

Learn to Concentrate and Win at Golf

The 72nd hole of a major championship humbles many hopeful golfers expecting to win their first major championship. At the British Open championship at St Andrews in 1970, Doug Sanders missed a putt of less than three feet to win the Claret Jug. This error not only cost him millions of dollars in lost prize-money and endorsements but also the chance to win his first major tournament in golf. His mistake was simple: he was thinking too far ahead rather than focusing on the task at hand:

“I made the mistake about thinking which section of the crowd I was going to bow to! I had the victory speech prepared before the battle was over...I would give up every victory I had to have won that title. It’s amazing how many different things to my normal routine I did on the 18th hole. There’s something for psychologists there, the way that the final hole of a major championship can alter the way a man thinks”.

Though it is easy to explain the mistake Doug Sanders made, it’s much more difficult to correct it. We do not lose concentration – we misdirect it. If you think about your concentration as a torch shining a beam of light toward something, then it ought to be pointing toward what you are doing rather than what you wish to avoid. On the 18th tee, we might be regretting what just happened on the 17th green or forecasting the outcome on the 18th hole; however, these thoughts are unlikely to help us to succeed on this tee shot. To overcome this dilemma, we need sensible strategies to improve our concentration and to stay in the present. Here are three practical tips to improve your concentration. First, develop and refine your pre-shot routine. Pre-shot routines work because the golfer learns to focus on task-relevant information (e.g., focusing on the back of the ball) rather than task-irrelevant information (e.g., thinking about the outcome of the shot). Your pre-shot routine helps you to prepare yourself physically and psychologically for the upcoming shot. Second, we can instruct ourselves about what we want to do. This instructional self-talk might be “smooth

and low” to remind ourselves to create a wide take-away on our backswing. Finally, we can practise in our minds what we wish to do on the golf course - this form of mental practice is known as mental imagery. Mental imagery allows us to rehearse physical actions (e.g., swinging a sand wedge) in our mind. Mental imagery was a vital skill for the 18-time major champion, Jack Nicklaus:

“I never hit a shot, not even in practice, without having a very sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head. First I see the ball where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I see the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behaviour on landing. Then there is a sort of fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality”

In summary, golf is a game played with the body but won in the mind. We can improve our concentration when we practise our pre-shot routine, instructional self-talk and mental imagery while we practice physically on the range and on the golf course. You might feel that much of what I have written is common sense; however, my question to you is this: Is it your common practice? In other words, if you do not practise your pre-shot routine, instructional self-talk and mental imagery it's unlikely we will be able to concentrate on the task at hand when it matters most.