



HOW TO DEVELOP CONFIDENCE

By Dr. John Pates

The five-times Open champion Harry Vardon said there are two types of golfers - those with the mental strength to win and the rest.

I was lecturing at Sheffield Hallam University when I met Darren Clarke. He was the first golfer I worked with you could really call a superstar. Peter Cowan, who coached Darren and Lee Westwood, among others, had invited me to the 2002 English Open at the Forest of Arden.

You probably know that the day before most European Tour events a Pro-Am is held. This low-key competition is an opportunity for sponsors to enjoy rubbing shoulders with some of the world's leading players. Professionals use this round to fine tune their knowledge of the course and though performing well is not important to them, they do not like playing badly 24 hours before the actual competition. Darren shot 84, an unbelievably bad round considering he was one of the best players in the world. He had not won a tournament for almost a year. Darren was down. He was depressed and running out of ideas.

Pete Cowan asked me to see Darren. He said he thought my ideas might help him. Peter said Darren had lost his confidence and he didn't know how to get it back. I met Darren in his hotel room on the Wednesday night before the tournament began. We chatted for three hours to assess his problems and give me an opportunity to help him think in a more positive way.

His mind was in a bit of a mess, to be honest, but I was familiar with the problem. I had come across the same negative way of thinking with other golfers. Every time Darren was about to hit a shot all he could think about were bad swings. He was swamping himself with the worst possible images. This is a common fault among players in a slump. We soon found a solution.

It was great working with Darren. He's a quick learner who is great at imagery. So what should have been strength had become a weakness. He was using his imagery skills to recall bad shots and that was destroying him.

Golfers everywhere often do that. I'm sure you've seen your pals talk this way. You've probably slipped into this habit occasionally yourself, no matter how well you have played. Pros are the same. Every week on Tour I see players come into the clubhouse after shooting five or six-under and talk about one missed putt or a poor bunker shot or a bad drive that cost them a bogey. They are never satisfied. So they focus on bad shots.

There's a pattern here. Often players play one bad shot and then focus on it during the actual round. So one bogey is often followed by another, then another and before

long, what should have been a 66 or 67 becomes a 73.

The opposite is also true. When a player hits a great shot, say a three-wood close to the pin on a long, tight par five, that often leads to a string of birdies. I've researched this and it's incredible how often this happens. The only thing that is different is how they think. Their swings do not alter but their minds do.

That kind of profile is common among some of the world's top players. Colin Montgomerie is a classic example. His scorecards are often littered with strings of bogeys or birdies and it's easy to pinpoint when he hit a particularly poor shot or when he turned on the magic, as we all know he can.

In his previous tournaments Darren was constantly following one bad shot with a couple of bogeys – it was almost guaranteed. Concentrating on bad shots causes you to immediately slip into the wrong mental state to play well. That happens more or less instantaneously on the golf course. That's a short-term problem. Long-term though, that kind of thinking is really serious because over time, say several weeks, it will start to erode your confidence. Then you're in a slump.

I asked Darren to think of a time when he was playing well, when he hit the ball perfectly, holed putts and won a tournament. He chose his 2000 World Matchplay Championship victory over Tiger Woods when he played magnificently at the La Costa Golf Club in California.

It was easy for Darren because even though the best part of two years had gone by, the memory was clear to him, as if it was yesterday. He could remember every hole and every shot of that 36-hole final. We started on the first tee, completing the first hole and moved on to the second. All the detail was there in his mind – what part of the fairway he was in, where Tiger Woods' ball was and even some of the conversation he had held with his caddy and what they were thinking at different times during the final.

He had the perfect mental game that day. Darren told me what it was like when Woods kept hitting the ball 20 yards beyond his tee shot. He said it was no problem to him because deep down he was supremely confident of putting his next shot on the green first, close to the pin. It was as if he was saying to Tiger: 'Follow that.'

In his mind, Darren relived the wonderful feeling he had when he holed the putt that won him the championship, fairly comfortably on the 15th green. He recalled Tiger congratulating him, how the crowd cheered – all wonderful, positive memories.

He looked at me, beaming with confidence, a broad smile across his face. I reminded him how powerful thinking that way was and that he needed to use the same imagery skills tomorrow in the tournament. That would get him in the right emotional state to help him play. I guaranteed that.

Darren had begun to recognise the feeling that recounting great memories can give him. I asked him to make associations with other thoughts that could reproduce this incredible sensation. We discovered that music worked particularly well for Darren. He was fond of the theme tune to Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* movies called *The Eye Of The Tiger*. The tune is loud and aggressive and the catchy melody gave him a similar emotional response to hitting a good shot.

Music works with most people. Like all art, it taps into your emotions very quickly. We've all experienced the benefits of music, haven't we? I have often played a favourite CD and by the time the song has finished, my state of mind is totally different. It only takes a couple of minutes, perhaps less. Usually I become happy. Music puts us into a good mood. Art is a fantastic way of expressing emotions and creating positive feelings – confidence, enjoyment, high energy and excitement. If you know how to tap into them you can get yourself into the correct mental state to

play your best golf.

Go to a place that you feel comfortable in your mind. Darren went back to La Costa Golf Club in California, where he pulled off his momentous defeat of Tiger Woods. For you it might be your local course on a day when you played particularly well. Give it some thought. All the shots will be there inside your head; it's just a question of digging them out.

We worked on Darren's memories throughout his career and made them specific to a particular club, filtering through tens of thousands of shots, discarding the mediocre, the average, the good, even the very good until all we had left were perfect shots. I remember the emotional thought Darren used when he hit his driver at the Forest of Arden was an opening tee shot at Wentworth in the PGA Championships the year before. Everything about that shot was perfect - the timing, the rhythm and the strike. Then he would imagine he was listening to the *Eye Of The Tiger* as if he had a CD player in his head. Finally, when he was over the ball, I asked him to focus on the target, whatever that might have been. If you are playing to a pin, the visualisation will be easier than if you are hitting towards a featureless fairway. That doesn't matter. In your mind, stick a flag or a bright post where you want the ball to go. Your mind can do anything to distort reality and get you in the right frame of mind. Try it. So now Darren is ready to hit the ball and with all those positive thoughts flooding into his brain he is virtually certain of a good shot. And that's what happened in the tournament.

Darren also used the progressive relaxation techniques we have talked about in another chapter. Do you remember Gary Emerson in the Italian Open and how he squeezed his club? Well Darren did the same thing and it was just as successful. We had enjoyed our time together. Darren was an easy pupil who opened his mind up to my ideas. And as I have already told you, he has amazing powers of imagery. I wished him well and I had a strong feeling he was going to play well. He did too. He shot 65 in the first round, an astonishing reduction of 19 shots. Darren followed that with three more great scores of 70, 68 and 68 for a final total of 17-under to win the tournament by three shots from Soren Hansen, the Danish player. Remember, Darren did not have a new putter or a new driver. He had not altered his swing or changed his ball or his caddy. No, all Darren had done was to think smart. I must say I wasn't surprised when Darren asked me to be his sports psychologist for the rest of the season. His improvement had been spectacular and unexpected and caused quite a stir in the golfing media. Two days later I was in New York assisting Darren in the US Open, which was being played on the horrendously difficult Bethpage Park course on the outskirts of New York. I remember Darren played his practice rounds with Thomas Bjorn. It was an incredible experience for me walking inside the ropes with these two great players. Darren continued with the process and played well, finishing in the top 24 with a host of big-name players behind him. I remember one particular shot he played in the practice round. He pulled his tee shot on the difficult par three 17th, and he was on the edge of the green but a long way left, perhaps 40 feet. The pin position and the severe slope compounded the difficulty of the shot. It was virtually impossible to get the ball within 20 feet. Darren aimed away from the flag, hit the putt and it went in. There were more than 5,000 fans there and they went mad. The shot was featured on CNN on American television that night as the shot of the day. It was an incredible experience being part of that and knowing that his improved form was primarily down to smart thinking.

SUMMARY

If you are not confident you will never play well. It's impossible. Fred Couples'

technique was simple – he always remembered his best shots. So build up a library of shots with all your clubs. Recall a great tee shot or a long putt or a holed bunker shot. Whatever your handicap is, you will have played well and hit a stack of good shots in your career. Get into the feelings and excitement of the emotions you were feeling when you hit the shot. Another technique that will help you is music.

The great Sam Snead played every shot he ever hit with an orchestra playing a waltz inside his head. I'm sure that was one of the reasons he swung the club with such wonderful timing. Then you must focus on positive outcomes. For Darren, this was his victory over Tiger Woods. You might have a vivid memory of a club medal or a friendly you played in with your pals when you took the money and played really well. The principle is the same. You will be in the right emotional state and I guarantee you will be much more likely to play your best golf and fulfil your dreams. I'm not saying it's going to be easy.

You can start to build up these memories in bed, in the car or when you are on holiday. Remember, Darren Clarke went from 84 to 65 in 24 hours. Use the same techniques as Darren and you can feel confident whenever you want.