

The Mental Game

The great Bobby Jones once famously said: “Golf is played mainly on a five-and-a-half-inch course... the space between your ears.” Golf is undoubtedly one of the most mentally challenging sports there is. It is a sport in which one’s decisions, thoughts, images, and feelings set up each swing and considerably affect outcomes.

It is an individual pursuit and there is nobody to help you on the fairways if, and when, things start to turn sour. If self-belief goes and negative, irrational thoughts begin to dominate, the round can quite easily take a turn for the worse.

Every golfer has felt the effect of their mind on the course- be it a budding junior, a professional golfer or even a club golfer playing in their weekend four ball. Having played the sport competitively for the past 12 years and professionally for close to two years now, I have felt the effects of my thoughts and feelings more times than I can count. For instance, whilst getting ready to tee off on the first hole, on a nerve wracking final putt to close out an event and even when faced with a shot outside of my comfort zone. Having encountered innumerable such situations over time, I have realized that a sound mental game is the biggest competitive edge in golf and therefore the biggest differentiator between the good and the great. The mental game of golf is a huge factor in any golfer reaching their potential. It’s all very well having good technical skills, but if you are not able to access them under pressure, favorable results are hard to come by. However, the good thing about the mental game of golf is that it can be learned and improved just like one works on the technical aspects of the sport.

To shed more light on various aspects of the mental game, I decided to reach out to one of my friends who is an expert on the topic. I picked her brain about some of the questions I often get asked by junior golfers and members at the golf club. I hope you all can take away a thing or two from our conversation, just like I did.

Nanaki J. Chadha is an internationally Chartered Sport and Performance Psychologist under the British Psychological Society. Alongside, she is a doctoral student and researcher at Staffordshire University.

Here are some excerpts from our conversation:

How important is the psychological component in the game of golf?

Nanaki: Most players at the top level are at par with one another in terms of the physical, technical and tactical components of the game. However, usually one important factor that differentiates the good from the greatest is the psychological readiness of the player.

The famous quote by Jack Nicklaus “Golf is 80% mental, 10% ability, 10% luck”

accurately comprehends the importance of the psychological aspect in the game of golf.

We tend to hear the term “mentally tough” a lot in context with athletes, what exactly does that term mean in relation to golf?

Nanaki: Sport is an extremely competitive showground and can be physically, emotionally and psychologically challenging for an athlete. There is constant pressure on athletes to perform and excel in their respective sports. For instance, within golf, the final putt on the 18th green to win a championship places immense pressure on the golfer.

Some players are able to handle the pressure and rise to the challenge whereas some tend to crumble under the situations. A golfer who copes with the challenges of internal as well as external demands and triumphs under such challenging conditions is often tagged as being “mentally tough”.



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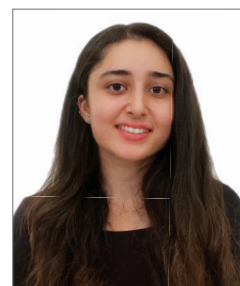
Within sport psychology, mental toughness is a common term that is used when referring to a collection of psychological factors that appear to distinguish between good and great athletes.

Furthermore, golf legend Gary Player said, “a strong mind is one of the key components that separates the great from the good.”

You have played and competed at a high level in golf in the past. According to you, what are some common psychological challenges that you think golfers tend to experience?

Nanaki: From my own personal experience of having played competitive golf and enduring its high psychological demands at a young age, I consider golf as one of the most challenging sports. Golf is a slow pace sport and for spectators it might seem like a simple task of putting a small white ball into the hole of the green. Nonetheless, during a round of golf that can take up to four to five hours to play, it is easy for golfers to get easily distracted and lose their concentration.

Golfers have a lot of time between shots, which



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more than often results in focusing on their previous mistakes (e.g., poor shots) or worrying about their next shot, rather than staying in the present. Also, many golfers engage in negative and self-defeating thought patterns, thus experiencing excessive stress and anxiety that affects their performance.

Can you suggest a useful psychological strategy that can help golfers deal with stress and anxiety on the golf course?

Nanaki: There are many psychological strategies that athletes can implement to manage their stress and anxiety on the golf course. However, one psychological strategy that can deem useful for golfers is “control the controllable”

During a golf competition, many athletes might find themselves experiencing immense stress and anxiety by focusing on things that are not directly in their control (e.g., focusing on opponents score, the weather, course conditions, slow play, spectators and referees’ decision etc.). Thus, investing a great deal of their energy on aspects they have no control over.

It is essential to encourage golfers to divert their attention on aspects of performance that they can control (e.g., focusing on their pre-performance routines, decision-making process, selection of the shot and golf club etc.).

By focusing on these aspects provide a sense of control and reduces stress and anxiety on the golf course.

How does performing psychological strategies in practice translate to and help in competitive golf play?

Nanaki: In training, golfers continuously work on their technical and tactical components of the game. Similarly, it is essential for them to incorporate the psychological component of the game into their daily training routines.

An analogy that I often employ to explain the current idea is that of athletes’ physical body. As athletes begin to train frequently at the gym, they in few months’ time begin to see their body transforming. They begin to feel physically strong and see an improvement in their physical fitness. Similarly, the athlete’s mind is a muscle that can be developed and strengthened by incorporating psychological strategies in training and conditioning. Even if golfers devote a small fraction of their time to psychological factors, they will provide themselves with a chance to perform more consistently in competition. **GP**