

Course and self-management

The ability to manage your state during the four or five hours you are out there is of crucial importance. When I really, honestly analysed my rounds in the early days I realised that I was doing a number of key things wrong that were potentially costing me a lot of shots.

My main playing partner during the year was extremely helpful in guiding me in this area and I learnt a huge amount from him. He plays a lot of golf on a lot of golf courses and has done for years so his grasp of how to manage himself and difficult situations was invaluable.

There are several key skills to saving shots on the course without having to make any improvements in your shot making – make sure you use them.

1. Play one shot at a time

“It will always be the ball and me.”

Tiger Woods

“You’ve got to stay patient, stay in the moment, keep grinding, ... You never know what can happen. And it turned out well.”

Tiger Woods

- It’s pretty tough to say that without it sounding like a relentless cliché along the “drive for show, putt for dough” lines, but this is number one on my list for a reason. It’s a skill that seems to be completely forgotten by most golfers.

You’re playing one shot at a time. Do not play your partner, do not play the course do not even play the hole and certainly don’t play with the final score

in your mind. Simply play one shot after another and when you're done that shot move on and start again. Erase the previous shot from your mind (or anchor it as necessary) and start again.

Many of the world's best golfers refuse to watch the scoreboard during their rounds and refuse to know scoring information from caddies. It's a great principle and one that you should adopt as much as possible. It's one that I still struggle with if I'm honest but it is so, so important.

2. **On your way to the course** - You should be very clearly imagining and visualising that perfect first shot even in the car as you drive there. This sounds daft but if you can really FEEL the sensation of a perfect first tee drive it will enormously help with first tee nerves. Get the feeling in the car and then use your anchor to reinforce it.
3. **Get there early and get warmed up.** In an ideal world you'll arrive in enough time to hit some balls on the range and get comfortable with the swing for the day. If you are playing at a course with a range or a practice area you want to slowly warm up and stretch and then work your way gradually up the bag from the wedge to the driver. Make sure you anchor every great shot and immediately dismiss any bad ones.

Your last shots should be using the club that you are going to use on the first tee and going through your whole pre-shot routine. If you hit a great shot anchor it. If you don't immediately erase it from your memory.

4. **Make sure your bag has everything you could need.** I realised very early on that I was ruining rounds for a variety of trivial and petty issues. Things were arising that were making me feel a little uncomfortable on the back nine and this was affecting the scores.

I have a few allergies, (boo hoo) so sore eyes were causing a problem quite often. Likewise sometimes my golf shoes were giving me blisters and I was often thirsty, hungry or in pain from my arthritic hips.

Now I have extremely clear rituals about how I play. I always have at least two bottles of water (with an emergency one stashed away in another pocket) with me as well as a couple of Powerbars (which cause less energy spiking than chocolate). I carry Ibuprofen for my hips which I take on the sixth hole to pre-empt the pain that usually starts on the ninth hole but still allows me to be pain-free (or relatively) on the 18th. I also bring plasters and eye drops.

I always carry extra tees, ball markers, pencils, pitch mark repairers, lots of balls, cards, my notebook, spare gloves (two – in case it's wet).

I'm not naturally a very organised person so this goes against many other areas of my life, but I've discovered that this attention to detail helps me score better, so that tips the balance. It helps me to "click" into being an organised person since I focus on the very real hip pain, the discomfort of sore eyes or the embarrassment (particularly in match play) of having to borrow a marker.

5. **Look like a golfer** – In my early days I'd rush to the course and simply play in my work clothes or even in jeans (they are allowed at Blackwood). Very quickly, particularly when playing with my regular playing partner (who always dresses immaculately AND like a golfer) I felt I was doing myself a disservice. I consistently talk to clients or managers about making sure that they "look the part" in an effort to influence and direct employees and I realised that this was vital on the course too.

Looking like a golfer not only makes you feel more confident about your own game but shows your opponents that you mean business. Again this is very useful in match play but it applies in all situations. I even used to make sure I

dressed like a golfer for a range session since it changed my state of mind and helped me to focus better on the task in hand.

6. **Remove distractions** – that primarily means turning off the phone! If you should be working and are sneaking out for a few holes then change the message on your phone to say that you're in a meeting but will call them back as soon as you're through. Who cares that it's a meeting with a bunker and a few fairways? All that matters is that you can properly switch off from the task in hand and focus!
7. **Watch what you eat.** In Tiger's book "How I play golf" he talks about how very early on in his career he was a bit of a burger and coke fanatic. He quickly realised that this wasn't serving him well and went down the banana/apple, energy bar and water route. Initially I just made sure I had a drink and some chocolate and realised that this was still giving me fatigue around the 15th hole – so very quickly I adopted Tiger's model almost to the letter. I make sure I'm never hungry but never stuffed.

I have something to eat on the 6th tee and then around the tenth or 11th. There is almost a ritual among amateur golfers to wait until the 10th tee before you eat something but I maintain this is too long. By that stage you are generally already hungry and thirsty and will have walked several miles. If you treat the round as three "sixes" as opposed to two "nines" you will help yourself stay well fuelled and not end up limping round the last few holes dreaming of beer and a burger.

This is common sense really and you'd imagine that at the very highest level in golf they would all be properly dealing with their nutrition and energy levels in the same way, but strangely that simply isn't the case. I watched a practice round at the Ryder Cup and was amazed to see a highly prominent European player ask the captain for a Kit Kat because he was "hungry".

The slightly sad thing about this story is that the player in question is one of those “best player never to have won a major” nominees and it seems bizarre to think that someone at that level simply doesn’t apply the lessons that Tiger so clearly does. Lessons that Tiger “got” at age 21 which have subsequently helped him to fill a room full of major trophies.

8. **Create a “bubble”** – this technique was taught to me by David Walters the incredible guy who helped me out so much in the last week of my challenge. David works extensively with soldiers who have returned from combat with horrendous cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and have seen terrible scenes of killing and death. This experience means that dealing with a bit of golfer “trauma” was hardly much of an issue for him!

The technique is useful really when you are playing with partners or in situations where there are lots of outside influences. So if your partner is having a bad day and is ranting or raving about his game and doing club throwing histrionics you can be easily distracted by this. It’s hard not to try to empathise with them and it’s also hard not to say the wrong thing.

Likewise if you’re playing match play and your opponent is using a few unpleasant gamesmanship techniques you can easily lose your focus. Many people struggle badly with first tee nerves and perhaps a small gathering of people waiting to play after you.

All of these situations can be alleviated with the “bubble”. What you do is the minute you feel any negative outside influences, imagine a bubble covering you completely. I like to imagine that there is an actual sort of whooshing noise as the bubble covers me. The bubble totally isolates me from the outside world and the only thing in there with me is myself and all the positive golfing experiences I’ve had in the past. I quickly run through a few past successes with the specifics varying depending on the shot I’m going to play.

So if it's a putt then I just think of previous great putts and if it's a drive I imagine previous booming drives.

This reverses any negativity that may have been experienced and allows me to reboot back to my normal positive self. When I've hit the shot I then allow the bubble to disappear or leave it on but allow some outside communication to come.

It sounds daft and I only use it in rare occasions when I'm being put off by partners/opponents, but it is very useful and I highly recommend it.

9. Get honest and totally realistic with yourself – understand the concept of “luck”

It's important to realise that very few of us are blessed with the scrambling skills of Seve Ballesteros or Phil Mickelson. It took me a long time to grasp this concept and a lot of frustration from my partner as he watched me end up with double bogeys after attempting ludicrous shots that it was highly unlikely I was going to make, in the vain attempt to pull off a magic shot and save par or even get a birdie.

One day after yet another attempt to thread a ball through the branches off a tree had gone wrong and my ball had bounced out onto the fairway a few feet in front of me he turned and slowly asked me if I felt I'd been lucky or not lucky with the ball hitting the tree.

Incredulous I answered that I'd been unlucky. Of course I was unlucky – that ball had hit tree for goodness sake. If I'd been lucky it would have sailed through and landed where I wanted it to land.

He then stopped and said slowly and very methodically

“No John – this is where you have this thing all wrong. You were very lucky to get away with that shot and to be on the fairway at all. You deserved to have it bounce off and into the stream there or even the deep rough over there. You have to learn to take your punishments when they come and to stop playing those ludicrous shots”.

This was a real wake-up call for me. I was taking the whole concept of positive thinking one stage too far. Everyone – even the best guys in the world - end up in the woods sometimes or in the rough with huge obstacles in front of them. The key is to take your punishment and hopefully pull back a par through great short game or putting. And if you do get a bogey then take it with good grace and simply expect to pull it back with a birdie later on.

The mantra is “If In Doubt Get Out”

So be totally realistic about your skills. Don't try and out drive your partners or bend balls round corners if you simply don't have the skills. Don't attempt to thread the ball through tiny gaps in the trees or attempt a floating wedge over a 200 foot high tree. Some things are beyond us and you'll really improve your scoring if you are this type of player and can just get a bit realistic.

10. **Manage the wind** – Again this is another area where my main playing partner helped me tremendously. He was an extremely canny player in the wind and every time I'd step up to the ball on a windy day he'd ask “how many clubs is that wind?”. For months I was always underestimating and allowing the inner macho golfer to think it was a one club wind when it was really two, or two when it was three.

Fully grasping this concept and being entirely realistic can help your scoring tremendously on a windy day.

11. **Don't under club.** The golf magazines regularly ask touring professionals either one of two questions and invariably the answer is the same. The questions are “what mistakes do you see amateur golfers make most when you play with them in pro-ams?” and “what is the one piece of advice you'd give to the average golfer?”

The answer is consistently:

“Don't under club – take enough club to reach the green”.

Being a macho golfer at heart I used to do this too. I would consistently underestimate how many yards into the green the flag was or be trying to thrash the cover off a 9 iron when a properly struck 8 would actually be the right club.

Most amateur golfers take very little heed of the distance markers on the course and very often you will find that even on their own course they don't know if the markers are to the middle or the front of the green.

When I visit any strange course I always buy a course map (if available) and ask in the professionals shop what type of markers they have and whether they are to the front or the middle. This is an incredibly rare thing for amateurs to do and this one tip could save you two or three shots in each round – easily!