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Mental Keys to Finding "The Zone"

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

Your confidence was tremendous - you felt no one could beat you that day and you could make any shot you wanted. You were so engrossed into playing each shot that you were oblivious to your playing partners. Your swing seemed so easy and effortless, the club an extension of yourself. Never before were you so in control of yourself and emotions. It was so fun to execute each shot as envisioned. Only after the round did you realize that you shot a career best round, and were in "the zone".



Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D.

Moments like these, when playing in the flow, are what all golfers strive for, but they are rare and hard to reproduce. Playing in the zone combines effortless performance, a task focus, and the positive emotions and feelings. Although the ideal is to play consistently in the zone, the reality is that on most days, players only wish they could find this elusive state.

Golf is a game that is played between the ears. If you ask any player, amateur or professional, how much of golf is a mental game they would reply at least 80% of golf is mental, after the basic skills have been learned. Yet, golfers spend countless hours practicing, taking lessons, and reading books to learn how to improve their swing or putting stroke. Rarely do players spend time improving their mental skills. Why do golfers spend most of their time beating balls on the range if golf is such a mental game? That's what they are most comfortable doing.

At one time you probably played in the zone even if only for a shot time. This is when your mind is focused in the present, you're in control of your thoughts, and hitting shots just as you envisioned. It's impossible to force yourself into the zone, but you can create a mindset that helps you enter the zone more frequently. Here, I present five keys to entering the zone based on my work with Tour Pros.

(1) Do You Have Confidence in Your Skills?

It's rare when you play well without self-confidence. Self-confidence is your belief about how well you can play or how good your skills are. Confidence develops from physical practice, playing well in the past, trusting your mechanics, and knowing you are physically talented. The key is to understand how you gain confidence and then work on the areas in your game you can

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control that lead to greater confidence.

(2) Can You Totally Focus on the Task?

The ability to totally focus on the task is critical to peak performance in any sport. Do you lose focus after a bad shot or a three-putt? Total focus means thinking about the requirements of the shot and only the shot. It also means playing one shot at a time and not getting ahead of yourself or thinking about the last putt you missed. Develop a routine to help you focus on performance cues and refocus on the task when you get distracted.

(3) Are You Zoomed In When it's Your Turn?

As you prepare for a shot, your attention starts broad as you assess all the factors that influence club and shot selection and then narrows as you engage with a specific target. To play in the zone you must be able to narrow your focus when needed to block out distractions. You play your best golf when you can narrow your focus on one thought, a target, or swing cue.

(4) Can You Put Your Swing on Autopilot?

The feeling of an automatic and effortless swing is another mental state associated with the zone. When you develop a strong memory pattern of the swing, it then feels effortless. This allows you to put you swing on autopilot - you don't have to think about how to swing - It just happens. Instead, it's better to think about the shape of a shot or the flight of the ball and let your body hit the shot.

(5) Do You Stay in Control?

When playing in the zone, golfers feel very much in control of themselves and their performance. Golf requires a balanced emotional level. The key is to be excited to play, but not cross the line into anxiety and fear. Excitement helps you play better, but fear and anxiety ruin your game and the round. To find your optimal level of emotion, compare the level of excitement during your best and worse performances.

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