

Mental game

How you react to bad situations has a major impact on your scorecard. Golf Monthly mental coach Gary Leboff shows you how to create the perfect 'virtual' caddie to keep you in check

Back on track

Whenever I start working with a new pro they tend to keep it quiet for a while. Golfers in general have yet to evolve past the point where it's okay to get advice on your swing but seeking help from a sports psychologist is regarded as weakness.

Initial sessions with amateur clients usually involve just the two of us sitting in a room or perhaps discussing ideas on the course. In the case of the pros, however, a third party must get involved.

The importance of caddies cannot be overstated. Bag carrier, confidante, strategist, yardage expert, shoulder to cry on, purveyor of confectionary – at some time or other, a caddie must be all these and more.

The toughest of all roles is diplomat. With sufficient knowledge and experience, most caddies can learn to pull the right club. However, nothing will get a caddie sacked faster than saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

How can the poor caddie possibly know? No matter how long player and bag carrier have operated in tandem, few can honestly lay claim to a telepathic relationship. It comes as a surprise to both when I suggest that the primary responsibility for a caddie knowing what to say and when to say it rests with the player.

Here's what we do. I invite the pro to identify their most challenging situations on the course. These might include:

- **MAKING A DOUBLE BOGEY**
- **MISSING A GREEN FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE FAIRWAY**
- **RAIN LASHING DOWN**
- **A GALE BLOWING**
- **BEING ON THE CUT LINE**
- **MISSING A SHORT PUTT**

I want to know what goes through their minds in these situations. For instance, in the case of a double bogey, it may be something like: "It will be tough to get those shots back. You can't afford that at this level. All that work down the drain. I should never have



entered this week. How am I going to explain this to my coach/sponsor/ wife?...” And so on.

Even the least enlightened professional doesn't need me to point out the destructive impact of such thoughts.

Please do this now. Imagine you are lucky enough to have the world's best caddie on your bag. Who would it be? What about Tiger's caddie, Steve Williams? Or Jim Furyk's bagman, "Fluff" Cowan? Maybe you'd prefer Pete Coleman, Fanny Sunesson, Dave Renwick or Ricci Roberts?

It need not be a caddie at all. You might want to choose a parent, a friend or mentor who knows you well enough to keep your emotions in check.

Next, please construct your own list of challenging situations. What makes you angry, frustrated or upset on the course? What do you normally, habitually, unconsciously, say to yourself at such times?

That's not what a top caddie would say. Imagine your wish has now been granted and one is tending your bag. What would he or she

say at such moments? What words of advice or encouragement do you need to hear?

Write them down! This won't take long – half a dozen bullet points are fine. Keep going until you have scripts for each event on your list.

Finally, copy your scripts into a notebook and put them in your golf bag. Don't leave them there! Reread these scripts until they are so familiar that the right thoughts pop into your mind at just the right moments. As for the pros, I ask them to hand the scripts to their caddies and make sure they learn them verbatim!

One of the golden rules of sports psychology is that results are not determined by what happens but how competitors respond. Lousy weather, missed fairways and bad breaks are all part of the glorious uncertainty of golf. The difference between those who react with rage or equanimity is found on the scorecard. ☺

You can contact Gary Leboff by e-mail at gary.leboff@virgin.net.