

An Introduction to Mental Training

Presentation made to the Lakeside Boys and Girls Golf Teams

September 4th, 2024

Session 1 Summary & Reflections

“You must be in control of yourself before you can control your performance.”

-Ken Ravizza

In the Zone

We began our session Tuesday with an important question: What are you like when you're at your best? Your answers to this question led us to the topic of the Optimal Performance State, also known as the flow state or zone. When sharing the recollections of their best moments, people referenced feeling confident, clear, “sunny,” relaxed, energized, trusting, separated from results/outcomes, and having minimal or no thought during these powerful experiences. Your comments aligned well with the results of research studies where numerous athletes have been asked to reflect on the same topic. Here are the characteristics that are most often reported:

Mentally Calm
Confident
In Control
Focused

Physically Relaxed
Automatic
Energized
Positive

Enjoyment
Effortless
Alert

Additional less obvious characteristics I would add to this list include acceptance (of potential shot outcomes and the range of results) and gratitude. I have the good fortune to work with one of the top junior golfers in the state. During my most recent session with him, I mentioned that I would be presenting to the Lakeside teams. I asked him about his favorite mental-game insights, and he shared that he has found great value in emphasizing gratitude. Approaching competitions and pressure situations from this mindset helps him to see these moments as opportunities instead of threats and this makes it easier for him to access his remarkable golf skills when he needs them.

So What?

Why should you pay attention to how you feel during these types of performances? I believe there are several good reasons. First, your best golf is played from this physical, emotional, and mental space. **Intentionally remembering your best moments is a vital part of developing confidence.** Performance coach Nate Zinsser describes how we need to make regular deposits in our confidence accounts by consistently revisiting our best performances.

Another important insight from this exploration comes from considering what happens when we perform poorly. When we struggle, it's common for golfers and other athletes to say they have "lost it." However, a more useful way of framing such performance difficulties is to say instead that our state has changed. Rather than feeling confident, calm, energized, and focused, we feel tense, scattered, fearful, frustrated, and out of control.

When we are in this counterproductive mental space, our golf skills are still there. It's just that our altered state is interfering with their execution. This directs our attention to another important take-home point: If you want to improve your performance, learn how to influence and control your state.

How would one begin to control something that upon initial inspection seems so uncontrollable? One way to approach this challenge is to practice and develop specific mental skills, such as relaxation, imagery, self-talk, gratitude, and acceptance. For instance, one of the most common skills I introduce to athletes is physical relaxation training. With just a couple of weeks of daily practice, athletes can learn to relax more on demand and, as they acquire this skill, they are learning how to take more control of the physical tension element of the Optimal Performance State (remember, most athletes report that they feel more relaxed in these moments). To address the energy side of the equation, athletes can learn adaptive self-talk and formulate clear personal values regarding why they play the game. To target the concentration and focus elements, athletes can start training in meditation or cognitive relaxation skills. Learnable skills like these are at the core of developing a strong inner game that is resilient under pressure and stress.

Another good reason to deliberately attend to our successes is to counter the strong tendency that humans have to emphasize the negative, or what some have called our [negativity bias](#). When something bad happens, it can be argued that people are primed to respond with emotions like anger, anxiety, and fear. Unfortunately, this same tendency, if exaggerated, isn't an effective recipe for coming through in moments that matter. When we react this way, we make these less-than-optimal moments more memorable. Strong emotions make memories "stickier," and, if we're not careful, we can create a mental library "Horror" section, full of vivid recollections of our worst moments.

In graduate school, one of my sport psychology classmates was from the Midwest. Whenever he talked about the zone, he would compare it to a tornado: both are remarkable and powerful forces of nature. Living in the Midwest, it is common during certain times of the year to receive regular tornado warnings. These alerts are issued when certain atmospheric conditions are present such as warm air near the surface, cool dry air at higher elevations, and a change in wind speed. When meteorologists see these signs, they issue a warning, and tornados frequently ensue. **When playing golf or performing in any important situation, focus on and create your preconditions for a great experience.** If when you're at your best, you feel confident, energized, relaxed, clear, and focused, why not cultivate these qualities initially first to increase the odds that the zone or a state close to it will follow?

Confidence & Results

This last recommendation sets the stage for a quick conversation about the relationship between confidence and playing well. At first glance, the causal link between these two concepts seems obvious. Confidence is caused by hitting good shots. When good shots are hit, then we feel more confident. In other words, the good shots or results come first, and then the good feelings follow. It certainly can and often does work this way. However, this type of confidence is a less stable and more vulnerable type of self-belief. Notice what would happen to it if you hit a couple of poor shots in a row. If your confidence is based on what you've done recently and those results aren't good, it would likely be undermined. There is a second, more subtle causal association between these variables that athletes can take advantage of: we can choose to feel confident first, and this, in turn, increases the odds of hitting good shots. Is this easy to do? No, it's not, particularly if you've been struggling and your recent past is full of less-than-great shots. The performance coach Fred Shoemaker has a great line that connects to what we've been talking about here: The bravest thing we can do in golf is to open to the possibility that our very next shot could be a good one.

I have a personal tournament story that connects well to these insights. In 1983, I qualified for the U.S. Junior Amateur in Wayzata, Minnesota. For those who don't know, this event, put on by the United States Golf Association, is like the U.S. Open for those under 19. The golf course we played, Wayzata Country Club, was in fantastic shape. They built a new driving range across the street from the clubhouse just for the event and stocked it not with regular range balls but shiny new Titleists. The members were temporarily kicked out of their clubhouse locker room so that each contestant would have their own locker, and if we left our golf shoes out at night, someone would polish them! I was incredibly excited to be there. This was my first USGA event and I wanted to play well on this big stage, and as I played my practice rounds at the start of the week... I was playing my worst golf of the summer! I couldn't find the fairway off the tee and my approach and short games were also way off. As I flailed during these preparatory rounds, all I kept thinking was, "Ugh! Why am I playing my worst golf now? Of all the times!"

Near the end of my final practice round, I made an unusual decision. I was tired of feeling frustrated and upset. Simply playing a course set up like this was an amazing experience and opportunity. **I intentionally decided to enjoy this event, no matter how I hit the ball.** Interestingly, I started to play slightly better for the last few holes I played that day, but I didn't think much of it then. The next day was the first round of stroke-play qualifying. I played solidly. The second and final day of the stroke-play qualifying arrived, and I played a little better. I surprised myself, and easily qualified for the 64-person match play portion of the tournament. The next day, I played my opening-round match and won it. I played my second match and won it too. As the week progressed, I started to strike the ball better and better. I won again and eventually found myself in the quarterfinals (the final 8 players in the event). For the first nine holes in this match, I hit the ball the best I had all week and

took a two-up lead to the backside. Unfortunately, on a couple of key holes, the pressure of this big event got to me, and I ended up losing the match. But this event was one of the most significant finishes of my junior golf career. My future Stanford coach ended up watching me play in the stroke play portion of the event. He planned to watch the defending champion who I was paired with, but he later told me that he came away impressed with me and my game. As I think back on this event now, it's clear to me where my good play came from: **I made the decision to enjoy myself first**. I've recently been following the work of performance coach Karl Morris, who has worked with several elite golfers who have won major championships. One of his favorite encouragements is: We go first. Don't wait for the golf ball to make you feel good.

I hope these summary comments and reflections on our first session are useful. If you have any questions or reactions you'd like to share, don't hesitate to reach out. I look forward to seeing everyone on the 23th. Until then, be well!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don". The signature is stylized with a large, looped initial "D" and a cursive "on" following it.