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Q-School pressure takes mental toughness

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By Patrick Cohn
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The final stage of the PGA TOUR Qualifying School tournament, which runs from Nov. 17 to 22 at the Doral Golf Resort & Spa in Miami, is unlike any other tournament in golf. While thousands of hopeful professional golfers compete, only the top 35 and ties will advance to join pro golf's elite class.

As a sport psychologist helping players get to the big time, I can see the fright and urgency on many players' faces. From PGA TOUR veterans trying to regain their card to Q-School rookies trying to reach the TOUR for the first time, the pressure is enormous.

Given the significance every player competing this week places on the Q-School finals, it's not surprising that fears and irrational thoughts might surface. Players begin to ask themselves, "Do I have what it takes to get on the PGA TOUR?"; "Can I handle my emotions?"; "Will my game show up?"

One bad hole or three-putt can mean the difference between reaching a dream or having that dream deferred.

I've worked with several players who qualified for Q-School finals for the first time this year as well as players who are back again, including Grant Waite, David Morland IV, John Restino, Jeff Cook, Randy Leen, Vance Veazey, Brian Claar, Kevin Blanton, and Brian Gay.

Here is a sample of the specific challenges some of these players face and what they can do to succeed.

Grant Waite finished 148 on the PGA TOUR money list this year and has to return to Q-School to retain his playing privileges. He is one of *the* best ball strikers on TOUR (he ranked 12th in greens in regulation this year), but his putting has been inconsistent (he ranked 179th).

- **Challenge:** Grant needs to get the ball in the hole without trying too hard or forcing it.
- **Solution:** He needs to focus on making good putts and not worry about missing. The goal in putting is to control your line and speed, and that's what good putters focus on. Missed putts are brushed off easily by good putters when they know they hit a good one.

David Morland IV is ready to break through after winning on the Canadian Tour this year. He passed second stage without hitting the ball his best.

- **Challenge:** David needs to not worry if he is a little off with his ball striking.
- **Solution:** When ball striking is poor, TOUR-caliber players must learn how to score. Many players think they have to hit it great to succeed, but that's not true. David learned this at the second stage. He needs to focus on getting the ball in the hole and scoring well -- without worry about how he is hitting the ball.

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John Restino had a great comeback at the second stage, shooting 69-72 the last two days at Grenelefe in Haines City, Fla., and winning a playoff to reach the finals for the first time.

- **Challenge:** John needs to not let other players distract him from playing his game. How players handle intimidation or psych-out games will be a big part of their success this week.
- **Solution:** John needs to focus on his game plan and not let the "games" of others distract him. He needs to not care what others in his group are doing and just focus on his plan for each hole.

Jeff Cook is a good friend of mine who won second stage at Seaside, Calif. It's no secret that he loves to tinker with his swing.

- **Challenge:** Jeff needs to not give into the tendency to overwork his mechanics.
- **Solution:** Jeff, like everyone else this week, needs to play with the game that got him to the final dance, which means trusting that his mechanics are good enough to get the job done. He mustn't let a bad shot make him tinker with his swing.

Vance Veazey played the TOUR in 1998, lost his card that year, and then played the NIKE TOUR in 1999. Vance plays great when he is relaxed and stays in control of his emotions -- which holds true for most players.

- **Challenge:** Vance needs to stay calm and not get overemotional.
- **Solution:** A lot is on the line this week, which makes it harder to stay composed after a bad shot. Vance needs to forget about what he is playing for, to try to stay relaxed, and to not get upset with himself for hitting a bad shot.

Brian Claar played back and forth on the PGA TOUR and NIKE TOUR in 1999, playing in nine PGA TOUR events.

- **Challenge:** To exorcise the doubt and play like he is capable of playing.
- **Solution:** Be confident that he has the game to compete with the best players in the world by reminding himself of his past success and believing in his ability. Confidence starts from within. Brian needs to take advantage of this notion.

Brian Gay finished 206 on the PGA TOUR money list in 1999. He struggled with his game early in the season, but he started to recover by the end. He has the Q-School experience working for him because he finished in the top 35 last year.

- **Challenge:** To get the ball in the fairway, which he struggled with early in the year.
- **Solution:** Use whatever club he can to get the ball in the fairway and use a swing that he knows will achieve this goal. This means seeing a good drive in his mind, feeling the shot that will get it done, and focusing on the target with complete attention. Above all else, he needs to see where he wants to hit the ball -- instead of trying to avoid where he doesn't want to hit it.

Email Dr. Cohn your questions.

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