

Articles and Tips - Mind Over Matter - Mental Approach

Do you have a mental routine? That is one of the first questions I ask my students. Most respond saying something like, "Yes, I always set up with the club aiming at a spot in front of the ball take a look down the fairway, set my feet and hit the shot." While there are good fundamental practices in that set up, it's not a mental routine. That's a physical routine, and there is a distinct difference between the two. A good physical pre-shot routine is important to play consistent golf, but a mental pre-shot routine might be even more crucial to your success on the links. A polished mental routine will incorporate your physical routine; the two can blend together into one seamless routine. A physical routine without a mental routine simply becomes a habit. Using an effective mental routine as part of your entire pre-shot routine won't become a habit; in fact, it works to keep you in the moment for each and every golf shot. So, what are the proper mental steps taken in preparation to execute each shot? Using these three simple steps it will teach you to willingly regulate your focus.

The Three-Step Mental Routine

Like many students of mine, you may recognize that you already use the following steps to some degree. But your focus will improve dramatically when you effectively use all three steps as part of your entire pre-shot routine for each and every shot and putt.



The first step in the 3 step mental routine, I have 163 over the bunker, 172 to the hole, with a perfect lie, the wind is helping a little from behind, It is a perfect stock 6 iron for me.

Step 1: Calculations and Commitment

Completing all of the analysis of the shot is the first step. This involves gathering all the necessary information – wind, slope, lie, grain, yardage, target, etc. – to make a decision on how to hit the shot.

Your focus will begin to narrow as you make a firm commitment to your club, your target and the type of shot you prefer. Ask yourself these questions:

- Which club should I use? Pick the club you feel you can make a full commitment with – one that gives you at least a 50 percent probability of successfully hitting based on all the conditions, such as the type of shot it is, your current physical conditions, your level of tension and the confidence in your game at that moment.
- What is the target? Choose as definite a target as possible, starting with an area in which you want your ball to come to rest. Then match it to something in the distance – a tree or a landmark – that will help you take aim. Intermediate spots or features that are in line with your distant target can be helpful, too. You must adjust to your target for crossing winds and the shape of the shot you choose to hit.
- Which type of shot to hit? Select the type of shot that is appropriate to the situation and within your abilities to successfully execute 50 percent of the time. There may be many options, especially if you are skilled enough to work the ball confidently. You could choose a draw, a fade, a high shot, a low shot and so on.

Refuse to make decisions – on any shot – based on what others are doing or on how the course is "meant" to be played. Instead, choose only the clubs, targets and types of shots that allow you to maximize your skills by fully committing to them. Always try to give yourself at least a 50 percent chance executing the shot successfully.

Once you are fully committed to all of your choices, you can move on to the second step of the three-step process. If you find this commitment difficult, remember that you will get more from your game when committed to a wrong decision than you will from not being committed to the right decision.



Step 2: Visualization

To further narrow your focus and to encourage reactive rather than analytical play, take a brief moment behind the ball, making sure that you are very relaxed. Clearly visualize the shot or putt to which you are committed. Visualization ranges from a general impression of the desired ball flight to a very clear mental picture of the flight and landing.

Visualization of the putt tracking across the green.



Step 3: Feel

In order to narrow your focus and promote reactive play, it is important to clearly feel the swing or stroke to which you have committed. Either behind the ball or beside it, try to feel your swing with a waggle, a partial swing or preferably a smooth full swing. Your goal is to incorporate one simple swing thought that allows you to feel the swing to which you are committed. The best swing thoughts tend to be the simplest and are most likely to center on the feel and tempo of your swing.

Here, beside the ball, I am feeling the swing that I'm about to execute.

This mental routine comes from "The Eight Traits of Champion Golfers," by Dr Deborah Graham and Jon Stabler, founders of GolfPsych.com. The value of this mental routine will, without question, help your ability to clear your head of focusing on mechanics while on the golf course. If I had a dollar for every time my PGA Tour student, Ryan Palmer, expressed that his tempo felt slower in the transition or his take away felt unhurried after he just finished playing a terrific round, then I'd be a rich man.

For Ryan, a smooth tempo always seems to be the key to his success. It can be the same for you, too.

I recently kept a close eye on another rising Tour star, J.B. Holmes, during the FBR Open in February, which he won. His mental routine was obvious and consistent. He went through his mental routine before every shot – he actually closed his eyes before walking into the shot! I thought, Wow, I can use this in my next article. His visualization skills are awesome.

Turns out, I was wrong. He explained later that when he closes his eyes, he's not visualizing the shot. He actually was reciting a verse from the Bible. In a sense, however, it's still relevant to this lesson. Part of Holmes' mental routine is his "focused meditation," in which he closes his eyes and rehearses the scripture. Meditation has been defined as any activity that keeps your attention calmly fixed in the present moment – just like your new, three-step mental routine.

Incorporating a solid mental approach to your pre-shot routine will help you become a more consistent golfer.
