

The Mental Side of Golf

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

Q-School: A study in stress

One week of gut-wrenching-throw-up-before-each-round pressure-packed golf--that's the [PGA Tour Qualifying School](#) (Q-School as the players call it). I've helped players qualify for the PGA Tour. I've also helped players deal with the frustration of failing at tour school. It is unlike any other event in professional golf. PGA Tour hopefuls and PGA Tour veterans have only one week--six straight days of competition--to qualify for the tour or earn their tour card back. Most of the players practice and play the entire year with the aim of peaking at tour school. A player can hack it around all year on the mini-tours, but play well one week and gain a tour card. Or a player can play great all year and lose his game during the most important week of the year. One thing is for sure, every player dreads the thought of going to Q-School.



Allen Doyle mastered his anxieties well enough to share medalist honors at this year's Q-School.

Why is so difficult to play one week of golf? The stakes are high for the pros--that one week may change a player's career and life forever. One bad swing or missed three-footer can mean the difference between playing for \$25,000 in mini-tour events or \$1.2 million a week on the PGA Tour. Players only get one chance a year. Q-School determines if you earn a PGA Tour card, earn a Nike Tour Card or conditional card, play the mini-tours for another year, or give up your dream altogether. Every player knows what's on the line and the thought of not getting a tour card drives them over the edge of sanity. It's hard to play good golf when you feel that your career is on the line (at least for the next year). It's a long year's wait for those who fail and must go back and try again.

The event has 180 different participants and 180

(GolfWeb File)

different stories. There are PGA Tour veterans trying to regain their cards, Tour rookies trying to get theirs back, Tour players out of the top 125 trying to improve their position for next year, Nike Tour players trying to rise to another level, college golfers living out their dreams, and mini-tour players who save up three grand for a shot at playing on the PGA Tour. Tour veterans trying to re-qualify for the Tour hide from the media and first-time PGA Tour hopefuls sidestep player agents and equipment reps.

How does Q-School change a player's state of mind? Each and every player battles his emotions--anxiety, tension, and fear, just for starters. Most importantly, a player has to control negative thinking, battle seeds of doubt, and avoid the trap of trying not to screw up. Have you ever tried to make a three-footer while thinking about what it means if you miss the putt and have to wait one year for another crack at qualifying? Have you ever tried to hit a tee shot into a tight fairway with OB left and become paralyzed by the thought of how to tell your sponsors that you missed qualifying by a shot? These are just two examples of the kinds of fears and irrational thoughts that players have during Q-School. Handling adversity is a part of sports, but nothing comes close to the perceived pressure the players are feeling.

How does a player cope with his emotions? The players who handle adversity well do not get caught up in results (positive or negative), unravel after hitting a bad shot, or panic after shooting one bad round. These players know how to pace themselves, stay cool after bad shots, focus on the task at hand and not the hoopla, and maintain an inner confidence that they will succeed. The players who are deluged by fear and irrational thoughts are pulled off track trying to avoid bad shots, are anxious about their games, look for excuses why it is okay to fail, and don't have confidence in themselves.

The final round is usually the most intense for all players. One bad hole or one missed putt can mean the difference between playing on the PGA Tour or playing on the mini-tour. It's the day that you want to throw up before the round because it's the day the scoreboard indicates who plays next year on the PGA Tour. When it's over, some players are ecstatic that they made it, others are upset that they missed, but one thing is for certain--every player is relieved it's over and they can all go home. Luckily for all the qualifiers, this year the weather saved them from having to face the gut-wrenching "final round" of Q-School.

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