

Mental game

Are you unhealthily obsessed with the game of golf? Gain a sense of perspective and you will probably become a better player, explains Golf Monthly's mental coach Gary Leboff

Is golf making you depressed?

Some things you should just never admit. While friends might tolerate doom and gloom about the state of your finances, marriage or waistline, to suggest it's your golf game that is getting you down is a recipe for social disgrace.

A client was referred to my practice just before Christmas. John had suffered a breakdown on the course. An 8-handicapper, avid practiser and ardent student of the game, John was playing with his wife when yet another iron soared high and wide of the green. "What am I doing?" he roared in frustration. "I am a hopeless golfer. In fact, I'm a worthless human being. And if you had any sense," John said, turning his wife, "you would divorce me!"

Been there, done that? Many golfers have suffered abject torture at the hands of the game. No other sport is quite so effective at exposing our emotional and psychological frailties. Missing a penalty, getting out first ball or being overtaken on the home stretch – all may leave you feeling low but none have quite such a devastating impact on self-esteem.

To the unwary, golf is a tyrant. How many times have you been told that unless you put in x hours of practice, have y amount of lessons and play z times a week, you will never be any good? It is a myth that the vast majority of golfers buy into.

Golf is demanding, expensive and time consuming. In return for all those lessons, hours at the range and guilt at not spending more time with the family, golfers EXPECT A REWARD. And they become angry when the game fails to keep its end of the bargain.

Here's the problem – there is no bargain. Such deals are the figment of a golfer's imagination. I know a county standard player who never practises. He maintains that standing on a range has no bearing on what happens on the course. While I believe you can take a good thing too far, his approach works for him. He decides when and if he plays, which creates a relaxed and productive mindset.



My book *Dare* was published last year. In it I explain how otherwise rational, thoughtful, mature human beings give their power away. Think about it – who do you give your power to? (Your boss, your spouse, that guy in your club who wins all the trophies?)

Generosity is admirable but some things should never be given away. Many golfers give their power away to the game. Instead of deciding when to play or practise, they grind away to fulfil their end of the deal.

John had given his power away. Weekends, social plans and even work commitments were organised around golf. Worse still, he would leave the course and analyse every shot for hours. Golf was making John depressed.

At our first session I asked John to list the most important things in his life. Wife, children, home, work, health and half a dozen others all came before golf. John soon realised that his obsession with golf was inappropriate.

I invited John to picture a screen in his mind and fill it with the elements of his life he'd identified. To his horror, golf occupied a

HUGE space DIRECTLY IN THE MIDDLE. Do this now – where is golf on your screen?

Armed with this information, we set about reorganising the screen. I encouraged John to close his eyes, shrink the size of his golfing image and move it to one side. John was putting golf back where it belonged.

John is now playing well. Instead of slavish obedience to the voice in his head telling him to play each and every weekend morning, he enjoys the occasional lie in. John plays when he wants to, not out of some misguided sense of compulsion. He is less tense, less frustrated and a far better golfer. He is also, frankly, much nicer to be around.

Life is too short to put up with tyrants and golf cannot be played under the kind of pressure they exert. Golf is a game. Make sure you keep yours in proportion.

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.