

1. **Belief – it starts with belief.**

If there was one secret to my challenge it was belief. When my belief was strong I played well and when it faltered so did my scoring. But belief is a difficult and tricky concept. It's undeniably important, but how much of it is purely inherent within the greats of the game? How much of it is hard-wired into them? How much of it is a result of an incredibly supportive childhood or a number of key experiences that subsequently drive them? How much of Tiger's skill comes from the endless support from his father?

It's undeniable that these guys have huge belief and I made a study of them during the challenge in an effort to keep my own belief up. I extended this study to many other sports and found the same thing to be true but, to begin with, let's stick with golf and more specifically three of the greats.

Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Tiger Woods.

Between them these guys have an incredible total of 40 major championships. Player has nine, Nicklaus eighteen and so far Tiger has another fourteen, although we expect the Tiger figure to be out of date very soon.

If we look at their own words some interesting patterns develop.

Gary Player discussing Jack Nicklaus:

*"I saw many players hit the ball better than Jack. But none of them had his mind. **Nobody, and I mean nobody, had his confidence under pressure.** The bigger the stakes, the more confident he became. That's what won him the Majors and all those tournaments. And, oh boy, you could just see it! He was as confident as a lion out there!"*

Gary Player on himself and confidence:

*“Ha! I think that has been my greatest asset. Like when I won the British Open at Carnoustie in 1968. I wasn’t playing well until 10.30 the night before the first round of the Championship. I was on the practice tee at 10.30, and then I found something. I found something! And I went out and won the tournament. I found it at the last moment – at the last moment – because I believed that despite my troubles and woes, I would find it. **I refused to lose my self-confidence, and you have to continue to believe, because if you don’t have the confidence, no one is going to give it to you.** They are going to try and take it away from you. So even when I am not hitting the ball well, I always tell myself, “it can change at any moment. Hang in there!”*

Tiger Woods on himself:

*“If I show up at a tournament, my number one goal is just to win. To do whatever it takes to accomplish that, but to win. There’s nothing wrong with having your goals very high and trying to get them. That’s the fun part. You may come up short – I’ve come up short with a lot of my goals – but it’s always fun to try and achieve them. **It’s just what I believe. It’s the way I’ve always been.**”*

Jack Nicklaus on himself:

*“**For me it came down to having belief in myself.** And I have always believed in what I can do. Even when I wasn’t playing my best, then I had to root my confidence, not in my shots but in my ability to manage myself and my game. So if I am not out there playing my best golf, I know that. I know what my best golf is and what my best shots are, if I’m not hitting the ball perfect I have to figure out how do I take 10 or 15 or 20 percent of my game away and play with the other 80% to maximise what I can do. People will say that is negative talk, but it isn’t. It is actually more confidence because once I realised where my game was, I was able to manage it better and play the correct shots, knowing when to take risks and when to be patient”.*

This was the guy who hit six birdies on the back nine at the 86 masters at 46 years of age. When everybody else had written him off his enormous self-belief in his ability on the back nine on Sunday in a major came rushing back.

There is so much to learn from Gary Player and his belief and he remained an inspiration to me throughout my year – perhaps even moreso than Nicklaus since he seemed to have to work at it a little harder. Jack's talent and belief seemed almost to be hard-wired. Player had to fight his way against the huge force of larger competitors like Palmer and Nicklaus. He had to endure horrendous heckling in his early days as a result of apartheid. He had to hit the gym and get strong to compete with the big hitters. And he still won nine majors and 163 tournaments in total.

And we all see it from Tiger nearly every week in life. But for me the really fascinating periods have been when Tiger has been rebuilding his swing or in a superficial slump. It's at this stage that you get to witness what I call the Tiger "smirk". This happens when he is sitting in a press conference and some smart-alec hack decides to quiz him as to whether he will ever get back to his best.

90% of the time he doesn't even bother to get cross. He lives on a totally different plane to the rest of us in terms of confidence and understanding of the game and his own swing. So he just "smirks" and answers the question with a slightly dismissive tone. And lo and behold a year or so later he's back winning majors again with a new and more reliable swing.

For Tiger his belief is absolute. He had such an incredible upbringing from his father and was exposed to such fascinating mind control techniques while in his mid-teens that he clearly has a head-start on most of the rest of us.

So it's clear that these guys, for whatever reason, have almost superhuman levels of belief. But what about the rest of us? And indeed what about those who have to play with Tiger, how badly are they affected by belief?

Economist Jennifer Brown of the University of California, Berkeley, did a fascinating study of the “Tiger effect”. She studied how the scores of other golfers were affected depending on whether Tiger was present or not at a tournament. She discovered that the scores of the other players were, on average, nearly one stroke higher when Tiger was playing in the field than if he wasn’t. The effect became more pronounced during his winning streaks and effectively disappeared altogether when he was in his last slump (2003-2004).

This fascinates me and shows just how important this is in terms of belief. It’s impossible not to cringe every time you see Ernie Els go head to head with Tiger because it is inevitable that Tiger will defeat him. If a golfer of such incredible ability and stature as Els is affected as badly as that, how does this effect mere mortals such as you and I?

What it does show, which is to our benefit, is that most of these guys really are the same as us. They are affected in the same way and have the same doubts and worries. So just like them, you need to do everything in your power to believe that you can make a big difference to your golf.

I built my belief and kept it up through countless methods. I managed to blot out those folk who were naysayers and specifically tried to find people who thought my goal was possible. I spoke with friends who had achieved great sporting achievements in other areas. I spoke to friends who had achieved huge business success “against the odds” and read countless biographies of people who had achieved colossal success in many fields. As long as you can accept that at heart most of these people are just like you and me and suffer from the same doubts, then you can put yourself in their shoes.

I am not, and never was, a Tiger or Donald Trump type of character. I struggled to constantly work at this belief thing and undoubtedly it did falter at times. If you get golfers of the calibre of Darren Clarke and Sam Torrance effectively telling you that what you’re doing is impossible, it is extremely difficult to dismiss that. And I did falter. But dismiss it you must. Nobody knows your own personal circumstances and nobody knows how hard you will or will not work. So nobody can properly judge you.

You need to be looking for this belief wherever you can find it and keep working at it. It's fragile and easily lost and as I keep saying – lose the belief – lose the ability to score. With my belief slipping one day I was flicking through one of my golf magazines and came across an article about a guy called Bob McDermott.

As a result of a farming accident in 1987 McDermott has been an amputee. He lost his left arm below the elbow, his right thumb and his left leg just below the knee. But this didn't prevent Bob from playing golf at an extremely high level. Using prosthetic limbs, Bob rebuilt his swing and currently plays off scratch and holds the course record at his local club.

Again this hit me like a sledgehammer. I was worrying that my silly little challenge was difficult with two legs and two arms and a couple of slightly dodgy hips. Which was nothing, absolutely nothing compared to what this guy had gone through. This literally catapulted me out onto the range and the course again with renewed vigour. A picture of Bob sits above my desk and every time I think "it's so hard" about anything I just look at him and it puts things into perspective.

On another occasion I was out playing the course on my own and things were going badly. I had allowed a little "it's so hard, why did I ever start this?" to creep into me when I noticed from the adjoining fairway a one armed golfer playing. Without a prosthetic limb he was calmly and efficiently knocking arrow straight shots down the fairway about 150 yards. Again this tipped the scales of my belief firmly in the right direction and off I went.

So get your belief from wherever you can. Model Tiger and not Ernie. Do anything you can and from whatever source to keep your belief up.

Still not convinced?

Well, then it's time to trot out the Roger Bannister cliché. You've heard it before but just read it once again and really let it sink in. Really let it see how it applies to you and, most importantly, your belief that you can get better at your golf.

On May the sixth 1954 Roger Bannister broke the four minute mile. This was so much more than a new record. It was a record and achievement that most people simply regarded as impossible. Scientists argued that the human body simply couldn't travel that fast. It was speculated that at that level the body would simply break down or even explode! The mental barriers to breaking through the four minute mile were huge. But Bannister, through training and belief, broke the record.

But here is the fascinating part – within a year a further thirty seven people had broken the previously impossible barrier and a year later an incredible three hundred people broke the four minute mile!

This can be explained by nothing more than a change of belief. He developed no new training techniques, there were no fancy shoes or special running tracks. Bannister simply showed that it was possible and with the belief that it was possible people allowed themselves to get up to that next level.

That's all this is about.

It's about you allowing yourself to become a better golfer. It's about you dismissing your age or injuries or even your work and family situations and believing that within a set period of time you can make a quantum leap in your golf.

So that's it. Set a big goal in a specific period of time and allow yourself to believe that it's possible. Blot out all "it can't be done" and "you're too old" type of people from your life and follow a basic committed plan to make that improvement. It doesn't matter how hard you work though, if you can't or won't believe that it's possible, it simply won't happen.

Belief – it *really, really* matters.