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The Imperfections of Perfectionism

by *Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D.*

Persistence, determination, and a strong work ethic are excellent qualities to possess in any endeavor. But in golf, if taken to an extreme these same qualities that breed success can cause failure. Most perfectionistic players are dedicated to an extreme level, and this can interfere with reaching peak performance. Players who set their goals too high and expect too much run the risk of trying too hard, being too controlled and reaching burnout.

Most perfectionistic players learn early in life that hard work and effort are the keys to success. A perfectionist sets extremely high goals and has very high expectations. When this person fails or can't attain his or her goals, frustration occurs and he or she increases effort and determination. Soon, this player wants to succeed so badly that he or she fears failure and is caught in a web of anxiety.

A perfectionist has good intentions but an ineffective attitude. The game of golf fosters perfectionism, yet as human beings we are not perfect, and can't be perfect. Golf is a game of misses and the person that can best manage his or her mistakes will prevail. In this article, I present some ideas for dealing with perfectionism.

(1) Throw Away Your Expectations.

Expectations can do more harm than good. You don't want to expect to play poorly, but you shouldn't expect too much from yourself. Placing high expectations on yourself puts you in a win-lose or success-failure situation. If you don't reach your expectations, you view your effort as a failure. Setting attainable goals for yourself is a better option. Set process goals like hitting a certain number of fairways per round.

(2) Emphasize Fun, not Winning.

The anxiety you experience partially results from an overemphasis on winning or beating others. Everybody is trying to win and you can't control the outcome of a match. Your competitive goal should be to play for fun and the enjoyment of the game. This is easier said than done for golfers who constantly tie themselves up in knots because they try too hard to play well.

(3) Don't Dwell on Mistakes.



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If you are a perfectionist, you spend most of your time dwelling on your mistakes and weaknesses. This is unhealthy for your self-confidence and doesn't let you enjoy golf. Dwelling on your weaknesses and errors sends a message to yourself that you are never good enough. You are not a failure, you just choose to think more about your faults. You have to make the choice to think about positive aspects of your game and remember the good shots instead of replaying the bad shots over and over.

(4) Give Yourself Permission to Make Mistakes.

Perfectionists think that anything less than a flawless performance is a failure. You have to accept that you are human and you will make mistakes just like everyone else. Sometimes it helps to give yourself permission to make mistakes. You're not perfect and even the best players in the world make mistakes. Allowing yourself to make an error helps you play on after that first error without having it ruin your game.

(5) Try Less.

Most hardworking players think that the harder they try, the better they will play. Trying hard in golf is an ineffective attitude. The harder you try, the more you interfere with a smooth, natural swing. When you press on the golf course, you usually tense-up, overcontrol, and steer your shots and putts. To play your best, you need to let it happen rather than make it happen. Try less on the golf course, you may surprise yourself.

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