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Part III: The psychology of going low

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Editor's Note: This is part three in a series on the psychology of shooting low rounds by GolfWeb contributing writer Dr. Patrick J. Cohn in which he discusses the mindset 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).

By Patrick J. Cohn
GolfWeb Contributor

Some TOUR golfers thrive on the feelings they have about playing at their home course and play well. How do some golfers excel with the pressure of everyone they care about watching and urging them on while other players succumb to fear of failure and embarrassment in the same situation?

It has a lot to do with experience, having been in that situation a hundred times before. A player's attitude also has a lot to do with it. Great golfers, such as [Tiger Woods](#), raise their performance to a higher level when playing in front of hometown fans and family. The added incentive, adrenaline high and excitement of friends and family watching stoke their competitive fires, helping them peak their focus and go deeper into the zone. I call this the cheerleading effect in golf.

I recently sat down with [Mark Calcavecchia](#) at THE PLAYERS Championship to discuss his career low 60 at the 2001 Phoenix Open. Why do golfers play well at home, such as Mark Calcavecchia in the 2001 Phoenix Open? They love playing for hometown fans and feel they have an advantage over the competitors when playing on a familiar course. "It's almost like you want to play extra well because you have all your friends and family and everyone else out there watching. A lot of guy's play good at home," Calcavecchia said.

Calcavecchia said he believes that you get an edge by knowing how to read putts on familiar greens. "I think greens are tricky to read, and you've seen over the years a lot of the Phoenix guys play good there because we have more rounds in than the other guys, and it seems to me some of the other guys have trouble reading the greens. I get on the greens, I am just comfortable. I know what the reads are, and when you are confident standing over a 10-footer and you know what it's going to do, it's easier to hit a good putt."

As many golf fans know, Calcavecchia's game is either hot or cold: he is firing on all cylinders or he is misfiring. There is not much middle ground when it comes to his performance. When he is on a roll and putting well, few players are better than Calcavecchia at going low. He confesses that his tendency to be impatient when not playing well is probably what's held him back from being a better player. "I am just an emotional player. Probably what's held me back through the years from being better than I actually was is because I am just an emotional player. I play by feeling. When I am doing well, I am happy, when I am struggling, I don't think that well and I am

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impatient."

But during the second round of the 2001 Phoenix Open, he found emotional bliss while shooting a career low 60 and he went on to shoot a TOUR record 28 under for the week.

"I was surprised I did a great, great job of not getting in my own way and just let myself keep going, and that's hard to do," he said.

What's the mindset or formula that allowed Calcavecchia to shoot 60 at Phoenix? Support of hometown fans, familiarity with the course, momentum, positive emotion, ability to stay aggressive, and not paying attention to score were all factors that helped him go low. He got off to a good start and had momentum on his side, which he believes helps him go low.

The challenge, though, is to keep a good round going -- as many golfers know -- to keep the momentum on your side for 18 holes. "A lot of times you see a guy shoot 5 or 6 under on the front and then he'll shoot even on the back. It's hard to keep the round going. It's hard to sustain ... you know something goes wrong or you get a bad bounce you know you flag an iron shot and it buries in the face of the bunker ... invariably little things that happen that slow you down."

When a golfer goes low on the front nine and fails to match it on the back nine, the little voice inside says: "don't screw this round up and blow your lead." Amateurs have the same problem with their own comfort zones. They start to play better than expected and then play defensively coming down the stretch, which usually leads to a bogey, double bogey, bogey finish.

Calcavecchia found a zone during the Phoenix Open: "It was almost as if I was in a cloud or I was in a haze where I really wasn't worried about anything. My swing felt great, I did not have to worry about it."

But as he said, if you knew how to get into the zone every time you played, everyone would play in the zone. That's the elusive part of the mental game that golfers are always chasing. You can't make yourself get into the zone, but you can set the conditions mentally for it to happen more often.

Calcavecchia, like Joe Durant when he shot 61 at the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic, didn't know how well he was playing. "I didn't even know how many under I was because I was just so focused on trying to birdie every hole and if I didn't I was going to try to birdie the next hole," said Calcavecchia. Not paying attention to score seems to be an overriding theme that helps players go low.

The issue of comfort seems to be instrumental in helping Calcavecchia get into the zone. When several factors come together, it's easier to focus on the process of playing golf without distraction. "You know it was just a comfort thing, I slept well, I wasn't nervous in the morning, I was comfortable. I was never in a hurry to do anything. I wasn't in a hurry to get out to the course, I wasn't antsy. While signing the autographs, the people weren't bothering me. Nothing was bothering me," he said. His attitude off the course definitely helped him get into the zone focus. Those times when something is bothering you in your life and you take those worries to the golf course is when you can't get into a zone focus.

Score was not an issue that day until the last three holes when he realized he had his best chance ever to shoot 59. "The zone I was in was so good honestly I didn't know how many under I was on my third to last hole I had to actually stop to figure it out. I thought, 'Well I have to birdie the last three

holes to shoot 59,' so that was a different kind of thinking, so the idea was to be aggressive. I wanted to give it all I had even if I would have bogeyed that hole, I wouldn't have been mad because I was thinking about going after it instead of just holding on and doing something stupid."

Unlike Joe Durant when he shot 61 this year, Calcavecchia did not have the need to be patient. Durant said that patience helps you from being over-aggressive and making a mistake when you are on fire. But Calcavecchia's game is all about being aggressive when he is on fire -- he wants to take advantage of the moment and his positive emotions. "I didn't have to be patient because everything was going so well. I missed an easy 8-footer on hole No. 2 and by the time I walked off the green, I had completely forgotten about it -- it didn't irritate me in the least. I didn't have to think about being patient that week."

Watch out when Calcavecchia doesn't need patience. He may lap the field.

Editor's Note: E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com. For more information about *Going Low*, visit: http://www.peaksports.com/golf/golf_books_goinglow.php3

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