



# Mental game

Obsessing over your scorecard and neglecting to focus on both the physical and mental components of the game can be very damaging, explains mental coach Gary Leboff

## The Stalin of Golf

**I** sometimes think golf should come with a health warning. It's as addictive as nicotine and as compelling as any great work of fiction. Once it grabs you, it rarely lets go.

The attraction is easily explained. Golf's combination of challenge, companionship and environment is unrivalled in the sporting firmament. The pity is that so many devotees, anxious to reap rewards from the game, are looking in entirely the wrong place.

Regular readers of this column will know I also work in football. When I first worked in the Premiership, I was stunned. The players pitch up for training around 10, run around for a bit, kick a few balls, lift a few weights and head home. There's no one left by half-past-one. All hell breaks loose if the sports psychologist (that would be me) asks one or two to stay behind and work on their minds.

After a few weeks of this lunacy, I called a team meeting. Once the squad had turned off their mobile phones (always a struggle), I asked what they wanted out of training? The silence was eerie. Training was, by and large, just what everyone did. All that mattered was how we fared on match days. Asking the players to leave, I sat down with the staff. What I asked them to do was develop "process goals" – objectives for speed, agility, communication and stamina. Focus on results was getting in the way. Working on these variables would deliver the skills we needed to get those precious three points.

The Stalin of Golf is the scorecard. It is a tyrant, a dictator that measures performance without mercy. Golfers who use their scores as their sole arbiter of performance are operating the wrong way round. It is by going back a stage and working on the components that deliver a score that you ultimately achieve those results.

So what are these components? Firstly, there are those that relate to what I call "The Outer Game" – driving, irons, pitching, chipping, putting. I make it absolutely clear to everyone I work with that these elements are not my area. Find a pro you can trust. Set THEM some goals. Work together to achieve them.

But more is needed. The tidal wave of amateurs passed to me by pros who simply



can't get them to reproduce on the course what they do on the range confirms what we've always known – golf is a game of the mind.

Think back to the best round you've ever played. What words describe you on that day? Your selection will undoubtedly include phrases like "in the moment", "not thinking about the score", "relaxed", "enjoying myself" etc.

Sports psychologists call these "states". One of my key tasks is to generate the right "state" for a competitor as often as possible. In golf, I do this by using The Inner Scorecard.

The Inner Scorecard is a way of creating and refining your optimum combination. We're looking for the cocktail of ingredients that will produce the right balance. This might include:

- ACCEPTANCE
- DARING
- RELAXATION
- SELF POSSESSION
- QUALITY OF VISUALISATION

- TRUST
- NOT SEEKING APPROVAL
- SELF KNOWLEDGE
- SELF AWARENESS

Five ingredients are enough. The player then takes a second scorecard out on the course and grades their performance out of 10 for each ingredient, on each hole. Before long, a number of connections become clear. A) Your scores improve – because the Inner Scorecard is bringing attention to the very ingredients that create peak performance. B) You notice a direct correlation between high numbers on the Inner Scorecard and low numbers on the course.

Golfers are obsessed with the scorecard – an obsession that is totally counterproductive. Low scores come by working on each component. Carts before horses go nowhere.

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