



Smart golf begins with practice

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John hits an errant tee shot into the trees. Instead of chipping out and playing for an up and down par -- at worse bogey -- he tries to hit a fantasy shot over and around the trees in front of him.

Too proud to chip out and "take his medicine," John's ego gets in the way of decision making. He steps outside the limits of his skills and plays a dumb shot.

He confidently plays the shot and the ball strikes a tree and goes out of bounds. He has to replay the shot and take a penalty stroke. He chips the ball back into play because now he knows the shot is too difficult.

He makes a triple bogey on the hole and is furious because he should have made no worse than a bogey.

John's ill-advised decision cost him two shots.

This type of thinking was perpetuated in the movie *Tin Cup* starring Kevin Costner. On the last hole of the U.S. Open, Costner, playing an egomaniac golf pro, decides to go for a 250-yard carry over water.

He thinks he can make the shot. He is confident when he steps over the ball. But he dunks shot after shot into the water until he holes out the last ball in his bag.

Poor risk management is a killer to shooting low numbers.



Jesper Parnevik tees off the 18th hole at Medinah the day before the PGA started. (AP)

Your ability to manage risk and make the correct decisions on the course are vital to shooting good scores. It's important to develop a strategy for every round based on your skills and knowledge of the golf course. You can do your homework ahead of time with a practice round.

One of golf's greatest challenges is that it's a thinking man's game. A smart golfer who knows when and when not to take risks will always beat the reckless golfer that is prisoner to his ego and emotions.

A reckless game plan coupled with overconfidence is a recipe for high numbers.

Confidence is a great asset in golf, but overconfidence can prevent you from playing "smart golf." You must have the confidence that you can hit any shot well, but that doesn't mean letting your boldness cause you to hit a low-percentage shot, or even a dumb shot.

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The overbold player usually reaches into the golf bag to drop another ball into play. Pulling out driver on every par-4, cutting the corner on every dogleg, going for every par -4 in two and aiming at the pin on every hole sometimes yields birdies, but usually leads to more double bogeys.

On the other hand, a cautious or careful game plan does not help you score your best.

A cautious player is so afraid of making mistakes that his or her game revolves around avoiding disaster. This player is in "protect mode," which leads to tentative swings and fearful putting. In protect mode, the goal is to not make a high number or a mistake, which is not the way to play.

Have you ever putted well when trying not to three-putt?

Good course management is playing smart golf, which starts before your tee up the ball with your game plan. Your game plan should balance both conservative and bold shots at the right times.



Vijay Singh is meticulous with his practice routine, and he took full advantage at Medinah.
(AP)

The smart golfer assesses the risk-reward ratio on every shot when making decisions. What are the risks of going for a par -5 in two on this particular hole? What are the rewards?

The rewards are simple -- a possible birdie or maybe a chance at eagle. What are the risks? A high score on the hole. These are some of the questions to consider when weighing the risk and reward.

Performance tip

Part of playing smart golf is doing your homework ahead of time. A practice round to study the course is essential for planning your round and setting a game plan.

Here is a checklist of tasks you should do during a practice round or when walking the golf course:

1. Check the accuracy of yardage books or yardage plates.
2. Measure the distance to fairway bunkers or hazards and how far it is to carry those hazards.
3. Note the distance to the most generous part of fairways.
4. Record the distance to carry greenside bunkers or hazards.
5. Pick smart targets off tees and around greens that are eye-catching.
6. Study the contour, speed and slope of the greens.
7. Get familiar with the subtle breaks on each green.
8. Note trouble areas around the greens.
9. Note the best spot on the green to have the best chance of making a putt.

Editor's note: Instruction features appear every Wednesday on GolfWeb.

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