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Expectations are the root of self-sabotage in golf

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By Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D. GolfWeb Columnist

Editor's Note: *This is second part in a series on the psychology of shooting low rounds. The series discusses the mindset that helps PGA TOUR and LPGA Tour players shoot career low rounds. This article is based on Cohn's soon-to-be-released book, *Going Low: How to Break Your Individual Scoring Barrier by Thinking Like a Pro (Contemporary Books)*.*

Obviously, golfers don't set new records unless they possess tremendous skill. Also important in scoring low is a player's self-defined belief about what he or she thinks is possible. Humans have much greater resources for success than they tend to use. Golfers often stifle their own success with self-imposed psychological limits in the form of comfort zones, expectations or preconceptions about what is a good score.

If you examine the psychological makeup of history's greatest golfers, those who have broken long-standing records, you would find that they had the ability to rise above their expectations and break records that were considered beyond reach. Golfers such as Sam Snead, Jack Nicklaus and Ben Hogan were able to buffer themselves against the negative expectations of others.

Many of the golfers who are trying to earn their way onto one of the professional golf tours limit themselves with preconceptions and expectations about what is and what is not possible, which forms their personal comfort zones. Consequently, if playing better than expected, golfers sabotage their games with negative thoughts such as, "when am I going to make my first double bogey and screw up this round?" Positive and negative expectations are the root of self-sabotage in golf.

Most PGA TOUR golfers I have worked with don't limit themselves with expectations about what is or is not possible -- players such as Joe Durant. Just two weeks before his win at the Genuity Championship at Doral, Durant won the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic and set a new 90-hole scoring record for a TOUR event. This was his second record in two days. Durant shot a record 29 under for the first four rounds of the event.

Most TOUR golfers don't set target scores before they play. Target scores are limiting. Durant had only one goal (not an expectation) when he shot 61. The goal was to give himself as many chances at birdie as possible. I talked with Durant after his first round of the Genuity Championship to discuss the mindset he needed to shoot a career low 61 (his second round) and a total 36 under par at the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic.

"Sixty-one is not a number you really put in your head, and say 'I'm going to shoot 61 today'" Durant said. "I just knew I could make a bunch of birdies and that's all I tried to do."

Target scores limit you in two ways: (1) It's frustrating if you don't reach your

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target, and (2) it causes you to go into what I call "protect mode" if you are playing better than expected or gain the lead.

What was the biggest mental key for Durant when he set a new 90-hole scoring record? It was the ability to not get caught up in score and what number he could shoot.

"I was very task-oriented, I wasn't thinking about score all week," Durant said. "I was just thinking about putting it in the fairway, putting it on the green as close as I could, and giving it a good roll on the green. I never really thought about where I stood in relation to par the whole week except for the last three holes on Sunday."

For most golfers, it's easy to keep track of score, and they do so every hole. But that only causes them to judge how well they are doing during the round compared to how well they should be doing.

Instead, Durant was able to immerse himself in the process of each shot. The trick is to not get too caught up in score. One way he tries to forget about score is to fool himself into thinking he is even par and trying to make some birdies coming down the stretch.

Momentum is important to shooting a low round. Durant believes that you have to control yourself and the excitement when you get on a roll.

"I had the momentum going, but momentum can destroy you too if you get ahead of yourself," Durant said. "I was able to stay in the present. 'All right, I know I have a great round going, we still have three holes to play, so let's just work on this shot right now.' If I do the right things then the score will be good."

At times, because of the excitement associated with going low, you have to stay calm and relaxed. Durant, like other golfers who are aware of this, had to consciously make himself slow down and take his time to go through his routine properly, analyze the yardage, and not rush up and hit the next one quickly.

"I was able to realize it (momentum) was happening and put a cap on it," he said.

Golf is a funny game because most golfers think you have to do something extraordinary, be more determined, or try harder to play well or shoot a low round, but just the opposite is true. One of Durant's keys to going low is to let his ability come out by doing ordinary things well, such as hitting greens and fairways.

"I was relaxed and felt like I was strolling, I wasn't trying to grind it out," Durant said. "It wasn't like I was so determined to shoot a good round -- it was almost the opposite, I was letting go of trying."

The more you try to hit a good shot or shoot a low number, often the worse your performance gets.

Durant was proud of his ability to not go into "protect mode" the last day of the tournament, even after starting the day with a five-shot lead. It's easy in that situation for a golfer to play defensive and protect his lead, and then blow the tournament (all of us have seen it happen in golf). The real key was to have the same goal the last day as he did all week long -- to keep making birdies, hitting fairways and greens, and giving himself as many birdie putts as possible, all the time without thinking about results or score.

Durant didn't change his mindset or approach all week: he wanted to attack the golf course.

"I used the same game plan I had the previous four days," he said. "I was not trying to do anything spectacular, just trying to hit solid shots and hit a lot of greens."

E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at pcohn@peaksports.com.

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