do this almost anywhere - sitting at your desk, in the car, etc.**

In my previous article in the Carolina Golf Journal, I discussed the impact of our thoughts on our play. In this article, I want to talk a little about emotion and the benefit or harm it can produce. Some people have suggested that good players play without emotion. Based on the way we are wired, that is virtually impossible. We have internal mechanisms whose entire job is to react emotionally to events. It’s not about being emotionless; it’s about keeping emotions in check, in balance.

One way to do that is to control your thoughts, what you think and say to yourself right after a shot, good or bad. Those thoughts trigger an emotional response as well. That emotional response then translates into a body response that can help or hurt your next shot. Control your thinking, control your emotions, and

you control your play. If for some reason the emotional reaction comes faster than your control, which can happen, then you trigger the relaxation response with the kind of breathing I have been discussing.

At this point you may be saying to yourself, "this sounds like a lot of work".

It isn't if you routinely practice some of these mental skills along with your game. How many times do you and your foursome stand around waiting to get on the tee or make the next shot? When that happens, what do you do? Talk about the last hole? Worry about what the guys or gals are thinking about your game? Deriding yourself for having missed such an easy putt? If you have time to do that, you certainly have time to do


something more productive. This is a perfect time to do your deep breathing, to calm yourself, to stay steady, to engage in deliberate positive self-talk that reinforces what you want to do next.

Here are some other tips to help you manage your stress responses which in golf directly impact swing, muscle tension and touch. Practice these regularly if you want them to become part of your game. Remember, if you don't have the mental game; you don't have a game!

- ***Know what you can and can't control; what you can't, you need to forget***
- ***Stress is about perception; reinterpret in a more productive way***
- ***Learn to self-regulate; you can learn to control involuntary stress reactions***
- ***Control thoughts & emotion immediately after an adverse event***

- ***Stress is cumulative; use it as in working out or lose it as in relaxation exercises***

Whether you are a professional golfer or a weekend player, the joy of playing comes from doing your best at your level of play. That means playing to the best of your ability. To do that, you must control those factors that pull you out of the best game of which you are capable. Those factors for the most part are all mental. Controlling your emotions and the physiological responses that accompany worrying and being anxious about your play will free you to play your best at the level you have trained for. Golf is the only sport I know you play primarily with your head!



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