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## Mental attitude is key to going low

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**Editor's Note:** *This is part four in a series by GolfWeb contributing writer Dr. Patrick J. Cohn in which he discusses the psychology that helps PGA TOUR and LPGA Tour players shoot career low rounds. This article is based on his new book, *Going Low: How to Break Your Individual Scoring Barrier by Thinking Like a Pro (Contemporary Books)*.*

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**By Patrick J. Cohn**  
**GolfWeb Contributor**

Notah Begay III was the first BUY.COM TOUR player to shoot 59. Begay's round consisted of nine birdies, two eagles and no bogeys.

Begay said he believes that most pro golfers are technically capable of shooting 59.



**Notah Begay III has four career PGA TOUR victories.** (Allsport)

"But that's not the hard part," Begay said. The problem starts when players "get in their own way." He said that when playing well, the hardest thing to do is let yourself play. "It's the mental struggle to get out of your own way and let things happen. You don't get many days like that in your life, so when it does happen, you just acknowledge it and go with the flow."

Begay etched his name in the golf books with a 59, but more importantly, he found

the confidence he needed to play well the rest of the year. He qualified for the PGA TOUR by finishing 10th on the 1998 BUY.COM TOUR. In 1999, Begay won two PGA TOUR events and finished inside the top 30 on the money list.

A fundamental mindset to going low is thinking you have the ability to go low. Begay believes he can shoot a 58 or 57 during his career. Having the confidence to go low is necessary. If you have never broken 90, 80, 70 -- or whatever your personal barrier might be -- that number becomes a mental hurdle or a personal 'record' for you to break. You can only do so by mentally defining this achievement as a valid possibility.

Begay broke away from the limitations of a comfort zone, which was discussed in previous articles. Begay is no stranger to shooting low scores. In college, he shot a record 10-under-par (62) during an NCAA Tournament in McKinney, Texas, to help Stanford win the 1994 NCAA title. He knew one day he would shoot a 59 in competition and that it was only a matter of time.

Begay said, "I've never been short of confidence. I think I can shoot 58 some day. Records are made

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to be broken, aren't they?"

His goal starting the second round of the BUY.COM Dominion Open was to make the cut and get to play on the weekend. Seven holes into the second round he was just 2-under par for the day and 4 under for the tournament. He knew a strong back nine would ensure that he would make the cut.

"I made a 30-footer on eight and two-putted for birdie on nine. So, I get to 6 under for the tournament then I switched from making the cut to getting into contention. I eagled 10, birdied 11 and aced 12. So I went from 4 to 9 under in just three holes."

Begay wasn't used to the pressure of being in contention to win a professional golf tournament, but he handled it very well.

"Walking off the 12th green, I wasn't thinking 'Oh God, just get (me) to the clubhouse.' I was thinking about going low," Begay said. "I didn't care where the ball went. I just tried to hit it as hard as I could and make another birdie."

A smart player realizes he has to go with the flow when in the midst of a low round and ride it all the way to the clubhouse.

"When you get (in the groove), you get out of your own way and allow yourself to become a free spirit," Begay said.

He knows, like other pros, that when shooting 7- or 8-under par you must keep going and not play conservatively. As Begay settled in over the shot, the greens seemed to enlarge; he focused on rhythm and balance and just cocked and swung.

"When you know you're in that zone, kick it while it's down," Begay said. "Every golfer who has ever played the game knows that it will kick you when you're down."

Unlike top TOUR pros, amateurs stop themselves short of reaching scoring milestones because they lack confidence. For example, if you label yourself as a 90 plus player, then that label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, which prevents you from breaking 90 when you are in the midst of a good round.

One behavior that prevents you from developing confidence and a positive self-image is when you "disqualify the positive." Downplaying achievements is often a side effect of perfectionism. Perfectionists are very hard on themselves. Even small successes are not recognized as a positive step because they demand so much from themselves. It's very difficult to strengthen confidence if you can't take pride and reward yourself for small achievements or reaching even modest goals.

Begay has the confidence to believe it's possible to shoot a low number every day he plays, but he doesn't expect it to happen every day. He understands that too many outside factors or intangible elements affect one's day-to-day performance. His confidence is certainly a reflection of his past ability to go low, but it's also a reflection of his self-image as a golfer.

"I think it's possible to shoot a low number anywhere," Begay said. "I'm still looking for that 57. It's out there, I know it's out there."

He had an 8-foot birdie putt at No. 9, his last hole, to shoot 59. Standing behind the putt, he said to himself, "This is what you practice for, this is what you work for. Let's go get a piece of history."

**Editor's Note:** *E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at [pcohn@peaksports.com](mailto:pcohn@peaksports.com). For more information about going low, visit [http://www.peaksports.com/golf/golf\\_books\\_goinglow.php3](http://www.peaksports.com/golf/golf_books_goinglow.php3).*

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