

Mental game

Even the world's best player hits imperfect shots. Keep your cool on the course by accepting your limitations, says Golf Monthly's mental coach Gary Leboff

Tame your tiger



One question I often get asked is this: "What is the biggest difference between amateurs and the pros?" It's simple.

By FAR the greatest distinction between those who earn their living through the game and those who wish that they did, is the way they handle mistakes.

Here's something I've never understood. Professionals practise for six to 10 hours per day, fine-tune their minds with someone like me and have custom-made clubs to meet their exact biomechanical requirements. Yet they EXPECT to hit just five or six perfect shots per round.

Amateurs practise when they have time – "practise" as in going to the range, pulling out the driver and trying to blast balls into the next county. They have swings that repeat purely accidentally and clubs that suit someone else. And yet the first ball that goes anywhere but as per instruction sends them into meltdown.

Golf is a game of mistakes. It is the damage caused by your errors that determines your score. If you want to reduce your handicap, eliminating the psychological fallout from mistakes will be far more effective than working on your power fade.

Negative thoughts are like a slippery staircase. They set off reactions that psychologists call "thought chains". A classic thought chain goes like this:

"That was a poor shot."

"My swing is dreadful today."

"There goes the scorecard!"

"Those lessons were a complete and utter waste of money."

"I'm a terrible golfer."

"I hate this game."

Set such "thought chains" in motion and you might as well walk off the course. It is why many golfers get so depressed.

I want to give you a couple of strategies that will enable you to escape the nightmare of "thought chains" and put errant shots into context. One is used by the greatest player in the world: Tiger Woods.



Firstly, please stop trying to be perfect. Perfectionism is a form of self-flagellation that invites the mind to set unattainable targets and wreaks havoc at the first sign of failure. I work with golfers who routinely shoot five, six or seven under par. None of those rounds are perfect, each and every one includes several poor shots. It is the response to those shots that keeps a great round on track.

From now on, before you walk onto the first tee, I want you to give yourself a "screw up allowance" – the number of bad shots that a golfer of your level is entitled to play per round. In general, a screw up allowance is identical to your handicap. Nonetheless, the minimum screw up allowance is four (even for scratch golfers). Every time you play a poor shot in future, instead of getting angry, chalk one off your "Screw Up Allowance".

As in so many other areas of the game, you could do worse than follow the example of Tiger Woods. Anyone who has watched Tiger at length knows he hits his share of bad shots.

He expects to play them. Tiger doesn't like playing bad shots but has a simple strategy for coping with adversity.

Tiger and his caddie Steve Williams employ the 30-yard rule. Whenever he hits a shot off line, Tiger allows himself 30 yards to vent, stew and curse his own incompetence. But that's it! The rest of the walk to the ball is used to regroup and refocus. By the time Tiger reaches the ball, he is ready to play.

As Steve is unlikely to be carrying your bag just yet, you must become your own virtual caddie. Give yourself 30 yards to rant and rage then let it go. It will work wonders.

For most golfers, a wayward shot is a drama waiting to happen. Remember, all you have done is played one bad shot! Make sure it has no effect on the next one.

Gary's book, *Dare* – a life-coaching book that includes plenty of golf tips – is published by Hodder Mobeus and is on sale for £10.99. You can email him at gary.leboff@virgin.net.