

Mental Approach To Golf: Game Can Be Frustrating

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Beacon Golf Editor

If you have played golf for any length of time, it is reasonable to assume that you have endured your share of frustrations on the course. These frustrations vary in frequency and intensity based on your experience and your personal approach to the game.

Part of the problem is found in the fact that we cannot find anyone else to blame for our faults. After all, golf is an individual game. Golfers attempt, at times, to blame their equipment, the weather, or the course. These are, in the final analysis, only a lame means of avoiding the obvious: no matter how well we play, we still make mental and physical mistakes.

Americans have always taken victory and defeat personally. We do not like to be beaten and we love to win. It is this dichotomy of perception which may well be at the root of our frustration of not being able to deal with inadequate performance on the golf course. We tend to forget that we are all human and subject to good days and bad days. None of us are perfect and even those who seem to be perfect are capable of jerking an occasional shot into the water or even lipping out a two foot putt.

Beginners Are Less Frustrated

Golfers who are just beginning to learn the game would seem to be the most "at risk" group for frustrating play. However, these novices seem to handle bad shots better than the rest of us. They can laugh at themselves more readily and seem less prone to demonstrate their anger at poor performance. They seem to be able to repress their frustrations and focus on the good shots. Otherwise they would give up the game entirely.

Beginning golfers seem to know intuitively that better days are ahead and with a little patience they will soon be playing the game better.

Inexperienced golfers also are good at setting their goals somewhere below par for a while. They do not expect to par every hole right away. For many of them bogie golf is their par. But watch out the first time they break the 90 stroke barrier. That is when par becomes an expectation and they learn of an even more exciting term called birdie.

Successful Athletes Agonize Most

Perhaps the most frustrated golfer is a person with strong athletic skills and a history of success in his personal endeavors. One would suspect that their experience in sports

should have taught them something about the "agony of defeat." Not true. These types are normally aggressive and are accustomed to feeding on the power of positive performance. When that performance is not quick to unfold, as in other sports, they are not well equipped to deal with the inconsistencies of the game of golf. They have difficulty comprehending why they can play like a champ one day and a dog the next.

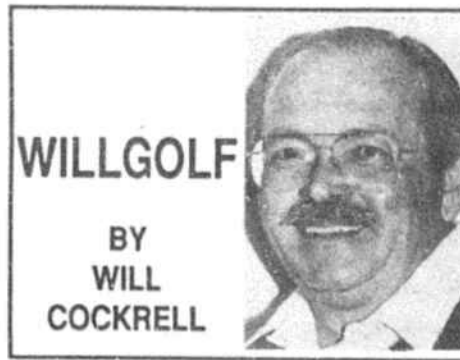
Golf is not a contact sport and we cannot take out our frustration on our opponents. Most highly competitive golfers make the mistake of trying to vent their anger on their clubs, on the course, or both. I have seen clubs launched into near orbits, trees whacked until the club is bent like a pretzel, and even golf bags and golf carts beaten in near volcanic displays of emotion. In most of these cases the frenzy was committed by very good golfers.

Most good golfers have experienced long strings of consistently excellent play and usually understand that the game is not intended to be played at that level for very long. Really good golfers know how to deal with adversity and how to internalize frustration into concentration on the next shot. They fully comprehend that a good round of golf is a combination of pars, birdies and bogies. And when those treacherous double and triple bogies occur, good golfers recognize that they have made a couple of mental errors which have caused them to attempt shots that simply were not in the cards.

Be Mentally Tough On The Course

The cures for golfing frustrations are rooted in the mental processes of really good golfers, professionals and low handicap amateurs. These golfers have their share of trouble on the course, but how many times have we seen them follow a bogie with a birdie on the very next hole. They don't believe that a bad hole or a poor round is "OK," they simply accept the fact that such will happen in the game of golf and refuse to let frustration set in.

Back in the early spring a young pro who had not won on the PGA Tour began with two solid rounds of golf at the Los Angeles Open. On television during the third round his play was rather indifferent. Afterward while being interviewed he was reminded that he had blown good rounds in the past to fall out of



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contention. His response was something to the effect, "If you cannot live with a bad round of golf, you should not play the game." I was very impressed with his assertion and not at all surprised when he won the tournament the next day. Here was a guy who understands the game and knows how to deal with frustration. My guess is that he has a lot more wins ahead of him.

It's The American Way

The ability to overcome our weaknesses and capitalize on our strengths is one to be admired. We have seen it at work in successful professional golfers and in amateur competitions as well. We Americans revere super stars, but we most admire the underdog who pulls victory from the jaws of defeat. Golf, more than any other sport, is like that.

You have heard it said that most golf tournaments are lost and not won. The golfer who can maintain composure and play the game one shot at a time will always be there at the end. That golfer is not playing against a strong wind, or poor course conditions, or "bad luck," or any other negative factors. That golfer is matching his shots against the course.

High School Golfers Are A Case Study

One of the most difficult challenges in the game is to get young golfers to stay off of emotional roller coasters. The tendency is strong in high school players to get too high emotionally on their good shots and too down on their bad shots. They are too quick to get down on themselves after a bad hole or a poor round. They magnify the importance of the poor shot and seem incapable forgetting it in favor of centering themselves on the task ahead.

One mental precursor which I coach with our high school team is to indulge in a bit of mental gymnastics before teeing off. I ask them to make a judgment of how many

bad shots they think they will make during the round. Then when they hit the first bad shot, they simply say, "OK, that is one, and I probably have six more to go." We do not classify imperfect shots as bad. High school players are familiar with imperfections and prepared to deal with them. They realize, better than many adult golfers, that they must rely on their short game to minimize strokes in medal play competitions. Accordingly they do not often fall into the trap of playing with a match play mentality during stroke play tournaments.

You Too May Be A Gymnast

If you are into mental gymnastics, let me suggest a couple of more notions which you may find constructive. Do your best to forget a bad shot until the round is over and you organize your next practice. Take each shot as a new challenge, free of the stigma of previous poor shots. Don't let a bad shot cost you more than one stroke by following it with poor judgement on the next shot. Once you have incurred a penalty stroke, never play a marginal or gambling shot on the remainder of that hole. On days

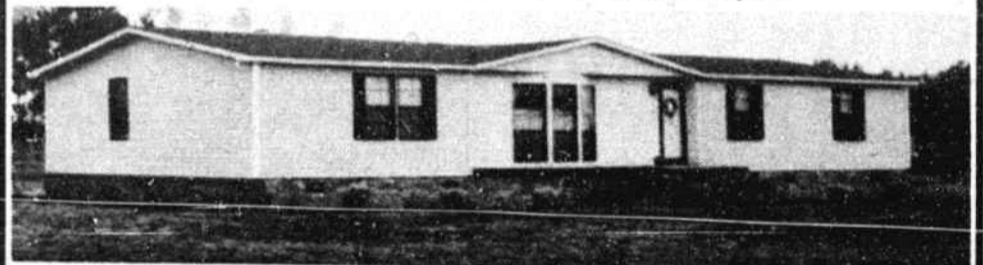
when you are not playing with your "A" game, plan to give yourself room to miss the shot. Finally, don't expect to play your "A" game all the time and just as important, recognize that you will occasionally play your "D" game.

In short, don't punish yourself emotionally when your swing is punishing your score physically. That combination of abuse sets the time bomb to ticking. Be patient with yourself and focus on playing better for the balance of the round or during the next round. The course, your clubs and your friends will always be there tomorrow. Relax and enjoy the greatest game of all: Golf.

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