



Patrick Cohn

The Mental Side of Golf

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

Making the switch to target golf

As you stand motionless over the ball, you run through a checklist of what you should remember about a good swing. You feel frozen and can't pull the trigger--too much information to assimilate. Your overanalysis is causing paralysis. When you finally swing, you stick the club in the ground and hit your shot fat. It's frustrating because you know you can't try any harder. Maybe the answer is trying less?

Oftentimes players get lost in the mechanics of their swing and lose sight of the goal in golf--to hit the target and get the ball in the hole. Players must understand the swing and have the discipline to practice and groove the swing. But players must also learn to trust what they practice and play target golf, not mechanical golf. Both activities are important for you to reach your potential.

Most golfers know how to work on the swing. They are good at practicing the swing. But to play your best golf, you have to let it happen and play target golf. Playing target golf means forgetting about how to get the ball to the target and trust what you practice. That's why you practice--to develop an effortless and automatic swing. Here are some keys for helping you make the switch from mechanical golf to target golf:

1. **Simplify your preshot routine.** A good preshot routine focuses your attention on execution and target and it should help you play target golf. A 20-step routine is not effective--it leads to overanalysis. Simplify the steps in your routine, especially as they get closer to pulling the trigger. Narrow it down to only one swing cue. Don't try to force it to happen.
2. **Trust your method.** A key to playing target golf is the ability to trust your method. If you do not have faith in your method, it's hard to trust your swing or stroke. If you believe in your method, it is easier for you to have confidence in your swing and then trust that you will hit the target.
3. **Focus on a target, not your swing.** An external focus is critical to trusting your swing and playing target golf. That is how you are able to react to a target. Don't think about how to swing.

To release conscious control of the swing, focus on a target, the shape of the shot, or an image of a good shot. The last thought should be on your target or where you want the ball to finish.

4. **Image is everything.** Our bodies interpret and perform better when we use images or feeling to relay information. We use verbal instructions to learn a new skill as we give ourselves commands during the swing. Soon the player has to quiet the verbal commands and focus on playing target golf. Translate the verbal instructions, such as "take the club back in one piece," into a feeling or image of the movement during the practice swing.
5. **Practice playing target golf.** Like any other part of the game, you have to practice playing target golf. Practice just looking at the target and swinging from instinct. Spend 40% of your time practicing target golf. Trust and confidence develop from learning how to play target golf on the range first. Then you can transfer what you learn to the course.

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