

The Mental Side of Golf

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Keys to entering "the zone"

Your confidence was tremendous; you felt no one could beat you that day. You could make any shot you wanted. You were so engrossed into playing each shot that you were oblivious to your playing partners and the passage of time transcended normal laws.

After everything went well on the course, you realized you were "in the zone".

Your swing seemed so easy and effortless, the club an extension of yourself. Never before did you feel so in control of yourself and your emotions. It was so fun to execute each shot as envisioned. Only after the round did you realize that you played the best round of your life, and were "in the zone".

Moments such as these are what golfers play for, but they are rare in golf. At one time you probably played in the zone even if it was only for a few holes. This is when your mind and body work in harmony to produce optimal performance.

It's impossible to force yourself into the zone, but you can create a mind-set that helps you enter the zone more frequently.

The following is a list of seven elements to entering the zone and playing better golf that come from my work and study with Tour Professionals.

1. Do You Believe?

Believing that you are a good player and you can hit good shots are preconditions to playing well. It's rare when you play well without self-confidence. Self-confidence is

your belief about how well you can play or how good your skills are.

Confidence develops from physical practice, playing well in the past, trusting your mechanics, and knowing you are physically talented. The key is to understand how you gain confidence and then work on the areas in your game you can control that lead to greater confidence.

2. Can You Totally Focus?

The ability to totally focus on the task is critical to peak performance in any sport. Most of us can concentrate well, but do you know what to focus on? Total focus means thinking about the requirements of the shot and only the shot. It also means playing one shot at a time and not getting ahead of yourself.

Many amateurs lose focus by thinking ahead or thinking about what just happened. Know the performance cues you should focus on and be aware when you are not focused on them.

3. Are You Zoomed In?

Focused attention is another characteristic of playing in the zone. Your attention varies from broad to narrow, and you need both to play well. During shot-making, your attention starts broad as you assess all the factors that influence club and shot selection and then narrows as you engage with a specific target.

To play in the zone you must be able to narrow your focus when needed. You play your best golf when you can narrow your focus on one thought or object during execution such as your target or swing cue.

When you develop a strong memory of the swing, it then feels effortless.

4. Can You Put Your Swing on Auto-Pilot?

The feeling of an automatic and effortless swing is another mental state associated with the zone. First, you have to learn how to swing and then "groove" that swing so you can rely on memory.

When you develop a strong memory pattern of the swing, it then feels effortless. This allows you to put you swing on auto-pilot -- you don't have to think about how to swing -- it just happens. Instead, you can think about the shape of a shot or the flight of the

ball.

5. Do You Stay in Control?

Most of the time golfers battle themselves on the golf course. But when playing in the zone, golfers feel very much in control of themselves and their performance. We know that too much excitement (or over-arousal) causes you to tense-up and steer your shots.

Likewise, becoming angry or frustrated is also damaging. Golf requires a balanced emotional level. The key is to be excited to play, but not cross the line into anxiety and fear. Excitement helps you play better, but fear and anxiety ruin your game. To find your optimal level of arousal, compare your level of arousal during your best and worse performances.

6. Are You Thinking Clearly?

A clear and decisive mind is also important to playing in the zone. How often have you been "stuck" between clubs when selecting a club, and you couldn't put a good swing on the ball? The clearer you are about what you want to do and how you will achieve it, the more decisive you can be.

When you introduce doubt or indecision about club selection, target, or set up, you send mixed signals to your body. This means it is important for you to have a clear picture or thought of what you want to do with a shot, and be resolute with that thought on each shot.

7. Can You Have Fun?

Let's face it, when you play well, it's fun. Golf is a game and it should be intrinsically rewarding. This means enjoying golf for the pure sake of playing without it being dependent on rewards like praise or money.

It's easy to enjoy golf when you're playing well, but the challenge is to have fun when not playing well. Learn to have fun on the golf course when playing good or bad. You will have a better experience and play better golf.

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