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Everyone's game should include course management

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Whether you carry a 2 or a 22 handicap, good course management is essential to getting the most out of your round.



Proof of Ernie Els' superb course management is in his 69.31 scoring average this year. (Allsport)

How do the pros manage the course? They use game plans for managing their course strategy. A golfer who has a good game plan and knows when to take risks will always beat the reckless golfer with no plan.

No game plan and poor course management will lead to high numbers. The best golfers in the world -- such as David Duval, Tiger Woods and Ernie Els -- develop a strategy or game plan for each round.

I tell my students a game plan has three steps. 1) Study the golf course. You can do this in a practice round or if you cannot play a practice round, by walking the golf course. 2) Setting a game plan. You do this during the practice round and before you start the tournament. It includes determining what clubs to hit off each tee, picking out targets on the course, and deciding when to lay up. 3) It is important to stick to your plan, but be flexible when necessary.

Let's discuss each part of developing a pro-like game plan:

1. Study the Tournament Course

Playing a practice round should already be part of your tournament preparation, and it's the start of developing a good game plan. Tour professionals always play one or more practice rounds before the tournament starts. The better tour caddies walk the course backwards before practice rounds to check distances in the yardage book, look for course changes, and determine the best approach shots. The practice round is the best time to decide on appropriate clubs used on the tees, select targets off the tees, and get to know the breaks in the greens.

I teach golfers to study the greens before the tournament starts. Course knowledge and experience on the greens are keys to reading greens correctly and making putts. Tour pros hit several putts on each green (and chips around the green) during practice rounds to become more familiar with the speed and undulations of the greens. If you have the time, hit several putts from different locations on the green -- uphill, downhill and across the green.

Here are some other areas I want my students to note during the practice round:

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- Check the accuracy of the golf course's yardage books.
- Record the distance from the tee box to fairway bunkers and the distance to carry fairway bunkers from the tee.
- Measure the distance to carry any bunkers that front the greens.
- Check the depth of each green so you can calculate the distance behind pins that are located on the back of the green.
- Calculate the distance you have to hit a lay-up shot on par-5 holes.
- Note any dogleg hole that turns abruptly, which might increase the chance of hitting a tee shot through the fairway.

2. Develop a Game Plan

Now that you have studied the course, the next step is to formulate a specific plan for playing the course. A game plan should be based on your golfing strengths and weaknesses.

I like game plans that keep you focused on the process and playing one shot at a time. Woods, for example, is a good driver of the ball and a good putter. His game plan is to focus on hitting fairways and greens, and playing one shot at a time.

It's a good idea to decide on a game plan before the round. Under tournament pressure, it's easy to make poor decisions and mental errors.

Also, playing within your abilities is important. This means playing shots that you can hit with no difficulty on the range. If you are a strong driver of the ball and a good putter, but not a great iron player, you may want to set a plan to hit the center of the greens on your approach shots. Below is a list of some game-plan variables to observe:

What's in the Game Plan?

- Record the clubs you hit on each hole in the practice round, wind direction and result.
- Pick out eye-catching targets beyond the fairway or green (for example, a top of a tall tree) that you can use during the tournament.
- Record the distance to the corner of the dogleg.
- Note the distance to the fat part of the fairway.
- Record the distance to stay short of fairway bunkers.
- Record the distance to carry greenside bunkers in yardage book.
- Examine the best spot on the green to putt from, given the possible pin locations for the tournament. Is the green sloped from back to front? Note the direction of the slope, grain and undulations.
- Record the green depth from front to back. Also, diagram the slope of the green and possible pin placements.
- Note the distance to carry the ball onto the top tier of any two-tiered greens.
- Note the firmness of the green and amount of roll after landing on the green.
- For par-5 holes, decide if the hole is a two- or three-shot hole. Make decisions for going for green in two.

The Goals of a Game Plan

A game plan can be as simple as selecting one or two goals you want to accomplish during a round of golf. For example, you might set a goal of hitting 9 of 14 fairways and 11 of 18 greens for the round.

As a sport psychologist, I also like players to include two mental goals for

the round. The mental goals usually relate to mental strategies you want to improve or implement. For example, if you find that you are getting lazy with selecting targets off the tee box, you might set a goal to pick a specific target on every tee shot. Here are some other examples of mental goals that I have used with my students:

- Make sure you visualize/feel every shot before addressing the ball.
- Be totally committed to the line you select for each putt.
- Stay focused on playing one shot at a time.
- Have patience with your putting after missing a putt.

3. Stick to the game plan but be flexible

Once you decide on how to play the course and have a game plan, it's show time.

Your game plan should be flexible because a course plays differently from the practice round to tournament day. The conditions of the course, weather, firmness of the greens and positions of the pins will probably change during the tournament. In 1997, Steve Jones shot 26-under par and won the Phoenix Open. His game plan was to give himself the best opportunity for birdie on each hole. Although he was playing well, he didn't just fire recklessly at every pin.

If you develop a smart game plan before you tee it up and execute the plan well, you will make better decisions on the course and, hopefully, take fewer strokes to get the ball in the hole.

Editor's note: This article was based on Cohn's new book *Peak Performance Golf: How Good Golfers Become Great Ones* (NTC/Contemporary). E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com.

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