

The Mental Game of Golf: A Guide to Peak Performance

By Patrick J. Cohn, PhD. Published 1994 by Diamond Communications Inc., PO Box 88, South Bend, IN 46624. (US \$19.95)

Think To Win: How to Manage Your Mind on the Golf Course

By Patrick J. Cohn, PhD. Produced 1995 by Peak Performance Publications, 2706 South Horseshoe Drive, Suite 106, Naples, FL 33942. (US \$18.95, package of two audiotapes)

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The Mental Game of Golf is comprised of 169 pages, including a reference list and 26 illustrations. The first two of nine chapters provide, respectively, a rationale for attention to the mental demands of golf and an introduction to the mental qualities of peak performance. Chapters three to six elaborate on specific desirable mental skills, and chapter seven focuses exclusively on preshot routines. Chapter eight is about improving quality practice, and the final chapter discusses mental approaches to golf's special challenges. Excepting the first two, each chapter begins with an introduction to its content and ends with a point summary of the same. All chapters are well signposted with several section and sub-section headings. These, in turn, are liberally peppered with highlights of major points, spaced at appropriate intervals in the text, and numerous quotations. I found this structure, organization, and presentation excellent and, together with its lay-person composition, both easy to read and comprehend.

In chapter 1, "The Psychological Demands of Golf," Cohn claims that, after the basic skills have been learned, golf is at least 80% mental. Some might argue (that it is more than 80% mental!), but all golfers would probably agree with his next assertion that such attention to mental demands is seldom reflected in either personal practice habits or the content of lessons from teaching professionals. Chapter 2, "The Psychology of Peak Performance," introduces readers to the distinguishable qualities experienced while playing in the zone: self-confidence, effortless performance, task focus, narrowed attention, sense of control, absence of fear, relaxed awareness, and enjoyment. Consultants will recognize these as components of the Ideal Performance State—the Holy Grail for all performers in achievement situations. Both of these chapters introduce and set up what ideally follows.

Chapter 3, the first of five mental-skill chapters, deals with "Confidence: The Key to Optimal Performance," and Cohn introduces the importance of thinking, feeling, and acting confident. He also addresses enduring, long-term, self-empowered self-confidence, and where it comes from, how it is gained, and how it is destroyed. As arguably the most elusive mental quality, I predict both consultants and golfers will read this chapter most often. In Chapter 4, "Learn to Let it

Flow,” Cohn points out that, although approximately 95% of instruction is on swing or putting mechanics, learning or developing trust in the swing is the key to “flow.” Overemphasizing mechanics and perfectionism, therefore, represent barriers to be overcome to “letting it flow,” which, as we learned in Chapter 2, is one of the keys to “playing in the zone.” I am not sure why Cohn is “amazed” when he hears tour players say “they would rather hit the ball well and score poorly than have a good scoring round and hit the ball poorly” (p. 52), but he explains his position more clearly in the tapes. I think golfers know they can “win ugly,” but to most, the ecstasy of intermittent reinforcement inherent in perfect shot-making is more addictive and alluring than scoring well.

In Chapter 5, “Immerse Yourself in the Shot,” Cohn estimates that, although only 30 minutes are spent focusing attention on execution of shots during an average 4-hour round, golfers need to learn what to focus on, how to deal with inner and outer distractions, and become optimally involved with targets. In Chapter 6, “Controlling Your Emotions,” we are told pressure can be used to our advantage by understanding which physical, mental, and behavioral responses are productive and which are not. Cohn returns to the “think, feel, act” explanation for these highly subjective reactions and uses applications of cognitive restructuring very effectively adapted to golf. Major points on “thinking like a champion” are illustrated in two tables, followed by three exercises on reducing physical tension. More specific attention to dealing with frustration and anger concludes this chapter.

Swinging freely is Cohn’s most important goal for golfers, but Chapter 7, “Applying Your Psychological Skills: The Preshot Routine,” draws heavily from the previous five chapters and contains his most critical message. Processing information and planning the shot, programming oneself (mentally) for success, and preparing both the body and mind for executing a good swing are the three main purposes of preshot routines explained in considerable detail and summarized in three useful tables covering full shots, chipping, and putting.

In Chapter 8, “Practice Like the Pros: Improving the Quality of Practice,” Cohn and Peggy Richardson distinguish between traditional practice habits and perfect practice habits, and with reference to five practice rules, create the possibility for quality practice environments. Such practice should be characterized by attention to weaknesses as well as strengths, good habits not bad habits, practice of mental skills, and the development of a pre-round practice routine.

Chapter 9, “Special Challenges in Golf: Comfort Zones, Patience, Enjoying Golf, and Commitment and Motivation,” represents Cohn’s acknowledgement and recognition of these “unique psychological demands” (p. 144) in the game. Comfort zones are expectations for scores players set themselves before and during games. A good example of the latter is the phenomenon of protecting good scores (playing conservatively) and finishing badly. On-course composure in the face of adversity and off-course patience with rate of improvement through practice are mentioned, as well as fun and how to enhance enjoyment. Finally, healthy levels of motivation, dealing with under- or overmotivation, and commitment and dedication to both the game and to improving the mental game are discussed.

Shortcomings of the book are very few but would include some obvious spelling and grammatical mistakes. Also, I feel the entire text could have been written in gender-free language, included more non-American golfer quotations, and provided example sheets in appendices to complement exercises or frame attempts—for example, to set goals. Nevertheless, I recommend *The Mental Game*

of *Golf* unreservedly and would rate Cohn's text better than those he lists (and does not list, e.g., Harvey Penick's reflections) in his references, primarily because he has effectively borrowed from well-known social psychology theories and carefully simplified how to think about and react to golfing demands. Sport psychologists, for example, will recognize the applied principles from self-efficacy theory, cognitive evaluation theory, cognitive therapy, and imagery and goal setting. Though "research" is mentioned, Cohn wisely avoids psychobabble. A second significant reason for my recommendation is the book's deceptively thorough organization and presentation, which results in a very comprehensive coverage of the literature, stated simply and within a logical framework.

The *Think To Win* instructional program is comprised of two audiocassette tapes, with an approximate total running time of 110 minutes. Cohn perhaps risks being "the voice," but he is articulate and definitely not dull or monotonous. From the cover of the package, golfers are informed that from Tape 1 they will learn how to "take your practice swing to the course, discover how you sabotage yourself on the course, understand the keys to effective practice, and learn how to play target golf instead of mechanical golf." Tape 2 will teach "the mental keys to playing in the zone, how to play more consistent golf, how to develop a preshot routine for full shots and putting, and the psychological keys of great putting."

Although similar, I believe this curriculum is different enough from the book (*The Mental Game of Golf*) to warrant the acquisition of both. The audio medium affords Cohn much more opportunity to elaborate on key points and to explain exercises and drills more completely. Individuals, however, may prefer the colorful and upbeat audio package, particularly those who dislike reading. I admit to wondering how well this information would translate on video?

Typical questions, voiced supposedly by amateur golfers, preface each side of each tape and represent an excellent array of "old chestnuts" experienced consultants will immediately recognize. On side 1, Tape 1, we learn that changes in attitudes and perceptions are the main reasons golfers cannot reproduce practice form on the course. A list of nine examples of "change" illustrates his message, followed by a list of six remedial suggestions. Four keys to practice include, practice how you play the course (i.e., imagine the actual holes), practice the shots you are likely to play and switch clubs often, simulate the mind games anticipated, and devote at least half the time to scoring shots (the short game) since at least 60% of golf shots involve pitching and putting.

Side 2 distinguishes characteristics of the *golflerner*, who focuses on swing mechanics, and the golf performer, who plays or reacts on instinct. Cohn does an excellent job here urging golfers to just perform or play freely and play target golf. Eight keys to target golf are listed, followed by four practice drills.

Following the amateurs' questions on consistency on side 1, Tape 2, Cohn discusses seven qualities of playing in the zone and refers again to the "think, feel, act relationship." He then spends considerable time introducing preshot routines that help instill confidence, demand a task focus, and build trust and an ability to play on instinct. He does warn, however, against perfectionism and dependence regarding preshot routines, which can work against golfers who can become bound to the routine instead of playing instinctively.

Six characteristics of good routines and five suggestions for enhancing consistency are listed to complete side 1. Side 2 focuses exclusively on putting—"the game within a game"—which Nicklaus is quoted as saying is 2% mechanics and

98% confidence and touch. Five fundamental characteristics of great putting are presented followed by six characteristics of good preputt routines. Releasing conscious control to “feel the ball to the hole” is emphasized.

In my opinion the entire *TSP* audience—sport psychologists, consultants, coaches, teachers, and players—will enjoy and benefit from both the book and tapes, which are refreshingly comprehensible and reasonably priced. Separately or together, therefore, *The Mental Game of Golf* and *Think To Win*, represent excellent contributions from a talented author, academic, and consultant. I would also highly recommend these to the international golfing industry (e.g., PGA, LPGA) and particularly to all golf coaches and teachers.