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Establishing confidence is golfer's first concern

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Editor's note: This is another part in a series on the psychology of shooting low rounds by GolfWeb contributing writer Dr. Patrick J. Cohn. This article is based on his new book, *Going Low: How to Break Your Individual Scoring Barrier by Thinking Like a Pro (Contemporary Books)*.

By Patrick J. Cohn GolfWeb Contributor

John Huston is another player who can light it up and go low. At the 1998 United Airlines Hawaiian Open, he broke what was then the 72-hole scoring record with a 28-under-par 260 performance. Huston shot rounds of 63-65-66-66 to win by seven strokes, which was the largest margin of victory on the PGA TOUR in 1998. It broke a scoring record that had stood for 53 years. (Huston's record then was broken in 2001 by Joe Durant when he shot 29 under in the first four rounds of the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic.)

John Huston considers himself a "streaky" player, one who either plays great or plays mediocre. When he is on, as was the case in Hawaii, he can light it up and lap the field. Yet if he doesn't bring his "A" game to the course, he may miss the cut. This is a sign of a player whose mind is so powerful that he can lap the field when he's thinking well, but he can easily miss cuts when he is thinking poorly. John's career low round came at the 1996 Memorial Tournament when he shot a course-record 61, beating the next best score that day by four shots.

For most TOUR pros good scoring comes down to making putts. Many players hit it great from tee to green. The winner's check usually goes to the player who is draining putts. And when a player like John Huston starts draining putts early in the round, the confidence he gains helps him catch on fire. So making putts early is a key that helps most players catch momentum.

Huston said, "If you make two birdies early to get to a couple under par, then it feels like you can feed off of that. You've got a little bit of a cushion if you happen to make a bogey. I would say especially if you make a couple of good putts, there's nothing like seeing a putt go in, knowing that you can make some putts that day."

The most important feeling that helps Huston feel confident is the feeling of good rhythm in his swing and putting stroke early. Not all, but most "feel players" on TOUR rely on good feelings in their swing to be confident. Robert Damron, for example, feels confident when he has good rhythm in his swing before he goes to the first tee. He said, "Some mornings when you start warming up and you know you've got it, there's a good chance you could play well that day, confidence builds from that point...There are some days I will tell you 'look out' before I get on the first tee."

Huston, also a feel player, draws confidence early from good rhythm, which feeds his momentum. "I think the most important thing in golf is rhythm. You get into a nice rhythm with your putting stroke or your swing, then you just start feeling confident."

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Rhythm gives Huston that added confirmation that he is ready to hit good shots and make putts. It makes the game easier because he doesn't have to work at finding it.

"The key is to get the ball in play and give yourself opportunities at birdie. Then when you make a couple of putts, stay out of your own way," he said.

Most golfers will agree with this statement: To play well, you first must be confident in your ability to play, rather than wait to play well so you can be confident. The sport psychology adage, "first you must believe, before you can achieve" is certainly true for both amateur and professionals alike. This is a great definition of confidence but when it comes to confidence there are varying degrees of it.

Confidence is based on the strength on one's conviction to perform a task (i.e. hit a good shot). It can range from no confidence to complete confidence in any given task. The language you use to describe confidence is another way to look at the strength of your conviction.


I talk about four levels of confidence in my work. The first level is "maybe I can do this." The second is "I think I can do this." The third being "I know I can do this." And the fourth is "I will do this." Most amateurs fluctuate between the first two levels of confidence -- "maybe" and "I think I can" -- which are not as strong a belief as "I know" or "I will."

The most important catalyst to a great round is your belief in your golf skills and ability to score. How much do you believe it's possible to break 90, 80, 70, or whatever your personal threshold may be? Do you think about it often enough to make it become a reality? If you think you can break 90 for the first time, you have a better chance to do it.

Prepare yourself mentally by believing you can play well. David Duval doesn't wait until he hits a good shot or makes a birdie to feel confident. He takes confidence with him to the first tee, which gives him the best chance to succeed. You can feel confident by recalling past success (even if sparse or long-ago), using your experience, believing in your ability and picturing success. Recall one or two events from the past to make you feel confidence now -- such as a good round, a productive practice session or a stretch of holes where you played well.

Email your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com.

Editor's Note: For more information about going low, visit http://www.peaksports.com/golf/golf_books_goinglow.php3.

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