

FROM THE GOLF GREENS TO A SPORTS AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGIST – “A PERSONAL NARRATIVE”



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Golf might seem like a simple sport, with the uncomplicated task of hitting a small stationary ball towards a stationary hole. However, the sport poses a number of challenges and is considered as one of the most challenging sports from a psychological perspective. Particularly, its lengthy duration, as the game can take anywhere between 4-5 hours to finish, it provides excessive amount of time to make the athlete vulnerable to distractions. Alongside its interrupted pace of play, constant changing of weather and playing conditions, make it even more psychologically challenging. Some of the greatest names associated to golf have accentuated the importance of thinking accurately on the golf course. Golfing legend Jack Nicklaus asserted that, “A good golf shot is 10% swing, 40% setup, and 50% mental.” Similarly, prominent sport psychologist Bob Rottela opined, “At least half the battle occurs inside the golfers’ mind,” and Tom Kite, a professional golfer, indicated that, “The game is 80 percent or 90 percent mental.”

In any sport, optimal performance is determined by a combination of three key elements: technical skills, physical conditioning and psychological readiness (see Figure 1). At the highest level of competitive sport, where most golfers are at par with each other in terms of physical, technical competence, there is

usually only one factor that differentiates the good from the best. For instance, on the last putt on the 18th green to win a championship, it all comes down to the psychological readiness of an athlete.

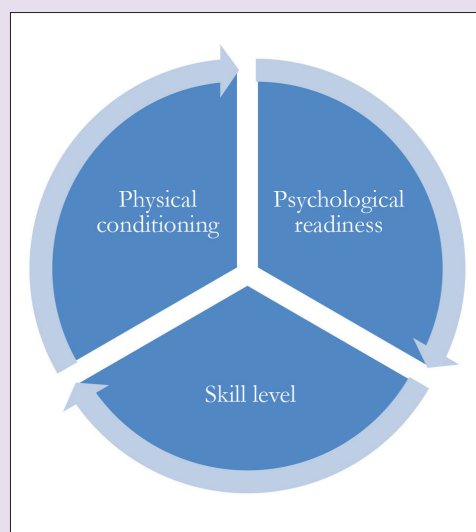


Figure 1: Adapted from Karageorghis, C. I. & Terry, P. C. 2011, *Inside Sport Psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Someone like me, who has played the sport at the National level and represented India on certain occasions, undoubtedly endured the high psychological demands at a young age. I was introduced to the world of sports at the tender age of



8. I started to hone my skills in tennis and later made my foray into golf. However, what started as a hobby turned into a strenuous ordeal due to the excessive performance pressure and soon, high levels of stress and anxiety made its way onto the greens of the golf course.



Our sporting culture constantly puts huge demands on athletes and promotes the notion of perfection and anything below excellence is considered to be unacceptable. More often than not, athletes base their entire being on their performance and begin to believe that they are ONLY good as their final score. Similar was in my case – I experienced exaggerated amounts of anxiety during golf competitions, placing immense pressure to compete without making any mistakes and expecting myself to hit every golf shot to perfection. On hitting one bad shot, I believed that my chance to get a good final score would evaporate. In particular, the constant demand for perfection was damaging my relationship with the golf, resulting in me disliking the sport altogether. In addition, I began to evaluate myself based on my sporting performance and failing to live up to my parents' expectations. Constantly being scared of the crucial and harsh feedback post poor performances made it even more challenging for me to enjoy the sport.

Though I couldn't make it professionally in the sport, but playing golf certainly has paid dividends. At my peak, I was not only ranked amongst the top ten women amateur golfers in the country of billions, but was also part of the Indian National Squad. Golf in

its own way, has also made me a more confident and an independent individual. It gave me the valuable asset of discipline, which I now apply to all aspects of my life. To play a sport at the highest level requires discipline, dedication and an enormous amount of sacrifice. Even though I experienced early successes and learnt many valuable lessons in my playing years, but one specific area that I struggled with was the inability to control my thoughts and emotions. I felt a dire need for a sport psychologist, who could have propelled me to play the sport at a higher level, but unfortunately, at that time it was a scarce resource in the Indian sport ecosystem. Having identified the void, I decided to merge my passion for sport and psychology and began my journey to pursue a career in sport psychology. Having completed my Master's Degree from Loughborough University, U.K and Doctoral Degree in Sport Psychology from Staffordshire University, U.K and alongside obtaining a Chartership as a Sports Psychologist under the British Psychological Society (BPS), have introduced me to the theoretical and practical aspects of sport psychology and allowed me to understand the athletes psyche in a detailed manner. Furthermore, it has allowed me to help athletes adopt a more rational, logical and pragmatic approach to foster better performance and well-being among them. Having gained a comprehensive insight into the field of sport psychology, I believe it is imperative for individuals present in the sporting environment of the athlete to practice the philosophy of "human first, performer second."

In 2022, after winning the World Golf Championships Match Play, Scottie Scheffler's father embraced him and communicated, "I'm prouder of who you are than your golf. You're a wonderful young man". This statement advocates a humanistic philosophy within sport, where the focus is not just on the athlete's achievements or laurels, but also on the person. Henceforward, it is important for everyone within the sporting fraternity to adopt a similar perspective and perceive the athlete as a person first and an athlete second, in order to create a supportive and rational home environment for the athlete to flourish under. In other words, a golfer's identity should not be exclusively based on the number on the scorecard, rather parents, coaches and peers, and



"Nobody ever remembers who finished second at anything." – Jack Nicklaus



most importantly, athletes need to view themselves as fallible human beings capable of making mistakes or being wrong. It's essential for us to banish the idea of perfectionism in competitive sport and instead embrace failure and learn from it.

"Golf is deceptively simple and endlessly complicated; it satisfies the soul and frustrates the intellect. It is at the same time rewarding and maddening – and it is without a doubt the greatest game mankind has ever invented" **Arnold Palmer**



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