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Jitter bug: Overcoming the first tee

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It does not matter if you are playing in the U.S. Open or for a club championship, the first tee jitters can ruin a golfer's rhythm and first good tee shot. Hitting any drive is tough enough, but it becomes even moreso when it's your first shot of the day and you think everyone in the clubhouse is watching. The first tee shot can often make or break a round because it sets up your performance on the first hole, which can have a bearing on your attitude and score on the opening holes.

Starting each round, you can experience two different types of jitters. The first is the friendly kind of butterflies characterized by excitement and anticipation. This is a good feeling of anticipation of the start of the round. You feel excited to play and ready to get going. These butterflies can help you play better by getting you focused. You feel ready, adrenalin is flowing, and your focus becomes more acute. The pros often experience this type of butterflies and interpret them as an instrumental part of golf.

The second kind of jitters are the type that makes you have a sinking feeling in the pit of your gut. Your mind races, heart rate accelerates, palms sweat, muscles tighten, blood pressure increases, and you get an uncomfortable feeling in your stomach. In addition, you worry about topping the first shot or hitting it in the woods. If you feel "anxious" jitters, your performance suffers because it makes you physically tense and cripples the ability to focus. Some golfers feel this when they are afraid to hit a bad shot, become embarrassed, or are afraid of losing the match on the first hole. Once you experience "anxious" jitters, you become obsessed with the uncomfortable feelings, which distract you from what you need to focus on.

The first kind of jitters is helpful to your performance and you need to embrace them because they will help you focus and give you the energy to hit a good drive. The second kind of jitters can be detrimental to your game. If you experience "bad" jitters, the first step is to address your fears. What are the possible fears a player might undergo before hitting the first tee shot?

- Fear of embarrassment -- don't want to look stupid in front of others.
- Fear of hitting a bad shot -- don't want to get off to a bad start.
- Fear of losing the match -- afraid to lose the game to a rival.
- Fear of not playing up to your own expectations -- tired of the frustration from not achieving your capabilities.
- Fear of not being respected as a golfer -- worry about how other will perceive you as a person and golfer.

As you can tell, most fears about the first tee shot come from worry about what other people think about you or your concerns about playing poorly. I

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would prefer that you adopt a more rational philosophy to dispute your own, often irrational, fears. For example, tackle your fears by telling yourself that one shot is not going to make others judge you or your golf game. What's the worst thing that can happen if you hit a bad shot in front of a friend? A true friend will still be one regardless of hitting one poor tee shot.

First, try to put your fears aside and focus on something more pleasant. Keep your mind distracted from the first tee shot until it's your turn to hit. Relax and talk with your playing buddies before it's the group's time to tee off.


Here are some other ideas for battling the jitters. Use what works best for you:

- Know that first tee nerves are part of golf. Interpret them as a way of getting you focused for the first tee shot and giving you the shot of adrenaline you need. This is how the pros look at first tee nerves. Focusing too much on the uncomfortable feelings only heightens the tension. Don't bring more attention to the knot in your stomach or a rapid heart beat when you feel the unfriendly jitters. Shift your attention to your game plan and how you should play the first hole. You have several options to prepare yourself for the first tee shot.
- Visualize the shot you want to hit. Feel a smooth swing as you take a couple practice swings and visualize the ball flying to your target. This helps instill confidence and focuses you on execution instead of "what if I top my first tee ball?"
- Relax and talk with your playing partners. Take your mind off the first tee shot. Some players work themselves into a state of anxiety as they stand around and do nothing while waiting to hit their first shot. Keep your mind occupied with other thoughts. When it's your turn to hit, don't rush your routine. Take your time to go through the routine and visualize a good shot.
- Reconfirm your goals for the day to help you focus on the process. Write down your goals on your scorecard or on something you can see. I've created cue cards for professional players I've worked with as a reminder to focus on their goals for the day. They keep the goals in their yardage book and every time they open it, the cue card "focus on the process" is directly in sight as a reminder.
- If you are the person that gets too anxious to pull the trigger, try some simple relaxation exercises before it's your turn to hit. Take a few deep breaths through the abdominal region. As you inhale, shrug your shoulders to your ears. As you exhale, drop your shoulders and release the tension. Tighten and release your grip on the club to prevent the "death grip." You want to release the tension in your hands, arms, and shoulders before you address the ball.
- Lastly, focus on execution and hitting the fairway. You can't make birdie (or bogey) on the first shot. Ask yourself, "What do I need to do to hit a good shot?" The answer will provide you with the appropriate task-relevant cues. Pick your target, see the shot you want to hit, feel the shot with a practice swing, aim and align, and focus on your target.

Above all else, take your time and don't hurry the first tee shot to "get it over with," which is a natural response to worry and anxiety. This will only make you swing faster. Remember to aim at a specific target in the fairway, rather

than aim at the fairway. Pace yourself by walking up to the ball with the confidence that you can hit a solid shot. Make sure your mind and eyes are focused on the target, not the trees or hazard. Focus on the feeling of a smooth swing you ingrained with your practice swings.

Note: This article is based on Dr. Cohn's new book, *Peak Performance Golf: How Good Golfers Become Great Ones* by Contemporary Books. Email your questions to Dr. Cohn at DocCohn@aol.com

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