



Louis S. Csoka, Ph.D.

APEX PERFORMANCE

Much has been written about golf from a scientific and technological perspective. Most of it has been about body position, swing techniques, correct motion, hi tech equipment and so on. This article, like the others to follow, is about your mind and golf. We often hear the expression "get your head in the game". Ever wonder what that really means? Have you ever asked after hearing it, "OK, how do I do that?" The solution is relatively simple; doing it is hard work. You must apply the same discipline, time and resources expended in developing your physical game to the development of your mental approach to playing golf.

There is a concept in psychology commonly referred to as the thought-performance relationship. It basically states that our performance is heavily influenced by our thoughts. In simple terms, our thoughts evoke certain emotions which then trigger a physiological response that directly affects what we do and how we perform. This sequence can go either well or badly, depending on the initial thought. For example, a negative thought like "there is that water again in front of the green" will evoke an emotional response like fear or frustration which then causes a battery of physiological responses like sweaty palms, tight muscles, and shallow breathing which all contribute to a less than ideal swing. Lo and behold, the ball goes in the water!

We Become What We Think About Most

by Louis S. Csoka, Ph.D.

In addition to the emotion, our thoughts also instantly create a "picture" in our mind, an image of what we are thinking. And, of course, if that image is of what you don't want to happen, you will do it. Let me explain. If, as you approach that hole with the water, you say to yourself "don't hit in the water", your mind will create an image of the ball going in the water. You see, our minds will automatically create a picture of only the action. It cannot include the "don't"! Solution? Always think and say to yourself the desired action, like "a nice shot to the right of the cup", then the picture will be the right one and it will help you execute it. This is one of the reasons it is so important to really control what you are thinking.

We all talk to ourselves! The question is "What are we saying?" When these self-talk phrases are repeated over and over again (like a closed loop), they become self-fulfilling prophesies, i.e. they come true! It's the way the brain works. It will take your thoughts and drive them into action. So whatever you "feed" it the most will end up being what you do the most. Here are some self-talk loops that any golfer has heard (or said) all too frequently.

- *I hate the wind. I never play well in the wind.*
- *I don't chip all that well and this is a bad lie.*
- *Don't leave the putt short, don't leave the putt short, don't...*
- *I'll probably slice the drive again.*

All these negative self-talk phrases do is create fear, hesitation and a lack of confidence which block any chance for

a good performance on the course. However, turn them around and they become your friend.

Let's look at confidence for a moment. Confidence is at the heart of all successful performance. But, there are a lot of misconceptions about confidence like, you have to be born with a lot of it; loud, cocky arrogance shows confidence; you must first succeed to be confident. None of these are true. Of course being successful helps boost confidence, but what about the times when you are involved in something where a clear signal of success comes much later. What keeps you going? This is where you apply positive, effective thinking. This is where you make self-talk work for you. You see, confidence comes from within. How you think about what is happening is more important than what is happening. If you think you can, you can. If you don't you won't! (Remember the Little Engine that could?!). The reason is that our response to any event will be primarily based on our interpretation of the event, not the event itself. Remember, your mind is racing at an incredible speed. Cognitive psychologists estimate that on the average, we have about 50,000 thoughts a day and 80% of them are negative. So, when you're playing golf, how much of that 80% is taken up by your game? You've got an uphill battle!

For example, if you think the earth is flat (circa 1492) then all your actions will be based on this belief, until someone thinks out of the box and proves otherwise (think Columbus). Same idea, more recently. In 1954, it was scientific and medical truth that the human body could not run a sub 4-minute mile. Then along came a young man by the name of Roger Bannister who proceeded to break


the 4-minute mile. What was even more fascinating is that within the next 8 months, others joined in the record breaking time. What changed? Not the track nor the shoes nor the clock. It was the belief that it could be done that changed.

So what does all this mean to the golfer? If you want to improve your game, get your head in it. The mental part of the game is more important in golf than perhaps in any other sport. To properly prepare, you must work on the mental side as well as the physical, especially the thinking part. Control what you are thinking and saying to yourself. Take charge of that little voice in your head and make it work for you. Here are some tips to help you get started:

- ***Be very aware of your self-talk. Intervene when it's negative. Practice it.***
- ***Play to your strengths. What are your good features? Think about them. What part of your game is strong? Leverage that for confidence.***
- ***Seek the company of positive individuals. If you're playing with folks who are very negative, you might consider a new foursome.***
- ***Surround yourself with inspirational material. It really does work. The brain takes it all in and through repetition, makes it permanent.***
- ***When faced with setbacks, focus on what you can change, ignore what you can't.***

The point of this entire article is that we do become what we think about most. You can't fight it. Our brains are wired to work like this. So increase your awareness of your thoughts and of your self-talk; change the negative to the positive, immediately and often. Ultimately, you are in charge. The one thing you have 100% control over when you're playing golf is what you are thinking. Make it work for you.

Louis Csoka, APEX Founder, has designed, developed, and implemented sports training with primary focus on peak performance mental skills. He has worked with teams and individual athletes in applying peak performance mental skills and advanced technologies as primary levers for achieving extraordinary results. Dr. Csoka's current engagements include work with exceptional golfers at the high school, collegiate and PGA levels, including Charlotte-based PGA Tour pro Johnson Wagner. COL (RET) Louis Csoka created, developed, and directed the U.S. Military Academy's first-ever Performance Enhancement Center. Col Csoka served for 21 years on the West Point faculty in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership.



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