

# Mental game

Acceptance is one of golf's greatest skills, helping you keep your game together when you're not at your best, explains Golf Monthly's mental coach Gary Leboff

## Playing the percentages

I have fond memories of the Ryder Cup of 2002. I was working with Aston Villa at the time and their training ground is a few hundred yards from The Belfry. We'd finished for the day so I thought I'd wander over to the golf course. By the eve of the opening fourballs, alarm bells were ringing. Those with long memories will recall that the event had been delayed by 12 months due to the attack on the World Trade Centre. Several players on both sides had suffered an alarming slump in form but Sam Torrance and Curtis Strange were committed to retaining their original line-ups.

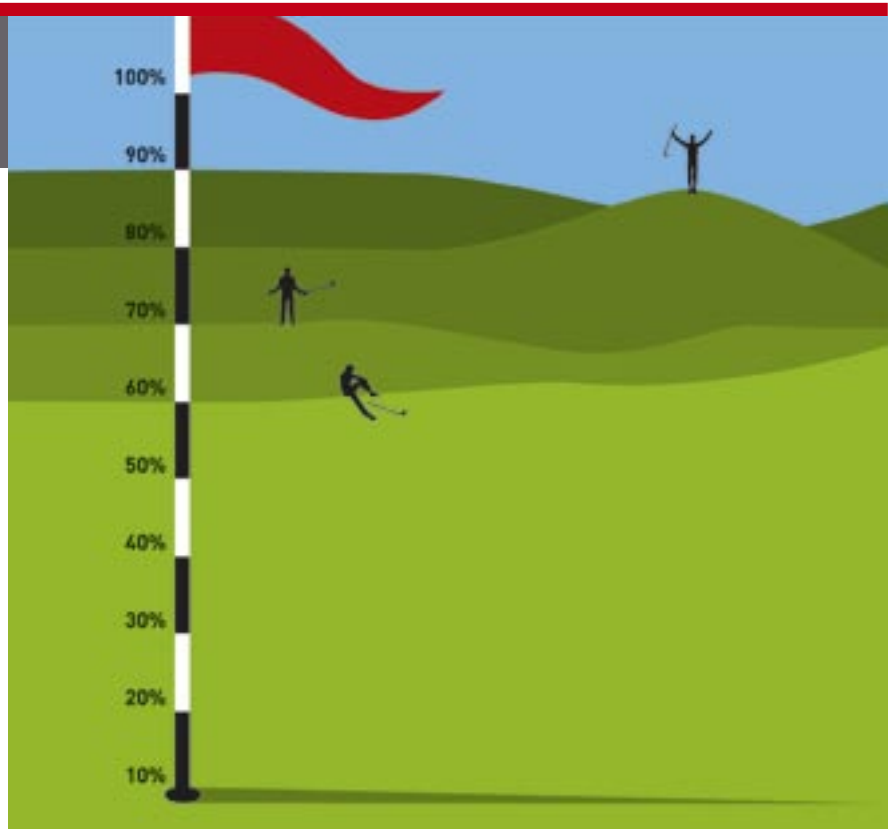
Sports psychology is an unpredictable discipline. The problems we face are often so new that the answers cannot be found in any textbook or manual. Solving these issues demands the ability to think and work quickly.

Here was a prime example. One particular member of the European team was about to perform in the biggest event in the world. His form was non-existent, his confidence had disintegrated but he was committed to playing.

Sportsmen who suffer a sharp reversal of fortune are invariably obsessed with what is going wrong (such as a lack of wickets, tries or birdies). The solution, one I have used in the Premiership, demands a considered assessment of what is going right.

The Ryder Cup star was invited to assess, out of 100, how he rated his form at that moment. The answer he gave was 52. In other words, the player felt he was performing to 52% of his ability. As you are reading this article, think about the current state of your game. Instinctively (don't think too much), what score would you give yourself right now?

Now take each part of your game. One of the many reasons that golf is such a challenging sport (something they don't tell you when you start taking lessons!) is that it is not one game but four – woods, irons, chipping and putting. Five if you add bunkers.



What score would you give yourself in each category? Another top player who came to see me recently assessed his game as follows.

**DRIVING:** 55% ("I miss too many fairways")  
**IRONS:** 80% ("It's the best part of my game")  
**CHIPPING:** 65% ("I play them well but I could do with more feel")  
**PUTTING:** 60% ("Short putts are fine but I don't make enough long ones")

This golfer's average score, his instinctive assessment, was 63%. Here's the twist – it doesn't matter what your score is. One man's 60% is another man's 70%. What does matter is that you walk on to the golf course adopting a mindset of "acceptance". Being settled with what you bring to the course that day quietsens the mind and allows you to work with what's there, instead of worrying about what's missing.

Back to The Ryder Cup. The golfer was set a simple challenge. All he had to do was play to 52%. In his terms, put alternate drives in play,

land half his irons on the green and make one or two putts. This was a clearly achievable goal. He knew he could play to 52% because: a) it was so far below his best form, and b) he could do it, quite frankly, standing on his head.

Whether or not 52% would be enough to win his matches was irrelevant. All that was required for him to conquer was his own state of mind. The rest, as they say, is history. Europe retained the Ryder Cup and the golfer played his part. On Day 1, he achieved and surpassed the 52% goal. For Day 2, the bar was gently raised to 55% and a new comfort zone was established.

Acceptance is one of golf's master skills. Too many golfers walk around the course searching for something that isn't there. Accept the game you bring to the course on the day – play the percentages – and build up from there.

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](mailto:gary.leboff@virgin.net).