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Learning to Play Target Golf

by Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D.

You stand motionless over the ball as you run through a checklist of what you should remember about a good swing. You feel frozen and can't pull the trigger, too much information to assimilate. Your overanalysis is causing paralysis. You finally swing, but you stick the club in the ground and hit your shot fat. It's frustrating because you know you can't try any harder. Maybe the answer is trying less? Two mentalities are important to play well in golf. First, players must understand their swing and have the discipline to practice and groove their swing. Second, players have to trust what they practice, and learn to play target golf, not mechanical golf. Both mentalities are important for you to reach your potential. Most golfers know how to train their swings. They are good at the practice mentality. But to play your best golf, you have to develop a trusting mentality so you can let it happen and play target golf. Playing target golf means forgetting about how to get the ball to the target and trust what you practice. That's why you practice - to develop an effortless and automatic swing. Here are some keys for helping you make the switch from mechanical golf to target golf:



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(1) Simplify Your Preshot Routine.

A good preshot routine focuses your attention on execution and target and it should help you play target golf. A 20-step routine is not an effective--it leads to overanalysis. Simplify the steps in your routine, especially as they get closer to pulling the trigger. Narrow it down to only one swing cue. Don't try to make it happen.

(2) Trust Your Method.

A key to playing target golf is the ability to trust your method. If you do not have faith in your method, it's hard to trust your swing or stroke. If you believe in your method, it is easier for you to have confidence in your swing and then trust you will hit the target.

(3) Focus on a Target, Not Your Swing.

An external focus is critical to trusting your swing and playing target golf. Don't think about how to swing. To release conscious control, focus on a target, the shape of the shot, or an image of a good shot. The last thought should be on your target or where you want the ball to finish.

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(4) Use Images and Feelings, Not Verbal Commands.

Our bodies interpret and perform better when we use images or feeling to relay information. The use of verbal instructions are needed for learning a new skill, but they are ineffective for playing target golf . Translate a verbal instruction ("take the club back in one piece") into a feeling of the movement during the practice swing.

(5) Practice Playing Target Golf.

Like any other part of the game, you have to practice playing target golf. Practice just looking at the target and swinging from instinct. Spend 40% of your time practicing target golf. Trust and confidence develop from learning how to play target golf on the range first. Then you can transfer what they learn to the course.

Note: This article adapted from Dr. Cohn's Audiobook Think to Win: How to Manage Your Mind on the Golf Course. Patrick J. Cohn, a golf psychologist, is based at Peak Performance Sports, Orlando, FL

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