

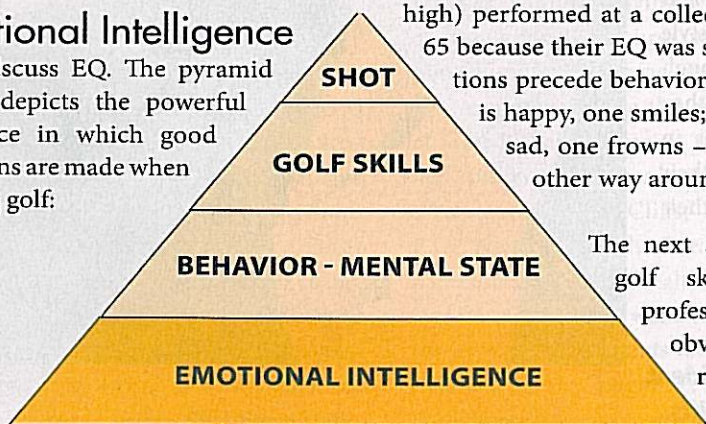
By now, everyone has some level of awareness of the “mental” game of golf. Just about every professional golfer is working with a sports psychologist of some kind, a “mental guru,” or even a professional life coach. Dozens of published books and articles on this critical part of playing golf already exist. Clearly, it is becoming increasingly important to be able to cope not only physically, but also emotionally, to gain a competitive advantage.

In this first of two articles, I'd like to introduce you to Golf EQ – a groundbreaking model of capturing all the “mental stuff” you always hear about and build a case of why it is your emotions that are the most influential part of playing good golf. In addition, I will share very simple and powerful techniques to manage and grow your EQ to play better golf. Unlike the physical talent that separates professionals from amateurs, Golf EQ requires only your desire to be better.

What is EQ? EQ is an acronym for Emotional Intelligence and is the complement to IQ (Intellectual Intelligence). EQ is the skill and ability to manage your emotions so that you can make the best decisions. The ultimate goal whether in sports or life in general, is to make good decisions, right? And in a non-reactionary sport like golf, where your mental state can derail your physical abilities, making good decisions, especially after bad outcomes, is the key to success. A high level of EQ helps you identify and reduce the mental factors handicapping your performance; improves your motivation, self-confidence, and overall attitude; and helps you get in the “zone,” making your game appear effortless.

Emotional Intelligence

Let's discuss EQ. The pyramid below depicts the powerful sequence in which good decisions are made when playing golf:



Emotions precede behavior – when one is happy, one smiles; when one is sad, one frowns – it is not the other way around.

The next step is your golf skills, where professionals are obviously superior to amateurs.

It starts with your emotional state – the bedrock of all decision making. Keep in mind the six universally agreed-upon ‘basic’ emotions: fear, anger, disgust, sadness, joy, and surprise. What is the name of the emotion you are feeling before you hit a shot? Do you know? And based on that emotion, do you know the things you can do to manage it so it does not lead to a bad decision?

It is your emotions that drive the lion's share of your mental state (the second step in the sequence). The term “mental state” is grossly misused. There are essentially 2 parts to your mental state: your IQ and your EQ. Your IQ is almost permanently set by the time you turn 4, so there is little recourse in changing that.

A Harvard study revealed that a group of people with an average IQ of 135 (very high) performed at a collective level of 65 because their EQ was so low.

golf

EQ

By Dr. Izzy Justice

The last step is executing the shot itself – shot selection and course management dictated by the lie of the ball, course conditions, pin position, etc. These skills can certainly be improved by taking lessons and good-old-fashioned practice. But again, these skills and acumen will always be trumped by poor EQ.

MYTHS

Before we discuss how to manage and grow your EQ, let's expel some myths out there about playing golf.

1. FORGET THE BAD SHOT.

(Read: Don't let the bad shot affect the next one.) I constantly hear very well-intentioned coaches and golf pros suggesting that forgetting the bad shot as quickly as possible leads to better decision making on the next shot. This is simply not pragmatic. First, our brains are not wired to simply “delete” a memory the way you can on a computer. Second, forgetting the shot may actually not be the right thing to do, because there may be some things to learn from the bad shot so that you do not repeat it. How can you learn if you are trying to forget it?

2. PRACTICE YOUR MISTAKES.

(Read: Practice makes perfect.) There is merit to this. If you keep missing 3-foot putts, then yes, practicing them makes

sense. But what if you make all the 3-foot putts on the practice green and miss a lot on the course? Or you hit the ball great on the range but cannot during the round? Then there is no point in practicing 3-foot putts or hitting more balls, because the issue is not a skill issue. But I see this all the time even with professionals. In cases like this, the issue is ... EQ. What is different about the "practice" area and the course area ... your emotions. So why not practice what is really needed ... managing your EQ?

3. CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS.

Emotions are not right or wrong, but your responses certainly can be judged as right or wrong. Emotions are a direct result of stimuli and as such, "controlling" them makes no sense whatsoever. I prefer the term "managing your reactions," which I will discuss later in the article. But make no mistake; to control your emotions is futile and not necessary. Accepting your emotions by recognizing what they are, regardless of what they are, is one of the more powerful states of awareness.

THE ZONE

How many times have you hit a bad shot and then dropped another ball and hit the same shot, only the second shot was significantly better? What was the difference between the first and second shot? It was not skill because the second one was great. It is EQ – there is no pressure, anxiety, fear, consequences, and excitement over the second shot the way there was on the first shot.

You have probably heard of athletes performing spectacularly and proclaiming they were "in the zone." What exactly is that state of "zone?" Go back and look at old tapes of athletes in all sports, even Tiger when he is blowing past the field, and you will see striking similarities in emotion and behavior.

The first is that the emotional state as viewed by behavior exhibited is neither high nor low regardless of whether the outcome was good or bad. The second is a complete disregard to the environment. I have heard athletes tell me that when in this zone state they cannot hear a sound from the thousands in the

crowd, but can hear their own breathing. The third is that once it is over, the mental exhaustion far outweighs the physical exhaustion. I am reminded of the touching moment of Tiger's mother noticing Tiger sleeping in the green jacket after his first win there just a few hours after he had won, while his entire entourage was partying downstairs. He was mentally exhausted by his focus.

Being in the zone all the time is obviously not possible or even necessary. But if you can command yourself to that state when it is needed, as all the great ones do, then you can win a lot in golf, other sports and life in general. Let's talk about how to do this.

HOW TO DO IT?

So the real question is how do you manage your emotions, especially after a bad shot? How can you will yourself to the zone state?

Assuming you have the required skill sets to perform great, or just the courage to want to be better, then it all starts with focus.

First, there are 2 levels of focus I want to introduce, followed by some techniques required to attain them. The first is Macro Focus. Macro focus is transforming yourself from the general state of being to a specific place and arena. In golf, this means thinking about the golf course and the specific golf hole you are presently playing, not the party you attended the night before or the things you have to do afterwards. It is also thinking about the club you are using and the shot you need to hit. You have to remove yourself from the world and insert yourself into the arena – mentally. And you have to be in a state of macro focus throughout your performance in your arena (your round of golf) or you will invite competing thoughts, making it infinitely harder to work through your emotions during your round.

How can you achieve the state of macro focus? Observe the surroundings, look at the trees, fairways, greens, sky, your clothes, your golf cart, your bag – all the things that can help you focus on your arena. There can be some general visual-

ization here too. Try to see what you want to happen before it happens. Just try.

The second, and much more difficult, is Micro Focus. This is the focus of being in the zone that we have already described above. When you are micro focusing, you notice the dimples of the ball you are about to hit, the glare of your club, you feel the grip pressure throughout your body, you can hear your breathing, and you feel like you are alone on the golf course.

How can you achieve the state of micro focus? First, note that you do not have to be in this micro focus state all the time during your round, just before your shots and especially after a bad shot. Second, the way to get to micro focus is to use your 5 senses to their full capacity. Specifically, feel the grip pressure, see one dimple on the ball you are about to strike, touch the ground by wiggling your toes in your shoes, smell the grass, taste your saliva. As you make a conscious effort to do this, you are concurrently making a subconscious effort to not think about unwelcome thoughts. Visualization is key in micro focus too, but unlike visualization in macro focus, it is much more detailed and specific. If you are putting, you can literally visualize the grain of every grass the ball will go over (your line). If you are hitting a shot, you can almost track the path of the ball flight every foot of the way regardless of how far the shot travels. Another key component of micro focus is the pre-shot routine, which has been discussed in detail for years. Think of the pre-shot routine as the countdown to micro focusing.

AFTER A BAD SHOT

Macro and micro focus are both easier when things are going well. But what happens after a bad shot? The number of amateur and professionals that cannot manage their responses to bad shots is phenomenal. Even the most skilled athletes are not immune. At this year's Masters, a top player was cruising along and hit a fantastic wedge shot on the 8th hole that hit the flag and went 20 feet away. Instead of an eagle or a highly deserving birdie, the player walked away with a bogey, and he went on to bogey several holes after that.

When the bad shot is hit, there is a physiological change in your body because of the power of your emotions. In a high-stress situation, the thalamus sends a signal to both the amygdala (emotional part) and the neocortex (rational part) within the brain. The signal to the amygdala, however, travels much faster than the signal to the neocortex, activating a fight-or-flight emotional response before the neocortex has an opportunity to analytically process the situation. In essence, the rational mind is taken over by the emotional. While this once served an evolutionary purpose to trigger survival instincts, today this dysregulation of emotion can dramatically reduce your performance.

Here is the formula for recovering from bad shots. I called it the RIM approach.

R I M


Recognize your emotions
Instant reaction management
Macro or Micro focus

1. RECOGNIZE THE RESULTANT EMOTION. Realize that the situation has triggered a fight-or-flight response, releasing adrenaline and increasing your heart rate. You, however, are not in a life-or-death situation, and have time to make a decision. Again, your first reaction to a bad shot should be to know your resultant emotions by name.

2. INSTANT REACTION MANAGEMENT. Don't let your body control you. Undoubtedly, you have seen players drop their heads, look in the sky, throw their hats or clubs, yell, or worse. Letting your body instantly react to a negative emotion is the first sign of demise. Be aware of the obvious fact that whereas you cannot control your emotions because they are triggered, you can control your physical reaction.

3. MACRO OR MICRO FOCUS. If you know exactly what you are feeling, which means you have a name for that feeling, then you can acknowledge it and put into play a macro and micro focus plan immediately. After recognizing your emotions and measuring your reaction, the next step should be to decide what type of focus plan you will immediately put into play. This usually depends on the severity of the consequence of the bad shot. If it is at the beginning of the round and you have tons of golf to play, then macro focus. Put things into perspective. If it's the 18th hole or a time of high importance, then micro focus. We have already discussed how to do both.

Growing your EQ is as simple as that, and will give you a great competitive advantage. Most golfers simply experience their emotions without reflecting on them in a critical manner. You cannot expect to control your emotions on the day of an important event if you haven't mastered the skills in practice. And by the way, you can apply this same RIM model to all other parts of life, which is a great way to practice without ever being on the golf course. This is why golf is such a great metaphor for life. And this is how you grow your EQ!

In summary, recognize the power of emotions as the bedrock of all decisions. In golf, call it Golf EQ. Have an identity for your emotions, and for each one, have a plan of macro or micro focus. Use the RIM Model in everyday life, and you will find yourself not just making better decisions in golf, but in life as well. What could be better? 

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