

Tips on thinking are food for thought

The ball just sits there.

That's one of the things that makes golf such a difficult sport to master.

You have plenty of time to think before you hit it, and plenty of time to think while you walk or ride to your next shot, where you think some more before hitting it again, etc.

You can think yourself silly, and then you'll usually play that way. If you know *how* to think on a golf course, however, your chances of playing up to your potential are greatly improved.

That's the premise of Patrick Cohn's book, "Going Low: How to Break Your Individual Golf Scoring Barrier by Thinking Like

a Pro" (Contemporary Books, \$22.95).

"Going Low" teaches golfers how to identify and eliminate the beliefs that impede their success.

"Thinking your way around a golf course strategically is OK," said Cohn, a sports psychologist who lives in Orlando and works with a number of PGA Tour players. "Over-thinking, or too much analysis, is counterproductive.

"Most amateurs are over-analytical. They try too hard, they care too much and they expect too much. In 'Going Low,' I talk about letting go of expectations of what is and isn't possible."

Cohn uses case studies of some of the lowest rounds ever shot — 59s by Al Geiberger, Chip Beck and David Duval and Johnny Miller's final-round 63 in the 1973 U.S. Open, for example — to illustrate how golfers get in the "zone" and stay there.

Clear mind

In virtually all of those super-low rounds, the golfers described their play as "effortless." Their minds were free of mechanical thoughts. They focused on the target, were able to visualize or "feel" shots before they hit them and, most important, were able to stay in the present.

Top professionals are able to recreate that type of thinking often, and although it doesn't mean they'll automatically shoot 61s and 62s, it explains why they are able to play to their potential more consistently than amateurs.

"Amateurs make too many false and self-limiting generalizations," Cohn said. "If they get off to a poor start, they get that here-I-go-again syndrome: 'I'm going to struggle all day.' Or, if they miss a

can't-putt-today syndrome.

"It's self-sabotage. Obviously, the best players in the world don't do that. Some pros have some of these issues but not to the degree amateurs do."

Too many golfers think about swing mechanics during their rounds, Cohn said. They analyze why they sliced their last shot and then make corrections in their next swing. Then they hook the ball and immediately start to work on a correction for that.

Before they know it, 10 or 12 holes have gone by and they are either deeply confused or irritated with themselves.

"I call that 'playing golf swing' instead of playing golf shots," Cohn said.

Beyond mechanics

If you want to get into the "zone," you must transcend mechanics, Cohn said. You must free your mind from conscious effort and play target golf. An uncluttered, clear mind is essential to playing in your personal zone, whether that means breaking 100 for the first time or shooting even par. Save those mental checklists for practice time.

Another problem common among amateurs, Cohn said, is that they use negative labels to define their games. For instance, a golfer might view himself as a good putter but a lousy ball-striker.

"Those labels become self-fulfilling prophecies," Cohn said. "When you start to take on labels, it doesn't allow for your confidence to grow in those other areas."

Cohn said even Tiger Woods probably had negative thoughts from time to time but was able to quickly discard them.

"I think what makes him so mentally tough is his ability to focus and immerse himself in the moment," Cohn said.

Cohn also is the author of "Peak Performance Golf," "The Mental Game of Golf" and "The Mental Art of Putting." His Web site is www.peaksports.com.

A lot of what he says is common sense. Unfortunately, that seems to be in short supply on the golf course.

Send e-mail to gdamato@onwis.com

GOLF



GARY D'AMATO