

The Mental Side of Golf

By [Patrick Cohn, Ph.D.](#)

Improving your focus on the course



Winning golf requires that you keep your focus...

"What was I thinking?" you mutter in frustration after you hit your shot over the green. You lost your focus temporarily, and it probably cost you a shot or two. Most players, at one time or another, blank out, become distracted, or are too stressed to concentrate. Even the greatest players in the world have trouble concentrating under pressure. The ability to concentrate is critical to successful performance in all sports, and especially in golf. During an average round, you spend less than 40 minutes actually playing your shots, which leaves more than three hours of downtime. In golf, it's hard to maintain concentration because you have to turn your concentration on and off several times during a round.



...no matter how interesting the scenery.

Total concentration is the ability to immerse yourself in a task without becoming distracted or pulled off task. Skilled players like Norman and Ballesteros talk about concentration as a state of "flow," being "in a bubble," or "in a cocoon," during which nothing can penetrate their focus. Concentration involves several elements. These include knowing what cues to focus on; staying focused on those relevant cues; keeping a narrow and external focus; being able to shift attention; refocusing when distracted; and controlling your thought process. Below, I discuss specific methods for improving your concentration on the course.

1. **Focus on the present moment.** To play your best, you must keep your mind in the present moment, focused on the requirements of the task at hand. One of the biggest errors you can make is thinking ahead about the results of making or missing a shot or putt, or thinking about what happened on the last hole. You must be aware of when you lose your focus, and then refocus attention on what you need to do to execute a good shot.

2. **Think only about that one shot.** To help you stay focused in the present, think about playing one shot at time. Separate that one shot from the rest and try to look at it as a game in itself. You don't want to be thinking about the 220-yard drive you must hit to carry the pond on the last hole when you are hitting your putt on number 10.
3. **Focus on performance cues.** A preshot routine focuses your attention by giving you specific performance cues to follow as you prepare for a shot. If you don't have a routine, your mind wanders aimlessly as you prepare to hit your shot or putt. Your routine should help you assess the conditions, help you with shot and club selection, and narrow your focus on the task. Your routine also locks your mind into the cues that you must focus on to execute your shot, such as your set-up, aim, and target. If you have trouble focusing on execution, it's time for you to develop a specific preshot routine.
4. **Relax your focus while you wait.** I don't know too many people who can focus for four hours straight. It is important to be ready to play when it is your turn, but you don't want to grind on or overanalyze your next shot. You also don't want to tax your concentration before it's time to play your shot. Once you select a club for your shot, relax your focus and save your concentration for the shot. Focusing intensely on your shot while you wait stresses your ability to concentrate when it's time to play.
5. **Use a warm-up routine.** All good players use a warm-up ritual starting about one hour before tee-off to help them focus their mind for play. Most Tour players start their warm-up on the practice tee after stretching. After that, they go to the green to get a feeling for the speed of the green. They finish by hitting some chip shots or bunker shots. A warm-up routine allows players to start to focus for a match, similar to a runner who has a stretching routine before a run, or a pilot who has a checklist before take-off.
6. **Cue yourself to concentrate.** Often it is hard to get focused for a shot when you hit your last shot 10 minutes ago. You must lock in your concentration once it is your turn to play. To help you click in, try using a physical trigger to focus your mind, such as tightening the Velcro on your glove before starting. At this point you want to turn your attention to preparation and execution for the shot, and if anything else enters your mind, let it pass through.
7. **Rehearse your shot while you wait.** If you have trouble refocusing after a long delay, try rehearsing your shot while you wait to play. For putting, imagine the line of the putt given what you have seen thus far. Physically take a couple practice swings and then "see" the ball rolling along your line into the hole. When it's your turn to actually putt, it will be second nature.

[Note: Parts of this article were selected from *The Mental Game of Golf: A Guide to Peak Performance*, by Dr. Patrick J. Cohn.]

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