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## Shooting low means beating fear

Dec. 14, 1999

**By Patrick Cohn**

**GolfWeb contributing editor**

Is shooting a low round just a fluke or a confidence booster that leads to greater success?

In the case of Notah Begay, who shot 59 on the 1998 BUY.COM TOUR, you can certainly conclude it was a catalyst to success. Begay was the first of two players on the BUY.COM TOUR to shoot 59 last year. Two players had already recorded 59s on the PGA TOUR.

He qualified for the 1999 PGA TOUR by finishing 10th on the 1998 BUY.COM money list. He won two PGA TOUR events as a rookie and finished 31st on the money list in 1999.

Begay's historic second round at the 1998 BUY.COM Dominion Open consisted of nine birdies, two eagles and no bogeys.

He started slowly on the back nine, registering just one birdie in his first five holes. He charged through the turn with three birdies on the last four holes. After a 4-under 32 on the first nine, the real fireworks began. Begay shot a record tying 9-under 27 on his back nine, which included an eagle-birdie-eagle run on the first three holes.

He had missed three consecutive cuts prior to the Dominion Open.

Making the cut and earning a check was certainly a goal that week, but shooting 59 meant much more than that. It raised his confidence to new heights and gave him the feeling he belonged on TOUR.

What's the mindset that helped Begay shoot 59, even when he didn't have a lot of success earlier in the year? In this article, I'll discuss five mental factors that help Begay and others shoot low scores.

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## No fear of making mistakes

Often when a player charges into the lead or finds himself several strokes under par for the round, there is a tendency to get scared and put on the brakes. He has to battle the feeling of "if I could just get this score into the clubhouse, it would be great."

Playing to avoid mistakes is not the way to play golf, at least according to Begay. Walking off the 12th hole during his historic round, he was already 9-under-par for the day.

"I got nothing to lose. I'm 9 under, if I make two bogeys coming in I still shoot 65 and gain strokes on the field anyway," he said. "And you're supposed to make bogeys everyday, at least one or two. If I make a couple coming in

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trying to get to 10 or 11, I think the risk is worth the reward."

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## Take it lower when you're on

Begay thinks many professional golfers are technically capable of shooting 59, but that's the easy part. The problem is when players prevent themselves from going further under par. Often self-sabotage can derail a player, even the good ones. The fear of blowing a great round or the fear of success can make a golfer panic when he gets under par in a round.

"It's the mental struggle to get out of your own way and let things happen," Begay said. "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."

No one would care if he shot a 60 or 61. His goal was to shoot 59, after he realized it was attainable. His mindset was to take advantage of his good fortune and go as low as possible, which is the mindset that can mean the difference between shooting a good round or shooting a great round.

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## Controlled excitement

On those days when you're in the zone, it's very exciting, almost too exciting. You need to control your emotions because it's easy to get overexcited and make mistakes.

The rush of adrenaline that accompanies great play is difficult to control. Begay, like many other good players, knows sometimes he has to use less club or swing easier.

"It's a rush," he said. "I have to start backing off clubs because I start hitting them further. I'm just pumped. When everything is firing you feel great. It's almost a euphoric state of mind, personally."

Also, you can't let the excitement of the moment make you change your game plan or alter your decisions.

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## A sense of rhythm

Players who rely on feel, such as Begay, Ernie Els, and John Huston can light it up.

"The whole process -- thinking about your shots, walking to your shots, going through your whole routine -- is very rhythmic, very sequential, things are well ordered," Begay said.

Rhythm, to a feel player, is the same as momentum to other less feel-oriented players. When they have momentum, it feels like confidence squared.

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## Total confidence

Believing you can shoot a low score is just as important as having the physical skills to do it. When a player such as Begay is in the zone, he can't wait to get to the next tee so he can make another birdie. It's a mindset that says 'I can't do anything wrong today. I'm on my game and the bounces are going my way.'

"You can do anything on those days. It doesn't matter it's going to end up right," Begay said. "If you pick a club that is too long, you'll probably hit it thin and it goes close. If you pick a club that is too short, you'll flush it, and it will end up the right distance."

Begay also has a history of low scores to back up his confidence, which helps tremendously. That includes a 62 he shot during the 1994 NCAA Championships.

Although he etched his name in golf history books with that 59, he wasn't happy with his performance the following two days at that event. Begay shot a pair of 74s Saturday and Sunday to finish tied for sixth.

It was his best finish on the BUY.COM TOUR to date, but more importantly it gave him the confidence he needed to play well the next few weeks.


"I went from just making the cut to one of the top players," he said. "I felt like I belonged out there. That (round) basically catapulted me into a higher level of confidence."

He had two second-place finishes within a stretch of five weeks after shooting 59, vaulting him to 10th on the money list. That stretch also earned him full playing privileges on the PGA TOUR in 1999.

This year, he won twice on TOUR. His next task: shoot a 57 in competition.

"I'm still looking for that 57," Begay said with confidence. "It's out there, I know it's out there."

**Editor's note:** This article was based on Dr. Cohn's future book, *Take it Deep*. For questions, e-mail Dr. Cohn at [pgapack@aol.com](mailto:pgapack@aol.com) or visit his web site at [www.peaksports.com](http://www.peaksports.com).

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