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Q-school success requires strong mental game

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By Patrick J. Cohn
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The PGA TOUR National Qualifying Tournament concluded recently with many golfers trying to achieve a life dream of playing on the PGA TOUR and others trying to get back on the PGA TOUR. To qualify, many golfers advanced in three stages of qualifying or a total of 14 pressure-packed rounds. About 1,000 golfers teed it up at first stage this year and approximately one-third of those players advanced to the six regional, second-stage sites around the country along with players who are exempt into second stage. Out of 468 players at second stage, only 120 or so golfers advanced to the 156-man field at Finals, where 36 earned spots in 2002.

Many golfers gear their games up for the fall qualifying hoping to peak out when TOUR school season arrives. But the depth of good players makes qualifying very competitive and it becomes harder each year to retain or attain a playing card on the PGA TOUR. You always will see a mix of players at q-school: Some TOUR veterans are clawing their way back to full-time playing status, while rookies are trying to earn a spot on either the BUY.COM TOUR or the PGA TOUR for the first time.

A golfer not only needs to have his swing in shape, but his mental game must also be up for the challenge and this is where I come in. Most players at this level can hit the ball well from tee to green, but it is the mental challenges of q-school that a player must survive to get a passing grade. Playing with competitive pressure is part of golf, but nothing compares to the perceived pressures felt by players who are striving for a life-long goal.

I teach players how to handle the pressure of q-school. A player must be in control of his attitude and emotions to play his best. What are some of the rookie mistakes that cause players to flunk out during qualifying?

***Focusing on results:** Thinking too much about results brings in anxiety, tension, and fear into a player's mind.

***Doubting ability:** Any doubts can fester into a lack of self confidence during times of pressure.

***Playing over-protective golf:** Some rookie players may get caught in the trap of trying to avoid mistakes, which is the opposite of a success approach. Have you ever made a 20-footer while trying not to three-putt?

***Self-limiting expectations:** Some players sabotage their games before they tee it up with self-sabotaging expectations such as "I can't make any mistakes, or I'll fail."

***Thinking about target scores:** Too many golfers focus on what number it will take to qualify instead of thinking about how to play well on each shot.

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The seasoned professional will know not to get caught in these mental mistakes to play his best. But for the q-school rookie, he might get mentally trapped and not perform up to his ability. How does a young or inexperienced player deal with the mental challenges of q-school? Here are some important points:

*The first mental key is to focus on the process of playing each shot. It's all about execution, not results. Players who think too much about the results (score, qualifying, etc.) are only distracting themselves from the real challenge -- to play each shot to the best of his ability. Good results flow from focusing on what you need to do in the present moment. You can't make birdie on the first tee shot -- the only thing you can do is hit the ball at your target in the fairway and whatever you need to do to execute a good shot.

As I discussed in my new book *Going Low*, a player must root out self-limiting expectations and generalizations to play his best. I ask players to play without expectations of what is or is not a good score or how well they should putt or strike the ball. The formula I use is to play with no expectations, high confidence, and set manageable goals. Goals you strive for, expectations set yourself up for failure.

*Have a system for dealing with doubt and adversity. This is not the time to question one's ability. Any doubt or excuses why it's OK to fail must be turned into a positive. I ask players to identify what their typical doubts are and have a coping statement ready to use to turn it around and stay confident. A player must anticipate and be ready to handle any adversity that comes along so he can react with confidence and composure.

*Stay composed no matter what happens. A player cannot afford getting upset emotionally and having it impact his play on the next shot, hole or round. Some golfers are naturally laid back and nothing bothers them, but I often work with golfers who ruin their chances by letting frustration and temper control themselves. I use a system for helping golfers get back on track when they get upset called the Three R's: Recognize, Regroup and Refocus.

*Have a game plan for playing the golf course. Any golfer should use a game plan for attacking the golf course. A game plan allows you to have good course management and play smart golf. A game plan should balance both conservative and bold shots at the right times. The smart golfer assesses the risk-reward ratio on every shot when making decisions. Smart golf includes three areas -- playing a practice round, setting a game plan and sticking to a game plan.

*Play for success instead of playing to avoid failure. Golfers who have ready-made excuses to play poorly set themselves up for failure before they tee it up. In addition, trying not to make mistakes on the course is a protective way to play golf, which leads to mistakes. A golfer who strives for success focuses on where he wants to hit the ball, has a positive plan for each shot or putt, and does not think about negative consequences of his actions.

Editor's Note: *Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D. is the author of Going Low: How to Break Your Individual Scoring Barrier. E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com.*

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