

Dreams can come true: Mental approach for going low

Feb. 11, 2001

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Editor's Note: *This is the first part in a series on the psychology of shooting low rounds by GolfWeb contributing writer Dr. Patrick J. Cohn. In each article, Dr. Cohn will chronicle the career low rounds of PGA TOUR or LPGA Tour pros and discuss the mindset that helps players shoot low rounds. This article is based on Dr. Cohn's soon-to-be-released book, *Going Low: How to Break Your Individual Scoring Barrier by Thinking Like a Pro* (NTC/Contemporary Books).*

On the PGA TOUR, BUY.COM TOUR and LPGA Tour, players are shooting low rounds more often. Players shoot 62s and 63s almost every week. They are setting course records, and tournament records are falling.

In fact, Mark Calcavecchia recently shot 60 in the second round of the Phoenix Open and finished the week 28-under-par 256, which broke the 72-hole record held by Mike Souchak.

Why are players shooting such low scores today? Lower scores are due in part to improvements in equipment, course conditions and physical training. A factor that might not come to mind is the mental approach. Today's players have the mentality necessary for going low.

Golfers seem to be fascinated by players who have shot 59. Al Geiberger was the first player to shoot 59 in a PGA TOUR event when he won the 1977 Danny Thomas-Memphis Classic. Chip Beck recorded the second 59 in the 1991 Las Vegas Invitational by making birdie on the last three holes. David Duval shot 59 in the fifth round of the 1999 Bob Hope Chrysler Classic. In 1998, Doug Dunakey and Notah Begay III shot 59s playing on the BUY.COM TOUR.

Dreams can come true

As a child, Beck dreamed that someday he would shoot a 59 on the PGA TOUR. He said he will never forget his first lesson in low scoring -- watching his childhood teaching pro, Tony Evans, shoot 60 with pars on the last two holes. That gave Beck inspiration and hope that someday it would be possible to shoot 59. During the third round of the 1991 Las Vegas Invitational, Beck realized his dream. Making 13 birdies and no bogeys at Sunrise Golf Club, Beck became only the second player to shoot 59 on the PGA TOUR.

What were the mental keys to Beck's round? Psychological momentum and a premonition. Like other athletes, golfers thrive on momentum, such as when they make two birdies in a row and feel like they are riding a wave of confidence. For amateurs, momentum kicks in when they make a few solid pars, hole out a chip shot, or string together three solid holes.

Sometimes, all it takes for momentum to kick-start is a great shot or a long putt that falls. That's what happened to Beck. On the first hole of the third

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round of the Las Vegas Invitational, Beck sank a 40-foot putt for birdie. That gave him momentum from the start, and he kept it throughout.

Beck's quest for 59 started long before that third round in Las Vegas. About six months before the tournament, Beck's wife, Karen, had a premonition about him shooting 59. That put the idea in Beck's mind. The conversations he had with his wife about shooting a 59 settled well in his mind. He started thinking it was possible.

The events leading up to the tournament were instrumental in helping Beck prepare to shoot a low score. Ironically, other players at the Las Vegas Invitational made him think about feat. All week, including the night before his historic round, other TOUR players talked about how someone could easily shoot a 59 on the Las Vegas course.


"We knew the night before that it was very possible to shoot 59 on that golf course. My caddie was talking about it; we knew it," Beck said.

One thing is for sure, Beck believed in his skills enough to shoot 59. He had broken 60 in his mind before he shot the second 59 in PGA TOUR history.

Most amateur golfers don't have the confidence that they can break 90, 80 or 70 for the first time until they have actually done it. Mental barriers about scores and what they think is possible often handcuff golfers.

Future articles will explain how to remove the mental shackles and offer mental keys for going low.

E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com.

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