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MENTAL GAMES

HOW TO CONQUER THE
'MAYBE SHOT',
THE No.1 MENTAL
ERROR REGULAR
GOLFERS MAKE.

If there is a sport that is more affected by indecision than golf then I'd like to know about it.

Not being 100 per cent sure of what you are trying to do will cause some level of doubt. Indecision and self-doubt are cancers to a highly consistent performance in any target-based sport, but especially golf. The more decisions that have to be made, the more hostile the possible cancer.

Golfers have to think about and decide where to aim, what club to use and when to hit the ball, and therefore a 'Maybe Shot' occurs when the player is uncertain about any of these three choices or a combination of them.

So golfers of all levels would stand to benefit a lot from reducing the indecision around these three mental selections. In doing so they would reduce the number of Maybe Shots per round and with it mount an assault on inconsistency – the reason why it is possible to shoot 70 one day and 80 the next (think of Rory McIlroy on the final day at this year's Masters), or 80 one day and 100 the next (just ask any club golfer that's ever played the game).

The real problem with inconsistency is the doubt that comes with it can spread like a virus, and before you know it a couple of poor rounds can result in you putting your brand new set of clubs up for sale on eBay.

The best way to stop this performance virus from spreading is to first learn more about the cause and then to immunise yourself from further bouts with the right kinds of solutions. As a sport and performance psychologist I help golfers eliminate the Maybe Shot on a daily basis, and here's a summary of the scientific mental skills we use to help with this remarkably common mental error.

Firstly, let's look at the basics. Knowing that the Maybe Shot is due to uncertainty about one or a combination of three decisions (what club to use, where to aim and when to hit the ball), it's useful to try to reduce self-doubt in these separately before bringing them together in the often-talked-about-but-rarely-understood pre-shot routine.

Self-doubt about which club to use is unforgivable yet still happens to most golfers a few times per round. Go to a paddock or field (one where you're allowed to hit golf balls) with 10 balls, your clubs and either a very long tape measure or one of those wheels that measures distances accurately. Using one club at a time hit all 10 balls with your usual full swing. Then go to where the balls end up and select the one that is most central in the grouping and



Perth galleries suffered through Sergio Garcia's interminable re-gripping phase during the 2002 Johnnie Walker Classic.



Three steps to a better pre-shot routine

Entire books could be written on how to build and use a pre-shot routine effective, but here are my top three tips:

1. Be careful of packaged pre-shot routines copied from someone else or downloaded from the internet. There is no one correct pre-shot routine. Make it your own.

2. Try to develop at least two pre-shot routines, one for putting and one for all other shots. At the most have four (putting, bunkers, short game and long game) as too many will make the muscle memory (autopilot) stage harder to achieve.

3. Once developed, try to always use your pre-shot routine before hitting practice shots. Hitting a bucket of 50 balls with a driver in 10 minutes is not golf. Using the pre-shot routine before each of those drives will go a long way to helping you take advantage of that practice in competitions. **- G.M.**

measure the distance from that point back to where you hit the balls. Write down this number (for example, pitching wedge: 94 metres) then move on to the next club in the bag. This whole exercise will need to be repeated every six months, as changes to your swing and physical capabilities will impact these numbers.

These simple statistics, when taken onto the golf course, will go a long way to reducing one major cause of the Maybe Shot as at least you'll know how far you normally hit the ball with each club.

Self-doubt about where to aim is also best fixed with a psychological approach. Why don't you know where to aim? In most likelihood it's because you're not too sure about the area near the target and therefore the Maybe Shot's best friends (If, Maybe and Might) creep into your thoughts. The reason most golfers play more consistently at their home club is because they know the course

better and this knowledge reduces the number of Maybe Shots caused by not being certain about where to aim. This process can be fast-tracked by simply learning the courses where you want to play well. Forget the practice round for now, as you'll find it difficult to achieve proper learning while playing 18 holes.

If you have access to the golf course then walk it. Study the areas near where you'd like to land each shot. Visualise your way around the golf course, one shot at a time. Stand in the bunkers, throw a ball or two at the green from difference heights and observe what happens. Become 'one' with the golf course (I had to put one cliché in). If you can't get access to the course then don't despair as technology can also help reduce this source of self-doubt. Scorecards and course photos will help, but nothing compares to what you can learn about a golf course from the free Google Earth software that allows the

user to zoom in to virtually any golf course in amazing detail.

As useful as these two mental skills are they will not produce the consistency you're after if they are not incorporated into a really solid pre-shot routine. And it is this psychological mega skill that also takes care of the final decision in our trio of causes of a Maybe Short - when to hit the thing!

One of the roles of the pre-shot routine is to remove 'feeling' from the decision-making process. Feelings are great in many areas of life, such as relationships, but have no place in the mindset of a mentally tough golfer. Why? Because a feeling is an opinion and it's impossible to ever get close to 100 per cent on an "I think now is a good time" thought. In other words, the golfer needs to design a pre-shot routine in which they start their backswing when something happens (for example one breath after a

final glance at the target), not when they feel ready. When the pressure is up, you'll never feel ready. About 10 years ago, Sergio Garcia decided to re-grip and waggle his club until he "felt ready". One waggle became two, which become three, and so on until it reached as many as 24. Now that's a Maybe Shot!

Maybe Shots are so damaging to a round that it's better to be 100 per cent committed to the wrong shot than only 70 per cent committed to the right one. ●