

A Round in My Mind: The Tale of the Golfer and the Sport
Psychologist

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Introduction

This is a story about Chris Marriott, a 4-handicap golfer who plays a round of golf at his local links – the Jubilee Course at St Andrews – with a sport psychologist, Dr James MacAndrews. James works with golfers – from the European Tour to satellite tours in the UK and Europe, and amateur golfers of all levels. During this round of golf, Chris and James share their experiences as the round of golf unfolds.

James arranged to meet Chris at the driving range forty-five minutes before his tee time, but he arrived just fifteen minutes before. Chris darted from the driver's seat to the boot of his car, ripping at his bag of clubs that was tangled with his son's scooter. Eventually, the bag emerged, along with a bucket and spade from a trip to the beach the previous day. Chris fumbled through the large pocket on his bag where he had left his shoes from his last round of golf three days before. It had rained that evening and the freshly cut grass was still clinging to the cleats of his golf shoes. He smashed the soles of the shoes together three or four times before sitting down on the edge of the boot to put them on. James could see Chris was flustered, so he walked slowly to his car, allowing Chris some time to compose himself and get himself ready for the round of golf. They shook hands, and as they did so, Chris began his apology:

‘So sorry, James; I thought I had more time to prepare this morning, but my wife popped out to the shops and was back late – so I was minding the two monsters! It's not how I usually get ready.’ James replied calmly, ‘Life doesn't stop because we have a round of golf to play.’ James prompted Chris to take a moment to prepare.

Chris enquired, ‘What shall we do now?’ To which James replied, ‘What would you normally do now?’

‘I would probably just hit some putts so I am close to the first tee because I don’t want to miss my tee time.’

‘OK, let’s begin there.’

James wanted to see how Chris usually prepared for a round of golf. He wondered whether this rushed preparation was more usual than Chris admitted. It is often the case that golfers disproportionately display their best side to the sport psychologist – the ‘perfect’ side, as it were – rather than who they really are. A lifetime being the person your parents want you to be; what your teachers wanted you to be; what your boss wants you to be. It can be exhausting.

Ripples of these thoughts were entering Chris’ mind. Chris felt a little uneasy. As he rolled one or two putts on the green, he thought, ‘Oh, my routine! Oh hell! I should be doing my routine. It’s the first thing I read in his (Dr MacAndrew’s) book: *With Golf in Mind*. I bet he can’t wait to see the end of this round. He’s used to watching Albert Ross sinking putt after putt on the practice ground of the Old Course as he prepares for the Dunhill Links or the Scottish Open at Royal Aberdeen. And now he has to endure my appalling putting stroke. Damn it – why did I contact him in the first place!’

James enquired, ‘How are you feeling?’ Without hesitation, Chris replied, ‘Oh fine.’ It was a response Chris unthinkingly offered to people he met. He’d always been fine. When he was asked to do extra hours at work, ‘Oh, that’s fine’; when his wife wanted him to look after the children while she went shopping with friends, and he couldn’t watch the football, it was ‘fine’. When his father demanded he assist within the family business during the summer holidays, and he couldn’t go to the beach with his friends – it was always fine.

James queried a second time with sincerity: ‘How are you feeling?’ Chris felt that his response ought to be sincere too.

‘To tell you the truth, James, I’m not feeling so good. I...I...I have played golf for the past thirty years, you know, ever since I was a kid. And I love golf, but it just hurts me now. I’m not as good as I thought I would be; I’m just not good enough.’

James replied, ‘Not good enough?’ in an enquiring tone, reflecting the point for Chris.

‘Yeah, just not good enough to play what I think I can play. I’m not succeeding; it’s embarrassing. You’d be embarrassed to play golf and show your scorecard to the lads. You’d be ashamed of your scores in the clubhouse because you used to be good.’

James recognised the distance Chris placed between what was happening and to whom it was happening. Chris created this distance with ‘You’d be embarrassed... You’d be ashamed...’. James tried to capture what Chris was saying: ‘Golf, it would seem, is hurting you now; you’re feeling that you are not worthy to play golf when your scores are not as good as you would like them to be and what others might expect from you, because you were good before?’

Chris nodded as he walked to pick up his ball. ‘It’s funny.’ Chris laughed as he flicked the ball into the air from the ground using the back of his putter and dropped it into his trouser pocket. ‘You’re right, you know. You’ve just captured what I have been feeling for quite a while now. How could anyone play golf well thinking and feeling as I do? I guess that’s why you work with the pros.’

James enjoyed the compliment and smiled, slightly embarrassed, and paused for a while.

‘That’s kind of you to say so; I guess I’ve learned about myself too – talking honestly with my clients. They have helped me to see myself – the good and the bad.’ With that, they both laughed heartily as they walked to the first tee.

Hole 1: Willie Auchterlonie (367-yard par 4)

The first tee was clear now, a two-ball had just left, and both players were in the middle of the fairway preparing for their second shots. Chris teed up his ball to play the 367-yard par 4 with a slight dogleg left to a raised green. With a good drive, Chris would be within pitching wedge distance (about 120 yards) and a gilt-edged chance of a birdie – but it had to be a good drive. There was silence between Chris and James because James didn't want to interfere as Chris prepared to play the tee shot as he would have extemporaneously. Chris' natural shot was a draw so he used to tee his ball on the right-hand side of the tee and let the ball fly out to the right before it curved back towards the centre of the fairway – even a little towards the left-hand side – allowing him to regard the green directly for his approach shot.

Chris took two practice swings. He did so because he had seen one of his favourite Tour professionals – Ernie Els – do so at the recent Scottish Open. He set himself up to the ball, glanced down the fairway and then back to the ball. Then he repeated the glance down the fairway, and when he brought his eyes back to the ball, he moved the clubhead away and unleashed a cracking drive. The ball soared to the right-hand side of the fairway, turning gracefully and swooping with a delicate bounce forward on the downslope of a ridge on the fairway, stopping ninety yards from the green. Chris plucked his tee from the ground and said, 'You're working your magic already – it's been quite a while since I drove off the first tee as well as I did there. It's birdie time now!'

James noticed the elation in Chris. He noticed how his shoulders were pushed back and his chest puffed out. The fourball waiting at the first tee congratulated him with 'Golf shot!' and another shouted 'That's Bubba long!' He

slipped his bag onto his shoulders and waited for James to speak.

‘Chris, those boys enjoyed it!’

‘I guess so. It’s nice to hear that – it’s been a while, you know. And that’s one of the things about golf – golfers applaud good shots even when they are competing against you. In how many sports does that happen?’

‘You enjoy good shots?’ James enquired tentatively.

‘Who doesn’t?’

‘Yes, a fair point. I suppose what I am asking is that a good shot is satisfying to you and there’s an extra buzz if other golfers see it too?’

Guessing that James was hinting at something about what it means to have others recognise how well you play golf, Chris explained: ‘Well, I used to just like hitting good shots. There is something so satisfying in the feeling of getting through the ball and watching it soar with a lovely draw through the air – like a drug it is. I’d hit for hours down at the range, never really bothering who was about. I was lost in my own world. I was Tom Watson, I was Freddie Couples, and I was Tom Kite. Other golfers would enthuse, “You’ve got a lovely swing – silky smooth.” Sometimes, I could overhear some of the older golfers at the club saying, “Take a look at his swing – pure class – even at his age. I tell you, if he doesn’t make it, nobody will.” and “He works so hard, he’s like Faldo.” And for someone who didn’t get much praise at home, I was hooked on the stuff at the golf club. I’d do anything to get more of it – anything.’

James pondered on what might be unfolding now for Chris – emotionally, at least. A flashback to his teenage years when the game seemed so enjoyable, lost in his own world playing golf. His golf performances brought adulation from

those around him, and the future seemed laden with riches – golfing riches. James felt that the rich past and the poor present might not be helping Chris to cope with golf now, with the disappointment and regret of what might have been. This last point was particularly heartbreaking because when Chris was growing up he played golf successfully at each age group and lost in the semi-final of the under-18 national championship – a highlight of his golf career. He was somebody – he was good at golf. And the boy he beat in the quarter-finals of that national championship 4&3, and twice before in similar events, was now a stalwart on the European Tour. Chris used to feel sorry for him because he beat him three years in a row in national championship match-play. The boy tried so hard but didn't have the faculties to defeat Chris.

'And now?' James enquired.

'Well, now, all I've got are the memories. Oh, and this putter – I haven't changed it, but it used to work better then.'

Chris and James were now standing a few feet from his ball and Chris said, 'Will I just play as I normally do?'

'Yes, as you normally do.'

Chris appeared constrained in his practice swings. Ninety yards was more than a full gap wedge for him so he had chosen his pitching wedge and was trying to make a shorter, smoother swing. He stepped into the ball, glanced at the target and back at his ball about eight times, and then struck the ball. It set off steeply – heading towards the flag, drawing more and more as it reached the green, eventually missing the green short left and rolling into the deep bunker there. It left James with a challenging up and down to save par.

Before James said a word, Chris defensively uttered, 'From the sublime to the ridiculous – nothing new there,' James

paused for a moment as Chris examined his clubface, before reflecting: ‘Is this pattern usual for your golf shots?’

‘It is now. I knew the shot I needed, but I couldn’t commit to it; and I was so eager to see the ball hit the green, I was up and out of my shot before it left the clubface – so silly, so annoying. This was a birdie hole.’

‘And now...’

‘Now I’ll be lucky to walk off with a six from there. I know it is the worst side to be on this hole and, lo and behold, I’m there!’

James didn’t want to interfere at this stage of the round and consultation. He resisted offering unsolicited advice and pontificating about the psychology of excellence in golf. James wished for Chris to relate his story – as a golfer and as a person. He needed Chris to reflect on how he regarded himself on the golf course and all those ways of thinking that marred his game. Destructive thinking that is illogical and irrational pervades golf. James had heard this destructive thinking from Chris and many other golfers. It ranged from rigid demands (e.g., I must get a birdie on this hole), to awfulising (e.g., A bogey is awful) and low frustration tolerance (e.g., I can’t stand it when my shot does not go where I want it to).

Chris trudged to his ball with his sand wedge dragging along the ground. He had the air of a man who had lost all hope. In the bunker, Chris peered up from where he stood and could just see the top portion of the flag on the far side of the green, and said, ‘Here goes nothing!’ With that final proclamation, he swung his club and the ball shot into the air, landing softly, just inches from the hole. Chris couldn’t see the ball but felt it was good and raced up the bank to catch a glimpse of it landing. It had landed before he arrived, and he looked astonished at what he had just achieved. ‘Now that is one lucky shot,’ he laughed. He

didn't even need his putter to tap the ball into the hole – par 4, done and dusted.

As they walked to the next tee, James reflected on what he had just seen.

‘You had a shot to the green that slipped off the edge and left you with a tricky up and down. You felt that a double bogey would be the best you could score from there. Yet, I’ve just watched you write the number four on your scorecard.’

Left with the echo of this statement, Chris explained himself, ‘I guess I didn't realise that I was capable of getting up and down; or more accurately, I was wallowing in self-pity for a poor approach shot and letting myself off the hook, rather than focusing on what I had to do – fighting for everything. OK, lesson learned!’

Hole 2: Whinny Knowe (360-yard par 4)

The second hole was another short par 4. A solid drive would leave Chris with a wedge into the centre of the green, which was guarded with bunkers at the front and thick rough at the back. This green was two-tiered, with the high portion sloping gently to a sharp incline leading to the lower portion of the green. The two-ball ahead were in the fairway, so James and Chris discussed the challenge of the hole ahead.

Chris began, ‘It doesn’t look like much, does it? But this hole has caught out more players than I can count. You see, it’s a wedge or 9-iron approach shot most of the time, depending on the wind, and the danger is mostly at the front. I know what I need to do here – club up on my approach shot.’

After another solid drive – slightly held up by a light breeze – Chris was left with 110 yards to the pin and 130 yards to the back edge of the green. Chris and James were now standing close to the ball as Chris began to select a club. James noticed a slight hesitancy in Chris’ club selection. Chris lifted his gap wedge, dropped it back into his bag and picked up his pitching wedge, then flicked back to this gap wedge. Chris mentioned that he was playing to the ‘fat’ part of the green on the top tier to avoid the bunkers. The pin was located on the lower tier near the front right bunker. Chris hit his shot high, and as it continued to climb, it lost distance and dropped sharply in the face of the front right bunker. ‘Argh...damn that gust of wind,’ Chris lamented as he walked back to his bag.

James didn’t feel a gust of wind; in fact, it was quite calm with a constant, light breeze. In any case, he was concerned about Chris’ explanation. He enquired, ‘The ball dropped quite sharply on your wedge shot; is that typical for you?’

Chris thought about it for a few seconds, ‘I suppose it does, but I’ve probably not thought about how it drops. Feeling that gust of wind, I should have clubbed up as I said back on the tee.’ James felt that Chris had made a sensible decision ‘...to use enough club’ as they discussed the shot beforehand, yet he had chosen his gap wedge, rather than his pitching wedge, when he arrived at his ball in the fairway.

‘Chris, it sounds as though you knew what the right course of action was at the beginning but changed your mind when you pulled out your gap wedge. I wonder what you were thinking about at that moment.’

‘I thought it was the right decision, alright,’ Chris snapped.

‘I gather you might be annoyed by your decision and regret the outcome or, perhaps, you are annoyed by what I said?’

‘No, I’m not annoyed about what you said at all.’

‘But I sense you have something more to say?’

‘Okay, you got me. You see, I was feeling confident after getting up and down on the last hole, and my ego saw a birdie opportunity. With the pin at the front, I thought it would be a full gap wedge, hit perfectly. I thought it would be at the foot of the flag. I don’t think I hit it as well as I could have and it came up short. I should have used my pitching wedge, and now I’m trying not to think about the bunker shot and what will happen, but I fear a dropped shot here.’

‘Do you feel your emotions played the shot before you had a chance to choose the best option for you right now?’

‘I guess so; I am playing the shot as the golfer I wish I was, rather than the golfer I am right now. I suppose it’s just something I have to come to terms with.’

James felt Chris was disappointed about this realisation. 'You seem quite unhappy with that realisation.'

'I am sad – I'm playing someone else's game rather than my own. I'm playing to look good to anyone who cares to watch. I'm making bad decisions and what I get is bad golf from a bad golfer.'

James was aware that Chris might be drawing a harsh conclusion (or exaggerating) to explain the event that had just happened. If Chris had hit the gap wedge perfectly, his ball might well have been at the foot of the flag and this conversation might not be happening – had that outcome prevailed. Sometimes, the vagaries of golf feed the tale of woe for the golfer; sometimes, it's best to avoid the microanalysis of every shot so that we can account for the imperfections humans experience when playing sports. On this occasion, Chris can choose to blame himself for the outcome or he can choose to learn from the experience – especially, how his biased thinking creates unhelpful emotions and actions. This one shot does not make Chris a bad golfer, and neither does one shot make Chris a good golfer. James wanted to help Chris to avoid labelling himself as 'bad' and felt this might be something to discuss as the round progressed.

Chris and James were now standing in the bunker assessing the shot. Chris began by saying, 'My ego wants to pop this up high and drop it softly by the hole.'

"Only *by* the hole?" as if to say he thought Chris' ego would want to drop it into the hole for a birdie. Chris laughed, 'Now that's an ego.'

James enquired about Chris' choice and asked, 'What would you choose to do if you were playing golf confidently?' This question is known as a contrast; it quickly helps the golfer to understand what he would think, feel and do if he were feeling confident. Chris smiled and

said, ‘It’s funny that you ask that question because if I were feeling confident, I would probably look at the lie of the ball and make a sensible assessment to get the ball up and down.’

‘Shall we go with that decision, Chris?’

‘It sounds good to me.’

Chris retraced his steps to his bag, picked up his sand wedge and stood by the greenside bunker, rehearsing practice swings. James identified the ‘confident, young golfer’ emerging in Chris as he descended into the bunker. With multiple glances at the flag and the landing spot, Chris smoothly splashed the ball out of the sand, landing it softly – seven feet from the pin. Chris smiled as he knocked the sand from his cleats and placed the club back into his bag.

Chris eased the head cover off his putter and walked over to mark his ball and clean the sand off it. He placed the line on his ball on his intended line and stepped back from the ball to make two practice strokes. James didn’t want to interfere at this stage of the putting routine, so he let Chris prepare and execute the shot. Chris stepped into the ball and made one last practice stroke. Then he glanced at the hole one last time and stroked the ball. It didn’t deviate from its line and dropped in the front door.

‘Two pars already – I like where this is going!’ Chris exclaimed.

While the pair ambled to the next tee, Chris mentioned to James that he estimated he was ‘playing more aggressive golf, fighting for his place in the game’ and asked whether James agreed. ‘Does that sound right to you, James?’

‘I guess the question I have for you, Chris, is whether it sounds right to you.’

‘Yes, I suppose it does. I am starting to find my golfing-self out here.’