



STAYING TENSION FREE DURING A ROUND OF GOLF

Ever been out on the links playing great and suddenly, without warning...you felt like you couldn't hit the side of a barn with a handful of oats? Or maybe it was a scenario like this: You hit the ball fantastic on the range. You went through the short irons, middle and long irons, and then the woods, finished with some 60-90 yard wedges and hit the ball like you could shoot 68. Your expectations were soaring when you stepped up on the first tee.

From then on, it was a disaster. You couldn't understand why just thirty minutes ago, you were hitting it like a touring pro. Now on the golf course...you are having to one putt just to save bogeys and double-bogeys. You then start experimenting with different swing thoughts to try and get back in the mode you were in on the range. You can't understand for the life of you, how this can be happening.

If this type of thing happens enough, you'll begin to feel like you will never be able to play under pressure. The average person can stand only so many experiences like these before they begin to take their toll. It is very easy for someone going through this type of situation to wear down emotionally, intellectually and yes...even physically.

You've probably heard of the disease referred to, as..."Paralysis by Analysis"! It will happen to everybody at some time or another during their golfing experiences. It basically has its roots in trying to perform under pressure while the brain is barking out orders to the body of how to sequence certain physical movements. Such as: take it back low, keep the left wrist flat at the top, start down with the hips, keep the upper arms close to the body and so on. Actually, these are all generally good things to do. However, trying to get the brain to tell the muscles to do these things in such a short period of time (a second and a half or two) while there is a price to pay if we are not successful...is far more than we are able to do on any kind of a consistent basis.

Now as long as we are not too concerned about the outcome of the ball, (at the range) we might be able to do it with at least some success. This would



not be optimal though because being concerned with the outcome of the ball can serve to help us focus more intently. You see the problem is not that you would be concerned with the outcome of the ball. It would be more along the lines of being too concerned that you may not make the correct movements to effect the outcome of the ball in a positive way. This is why repetition at home is so important. By consistent repetition every day or at least a few times a week, we program the neuro-pathways (connections between the brain and the muscles...also known as muscle memory) to make certain movements that become instinctive.

Ever swat a fly with a fly swatter? Did you concentrate on how you would flip your wrists or turn your torso or lead with the elbow? Probably not! You might have gauged how far you were from the fly and then gave it a swat but...it would be safe to say that you didn't try to sequence movements of certain parts of your anatomy in order to dispatch with it.

Guess what? Whether consciously or subconsciously...you probably visualized the swat before you actually sent that fella into oblivion. Then you responded to that visualization by just swinging the fly swatter. We perform better when we are relaxed and let our muscles move by instinct. In other words, below the conscious level and without the use of reason or through contrivance.

We actually play our best golf when we visualize a shot in a positive manner and respond to that visualization. If you already set the club correctly at the top, you don't need to think about it...right? You see, since it is something that you do by instinct, you don't need to think about it to do it. When we have to swing in a sequence that our brain is trying to get our muscles to perform, even though they are not used to whatever movement it might be while playing golf...we only serve to create tension. This kind of tension would destroy even the best of swings.

However, when we operate by instinct we are virtually tension free. This is where we allow ourselves to slip into "The Zone". As long as we can stay free of tension, we can remain in "The Zone". If we start to think that we don't belong in "The Zone", we destine ourselves to be thrown from it. Ever



been in “The Zone”? What a feeling it was! Almost like someone else with far more talent was playing for you. Things seemed to be happening in slow motion and you were focused in the present. Free of doubt, fear, anxiety, tension and other thoughts that would tell you that you don’t have the talent to be playing this well.

For most people, their time spent in “The Zone” is short lived, maybe only a couple of holes or so. Each time we get into “The Zone”, we learn more and more to stay out of our own way, so that we can stay in this exciting place where we seem to perform at a level far greater than our experience would tell us that we are able. After several visits to “The Zone”, we develop the calmness to stay in it for longer periods of time.

Eventually, we can get to the point that we are in “The Zone” during every round, for at least part of the round. We begin to learn that being in “The Zone” is something that is within our control and not just something that happens by chance once a year or so. There are many good players that can get into “The Zone”, maybe slip from it for a hole or two because of some distraction and then know how to get right back into it.

It not only comes down to swinging the club in response to visualization but there are other factors that help us to stay in “The Zone” for longer periods of time. Staying in the present is of the utmost importance. Worrying about past shots that were a little wayward or...maybe a missed putt a couple of holes back, only serve to keep us from the present. Maybe a thought of a tough hole that is coming up that has been your nemesis in days gone by. You’ll not find “The Zone” by dwelling on thoughts of the future or thoughts of the past. Additionally, you’ll be thrown from “The Zone” even if you have found it, by dwelling on such thoughts.

Imagine...being able to have much more control than you’ve ever had before...of being able to get into and stay in “The Zone”. Wishful thinking? You might be surprised. It is definitely a process that is made clearer by experience. The more you get into “The Zone”, the more you’ll learn from your experiences there. You’ll learn more and more how to stay out of your own way by keeping tension to a minimum.



If you are tension free, does it mean that you are in “The Zone”? Not necessarily. If you are in “The Zone”, does it mean that you are tension free? For all practical purposes...yes! Remember, tension free does not mean that you don't have butterflies in your stomach. It just means that you are letting your muscles respond to positive visualization and operating by instinct, rather than letting your brain control your muscles through contrivance.

Can you play good golf if the brain has to tell the muscles to move in a certain sequence? Yes...but not as consistently and certainly not to your potential. You might have enough success playing golf with tension, that you actually feel uncomfortable without any tension. Since we are usually content while in our comfort zone, we usually choose to not stray from it.

We will still have the occasional victory but...not to the extent that we are capable of. It is often very difficult to get someone to “TRUST” himself or herself if they are not in the habit of doing so. Once they can experience enough little victories by trusting themselves though, they get to the point that “TRUST” becomes habitual.

When a person habitually trusts their muscles to move in the correct sequence through visualization, they set themselves up to play far above the standard that they are used to. Remember, in all but maybe a few isolated cases, it is a process that comes through little victories, which lead to greater victories and then finally becomes a habit. Those little victories are what give us the impetus to trust more and more so that we can experience greater victories and then finally, through experience...we learn that we are successful when we “TRUST” rather than “DOUBT”!

“TRUST leads to relaxation! ”DOUBT” leads to “FEAR”, “FEAR” leads to “ANXIETY” and “ANXIETY” leads to “TENSION”!

It would be nice if we could just understand these things and then go make it so. I don't mean to sound like former president George Bush, but...”Not gonna happen, not gonna happen”! If you were a child, it would come much more naturally because you wouldn't have a library full of undesirable outcomes of the past. As adults, we have to learn again what it is like to play



without fear and stay in the present. We have to get rid of all of those memories of unsuccessful outcomes that have led us to our present condition.

This is one of the reasons why touring professionals putting strokes get shorter and shorter as they progress through their careers. The average person can only stand so many negative outcomes before their mind starts to become fearful and makes adjustments to lessen the chance of a bad outcome. You might hear Peter Alliss say every now and then “Ahhh...to have the nerves of a twenty year old”! Another way to say it might be, “Ahhh...to have the reckless abandon of a young golfer who hasn’t had to file thirty years of undesirable shots into his library”!

Are you relegated to the wreckage pile just because you’ve known many defeats in the past? Not at all. However, you will need to have some kind of vehicle to remove those memories or at least be able to put them out of your mind and focus on the here and now. If I may give you a suggestion that I feel is beneficial. Learn to enjoy the moment. Relish the fact that you even have an opportunity to be in this pressure packed situation in the first place. Whether it is the pressure of the Club Championship or just the pressure of making the ball carry over water for a hundred and fifty yards or so. You will begin to let yourself win little victories that will lead to greater victories and thereby start to fill you with more and more confidence. You will start filling your library with positive experiences, which will play through your mind when facing future shots.

Would you like to be effective at being able to visualize? Here’s a tip that should help. The next time you hit a shot that you are proud of...hold your finish and feels its balance, look around at the beautiful green grass on the fairway. Smell the fresh air or recently mown grass. Listen for whatever sounds you might hear, maybe birds chirping or just the wind blowing through the trees. Enjoy the feeling of pulling off a shot that might have been under much pressure. The point is, involve as many senses in this experience as you can. Make it as vivid as you are able to and enjoy the moment.

By doing these things, that particular shot will become a memory that you will enjoy playing over and over again. Take advantage of as many good shots as possible by getting into the habit of enjoying the moment.



Would you like to play much closer to or...at the level of your potential? Just have a library full of good shots that you can recall and watch the magic begin. This isn't some new mystical way of playing better golf. It is actually the same type of thing that most of the players on the PGA Tour do habitually.

Keep in mind though, it is extremely difficult to stay focused non-stop for four hours or so. You will find it much easier to visualize when the time comes, if you'll relax between shots and enjoy the beauty of the golf course, chatting with you playing partners, enjoying the weather or whatever you feel comfortable thinking about. Try to make it something that does not get you keyed up but...relaxed!

Remember:

- ◆ When you hit a good shot, put it into your library as vividly as possible by incorporating as many senses as you can to remember the moment.
- ◆ When faced with a similar shot in the future...relive the shot placed in your library. Try to recall every sense that you used to remember it. Remember the feeling of satisfaction that you had. Think about how your swing felt.
- ◆ Now visualize the shape of the shot you are now trying to hit. Picture the ball coming to rest precisely where it was aimed.
- ◆ Whether you take a practice swing or not is up to you but when you are actually getting ready to make the shot, trust your muscles to make the necessary movements in response to your visualization...to create the shot that you visualized over again. Relax and let your instincts take over.

Hey...there's another shot that you can put into your library.

Good golfing!

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