



STAYING IN THE PRESENT

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.

This is a classic problem for all golfers from the best players in the world to novices playing in their first competition. In the golfing sense, thinking about outcomes means thinking about your final score, concentrating on birdieing the next three holes, worrying about your final place in the tournament, and thinking about how many shots you can cut off your handicap.

The first thing to recognise is that outcomes are out of your control. You could play the best golf of your life in the club championships and shoot 65 only to be beaten by a lower score. Does that mean you have played badly? Of course not.

If you focus on outcomes you are guaranteed to struggle with your confidence. Your stress levels will go up. Say you are a five-handicapper and you shoot six-over, if you are outcome orientated, you will be likely to interpret that score negatively. You will think you have failed, which is a bit ridiculous. You've probably played really well.

I lot of Tour players I talk to struggle with this. If they don't shoot well under par, they often assume they are failures. They start to think they aren't good enough to be on Tour and the next thing you know they have no confidence and struggle to get their game back.

The only thing you can control on a golf course is yourself. That means many things but primarily you must bombard yourself with positive emotions. That will get you in your zone and you will be highly likely to shoot a good score.

How about making your goal to get in your zone? Or to get in a relaxed state over every shot? They are called process goals and the difference is you can control them but you obviously can't control every other golfer in the tournament, the weather, your playing partners or if your ball gets a bad kick into an unplayable lie in a bunker. Processed and performance goals are under your control – they are measurable, manageable and they can give you enormous confidence. Don't try to shoot a particular score. Don't try to win a tournament. Don't try to beat a particular player. Those are major outcome goals that will frustrate you.

When I first started working with Dean Robertson he had missed a few cuts. Then he went on to make nine from his next ten events and virtually secured his Tour card for another season. Not long after I met Dean, I remember him playing in Cape Town, South Africa and he was two-under par with three holes to play in the second round.

He had made a dramatic improvement in the way he was thinking on the golf course but then, without warning, on the 16th tee he became outcome orientated. He started to think about birdieing the last three holes and contemplating how much he would rise up the leaderboard and how much money he might win. He bogeyed all three and missed the cut by one.

Steve Gallacher is another player who was stuck in a rut thinking about outcomes he could not control. When he focuses on playing well he is a different person to when he starts thinking about making cuts, top 10 finishes and winning tournaments.

Steve plays his best when he picks the club, selects a target, keeps that in his mind and hits the ball. It's that simple. Focusing on your target prevents you from thinking about outcomes. You can't evaluate anything.

If you hit the ball left, right or straight down the fairway – so what. You have to hit your next shot anyway. So instead of worrying, say about being in a bunker or in the rough change the way you think. Instead of thinking you might leave the ball in the bunker or fail to get the ball out of the rough, look at your next shot as a challenge.

Enjoy the difficulty. Improve your short game because if you fancy your chances of getting up and down if you miss the green that will take all the pressure off. Then the tension will go and you'll start hitting more greens because you will be focusing on the target and not on the bad places your ball might go.

You need to keep faith with a pre-shot routine that allows your mind to be consumed with processes that enable you to get into your zone. We've talked about these elements many times – relaxation, confidence, excitement, positive emotions such as fun and focusing on the target. If you do that your scores will come tumbling down.

SUMMARY

Forget about outcomes and find the keys to your own personal zone, that wonderful place your mind can take you, that will allow you to play your best golf. Focusing on your keys, on your positive emotions, will amplify them and make them more powerful. Use your mind to unlock the power of imagery, think what it would be like to be inside the body of Tiger Woods, to swing like him in an Open Championship. Imagine your own television screen inside your head and put in as much detail as you can – the crowd, the noise, the colour and the atmosphere.

Build your own private library of images so draw on whenever you need them. All the great champions can help you – and when you start thinking like them, you just might start playing like them.