

The Magic Circle: A Mental Tool for Creating Quality Concentration

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Abstract

Golf is a sport that provides a plethora of mental challenges due to its self-paced nature, the length of a typical round, and the various hazards found on the course. The ability to remain focused for 18 holes, especially towards the end of a round, after a bad shot (or a string of bad shots), and during slow play, is a particular challenge for many golfers – professionals and “weekend warriors” alike. This article presents a tool designed to help golfers achieve and maintain an appropriate focus throughout a round of golf. In addition to being an aid to performance, this tool can also facilitate more enjoyable golf.

There is no mystery about the origin of the phrase ‘golf is a game played on a 5-inch course – the space between your ears’. The mental challenges that golf provides seem to far surpass those presented by other sports. That, indisputably, is a large part of the allure of the game for many of us. We all love a good challenge. All too often however, the mental challenges golf breeds and golfers create, often unknowingly, cause the golfer’s mind to become his or her worst enemy on the course. How often have you backed out of a shot mid-swing and topped the ball 20 yards down the fairway because you suddenly doubted your club selection? What about chickening out on a putt when that voice ‘up there’ reminds you that you missed a similar putt a few holes back? How many times have you pulled out your driver to ‘go for it’ against your better judgment? Recognizing the power the mind has to make or break a round, many tour players

have turned to mental training consultants to help them strengthen their mental game and turn their mind into a powerful weapon. Mental training is beginning to be seen as the logical complement to the time spent on the driving range and practice green. However, mental training should not be seen as something that only the pros ‘do’; the positive effects of mental training are as great for the recreational golfer.

No doubt, many of the mental challenges inherent in golf arise due to the self-paced nature of the sport. Not having to play your shot until you are ready to do so provides ample opportunity to become distracted. Inconsistencies in your game, and the frustrations that accompany them, are frequently the result of lapses in concentration – it is not that your technique suddenly deserted you on the walk between the 12th and 13th holes! By learning to improve your concen-

tration and become fully engaged in each shot, you will be more likely to play your best game more often and consequently enjoy your golf more – which, don't forget, is why you're out there in the first place.

Many recreational golfers report that the toughest times to maintain concentration are towards the end of a round, after a bad shot (or a string of bad shots), and during slow play. Many golfers complain of not being able to concentrate for the full 18 holes. Actually, it is quite unrealistic to expect that you *can* concentrate for the 4 (or more) hours of a round of golf. If you try to concentrate on your game for the duration of the round you are likely to become mentally fatigued. You find it difficult to concentrate towards the end of the round because you have 'exhausted' your concentration. You start to make stupid mistakes, become frustrated that you spoiled your 'great' round, and retire to the 19th hole feeling cheated and disgruntled.

Instead of trying to concentrate all the time, try to 'switch' your concentration on and off between shots, therefore 'conserving' your concentration. In order to help you do this, imagine that there is a large circle (about 15-20 feet in diameter) around your ball. As you approach your ball and enter this imaginary circle, switch your attention on. Once in your circle you should be completely focused on the shot you are about to play. This is your time to prepare for the shot – fully engage. "Easier said than done" I hear you sigh. We all know that the golf course is a haven for distractions – a chattering partner, your chattering mind, dreams of winning, thoughts of your last poor performance on this hole, people watching (and you think judging), the image of your ball sailing OB... How many times have you tried to ignore distractions such as these – and failed, however hard you have tried to block

them out? Rather than fighting to ignore these distractions, give your mind something constructive to focus on. Develop a simple pre-shot routine and use it before EVERY shot. By doing this, you are providing your mind with direction. This makes it harder for your mind to wander and be distracted by negative thoughts. Typically, a pre-shot routine should commence as you enter your circle and 'switch on' your concentration. Although routines are highly personal, most include shot and club selection, alignment, visualisation of the shot you want to play, a practice swing, positive confident thinking, a glance at the target, a deep breath, and a last swing thought. However, a word of warning - KISS! (Keep It Simple - Smart!)

After you have played your shot, get out of your circle and turn your concentration off. As you leave your circle and walk up the fairway or to the next hole, take your confidence and a positive attitude with you but leave your emotions (good and bad) about the previous shot behind. Between circles totally switch off from your game – don't start planning or thinking about the upcoming shot until you reach your next circle. Instead, enjoy the scenery and the company of those you are with. Do not let it be a good walk spoiled.

By constantly switching your concentration on and off as required, you will be able to concentrate on the last putt on the 18th as well as you did when you teed off on the 1st. Using the circle will also help you take one shot at a time and therefore help you forget about your bad shots. This technique can also be used to prevent slow play affecting your game. While waiting for your target area to clear, avoid stepping up to the ball. Stay outside your circle. Don't get ahead of yourself. When your target area clears, step into your circle, switch on your concentration, and start your pre-shot routine. If you

become distracted during your routine, step out of your circle, take a deep breath then step back in and recommence your routine.

Many tour pros consider their routine to be as much part of the stroke as their swing is. Hopefully you will too. Happy Golfing!