

Pass or fail: Learning how to make the grade

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It's baaaaack!

Thousands of golfers are now chasing their dream at PGA TOUR Qualifying School. The first stage of qualifying is concluding this week.

Most qualifiers have to start at ground zero and get a passing grade at one of the 13 qualifying sites at first stage before moving on to second stage. Some TOUR veterans (depending on status and 2000 money rank) are allowed to start at one of the six qualifying sites at second stage. Others are exempt right into the Q-school finals at PGA West in LaQuinta, Calif., such as the players who finish Nos. 125-150 on the TOUR money list in 2000.

A golfer who is playing well during this fall fiesta of qualifying can change his life forever with a successful showing at the final party. As a sport psychologist helping my students get on TOUR, I am familiar with the pressure some players feel during qualifying. You will see a mixed bag of players at TOUR school. Some PGA TOUR veterans are clawing their way back to full-time playing status, while other players are trying to earn a spot on either the BUY.COM TOUR or PGA TOUR.

The goal for TOUR school rookies or golfers who have yet to succeed is to have their games peak at Q-school and be as mentally prepared as possible. This is where I help players.

To get a passing grade, each player has to pass the mental challenges of TOUR school so he can get the most out of his ability level. Handling stress or adversity is part of golf, but nothing comes close to the perceived pressures felt by players who are banking on a TOUR card. I teach a basic concept: A player must first be in control of one's performance before he can control himself or his emotions. So what are some of the rookie mistakes that cause players to flunk out during qualifying?

Fear of Failure

Anxiety, tension, and fear are just a few of the emotions a player feels when he is afraid he might fail and not realize a longtime dream.

Negative Thinking

Now is the time that doubt will rear its ugly head and distract golfers from focusing on playing golf.

Avoidance Golf

Some rookie players may get caught in the trap of trying not to screw up or trying to avoid mistakes. Have you ever made a 20-footer while thinking about avoiding a three-putt?

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Irrational Thoughts

Some players sabotage their games before they tee it up with irrational thoughts such as "I haven't played well in TOUR school before. I don't see why I should play well this time around."

Expectations Trap

It's hard to play your best golf when you internalize and try and live up to the expectations that others have for you.

What's the remedy for players who get caught in a web of anxiety and irrational beliefs? I don't have one formula for helping every player mentally prepare and perform well at TOUR school because everyone is different. I treat each of my students differently depending on their personality and mental challenges. However, I do teach a few basic lessons to help players cope with the mental challenges of TOUR school:

Keep Emotions in Check

Why is it that some players fold under pressure and others thrive on it? This has a lot to do with how a player focuses under stress and what they focus on. A player cannot focus on what it means to qualify and what comes from successfully qualifying. They can't interpret the tournament as the biggest in their career. It's best to keep things simple by focusing on playing another round of golf.

Focus on Execution

Players have to play one shot at a time and focus on what it takes to hit a good shot. The best golfers in the world are able to focus only on the shot they are hitting -- whether it's a putt to win the tournament or the first shot of the event. Good results flow from focusing on what you need to do in the present moment.

Play without Expectations

It's OK for players to believe they can win, but high expectations are a form of self-sabotage. I want my students to play without expectations of what score they should shoot or how well they should hit the ball and putt. I want them to put aside the expectations of others close to them. Instead, focusing on simple goals such as the number of fairways hit per round is a better alternative.

Replace Doubt with Confidence

This is not the time to question one's ability. Confidence is too important at this stage. Don't allow excuses to fail -- turn them into reasons to succeed and play well. Confidence is huge in any sport but when the pressure is on it can be a very reassuring feeling to know you are going to play well instead of hoping you can play well. I want my students to focus on the reasons to be confident in their ability.

Be the Intimidator


First-timers can't allow other players or the golf course intimidate them. They need to act, feel and believe they belong on TOUR. A player must also use his strengths to attack the golf course by sticking to his pre-designed game plan.

Avoid Distractions

Distractions are plentiful at TOUR school -- especially at the second and final stages. Agents, media, equipment reps and friends and family all are competing for the attention of players. A smart player avoids the hoopla and focuses on playing good golf instead of negotiating with agents and equipment reps.

Every player deals with the stress of TOUR school in different ways; some better than others. The golfer who has the toughness to pass the mental challenges of TOUR school will be closer to getting a TOUR card for 2001.

Note: Email your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com.

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