Modelling

A couple of little stories first:

I cover this in a little detail in "Dream On" but don't discuss the science and how it can be properly applied to your swing.

Story One - McIlroy

Within a short period of time I had two events that were what I called "Eureka" moments, i.e. those moments where I made huge progress, where I felt I had unearthed one of golf's secrets.

The first happened when I was standing at the range one evening fairly early on in the whole challenge. I had been hitting a lot of balls and my striking was terrible. But it wasn't terrible even in a consistent way. I was literally spraying the driving range on either side and hitting the odd "thin" *and* "fat" shot too. If anything, I seemed to have regressed back to before I had started and the enormity (and perhaps stupidity) of the challenge was really hitting home.

So I stood for a while and collected my thoughts. A few booths down a young guy, maybe fifteen years of age, was practicing with his driver. He was clearly good, very, very good and had an older man standing behind him making occasional comments. But as I watched I realised that every shot was absolutely perfect. I'd seen him up at the range many times before, since it had now effectively become my second home, but I hadn't really paid him a huge amount of attention.

But the staggering thing about this young guy's practice was not just how outstanding his ball striking was but how incredibly effortless it seemed. There was huge power being unleashed into the ball but it was extremely well controlled and his balance was

perfect at all times. There was no sense of a slight wobble on the follow through, even when you could see he was hitting it with huge force.

The power and, more importantly, the beautiful controlled rhythm were absolutely mesmerising. It was almost hypnotic so, rather than face up to my own horrible ball-striking, I simply stood and watched for about fifteen minutes.

Eventually he finished and slowly gathered up his clubs. I was dragged out of my little trance and back to the reality of my own practice. I took a few swings vaguely thinking about how he had struck the ball and then carried on. The first ball was struck arrow straight down the middle, as was the second, third and fourth. I was amazed and simply couldn't believe it. Somehow, in some odd fashion, I had picked up a little of the magic of this young guy. I carried on and finished up with easily the best practice session I'd had in days.

The interesting thing is that I wasn't trying to take any specific aspect of how he swung at the ball. I wasn't looking at his hands thinking "ahhh, that's where I was going wrong", or even looking at how far he was taking the club back or following through. What I took was an overall sense of flow, balance and controlled power at impact that gradually eases off into a beautifully balanced follow through. That was as specific as it got.

The teenager, I soon discovered, was actually a lot better than very good. He was Rory McIlroy who later that year smashed the course record at Royal Portrush with a 61 and later in 2007 won the best amateur at the British Open, even featuring on the leaderboard on the opening day. His handicap at that stage was a quite incredible +6. So yes, I was enormously privileged to be witnessing talent of that level, but the same principle clearly works with other golfers.

Story Two - Harrington

The second time I witnessed this phenomenon was late one night when I was in the gym. It was about 9.30 p.m. and I was exhausted. I was making very heavy work of the whole process and would have been better off at home for an early night. As I sat slumped on the bench I was watching golf on the television. It was a tournament from somewhere warm and a long way away, possibly Hawaii. Padraig Harrington was playing and he had a seven iron approach to the green. I watched in awe as he struck it in a beautifully controlled fashion. The ball landed inches from the hole.

I played the shot over and over again in my mind and marvelled at how simple it seemed. So effortless, so controlled and so compact (I have always been a bit Elvis-legged so I tend to notice that specifically) but again I wasn't noticing anything technical about the swing. I was simply absorbing the whole action.

Two days later I was due to play golf with my main playing partner. He and I were playing pretty level golf by this stage and the matches had become extremely competitive as he was making some big progress with his golf at the same time (he ultimately won both club championships that year and took six strokes off his handicap).

Unfortunately, when we were playing I had been up very late the night before at a party and, it was fair to say, was not exactly in tip-top form. I was sluggish and would have been happier at home in bed. This immediately reflected in my golf. By the end of the fourth hole I was four holes down. At this rate I was looking at a white-wash, which would not only have been humiliating in our own little battles but also within the context of my challenge would not have been good. I stood on the fifth tee which was approximately 165 yards. i.e. exactly my 7 iron zone. I collected my thoughts and calmed down. I knew I needed to start again and afresh with a new mindset.

So I thought back to the way Padraig Harrington had hit his 7 iron a few nights previously and played it over in my mind. Mentally I turned myself into Harrington on the tee and stood up to the ball. I was going to play it in exactly the same effortlessly controlled way.

I struck the ball to within four inches of the hole. I then proceeded to win the next six holes making it seven straight holes in a row. My golf was utterly transformed on that day to such a level that it destroyed Stuart's confidence in his own game very quickly and I easily won the match.

This was the most graphic illustration to me of the power of what is an NLP concept called modelling.

At heart, it's the process by which we all learn to walk and talk. We simply copy what we see others doing.

This made me look deeper into this whole area and set me off on the path of trying to learn the swing as a whole – as one fluid movement. So, even though I was still having lessons, I was able to try and think about it as a single motion. Not some sequence of movements and positions where my hands should or shouldn't be at each stage.

I was reminded in graphic detail just how much that style of learning didn't work for me when I sat down one night to watch a video by an incredibly famous American golf coach who breaks the swing down into eight distinct stages. By the time the first stage was over I was asleep. Now I'm not saying that this method can't and won't work for everyone, but I do feel that for most of us if we can get back to the way we learnt when we were tiny AND have a good pro who can regularly help us with a few key tweaks (which I'm afraid are still essential) then we can pick up a decent swing in a much, much faster time than is generally taught.

A good example of this is the "first secret" that I get people to sign up for on the www.scratchtoscratch.com website. This secret (as I presume you know) is to watch a

video by Jim Mclellan who had an utterly beautiful swing. The swing plays on a loop and you have to sit and really focus on it imagining that it is you swinging and not Jim.

Jim's swing is here in case you've forgotten:

http://imkurs.de/projekte/scratch2scratch/index.php?/pages/PerfectSwing.html

Several thousand people have now signed up for this "secret" and I regularly receive responses back from people telling me just how successful it has been for them. But, almost without exception, the biggest benefits come from teenagers. They seem to be vastly more open to learning like this and much more comfortable with "giving it a go". The rest of us tend to want to try and over-analyse and almost make things harder than they need to be. It's as if many years of bad rounds have knocked the stuffing out of us and we simply believe the myth that golf has to be hard, that we really have to suffer to get better and that it is a combination of a hundred different moves that makes a perfect swing and we need to be aware of them all.

Which is nonsense, utter nonsense.

I developed this technique to a ludicrous level and probably watched Jim's video ten or twenty thousand times during my challenge. I became an expert at imagining I could feel his hat on my head, the birds around him, the weight of the club in my hands and that the beautiful free-flowing rhythm was actually mine.

Subsequently I watched a variety of other swings to help me along and these days, in a continuing effort to control my slightly active legs and hips, I frequently watch a Sergio Garcia iron shot video which I took at the Ryder Cup.

This one:

http://www.viddler.com/explore/TJohnRichardson/videos/19/

Interestingly this video is my most watched video on Youtube even beating Tigers. Undoubtedly the purity of Garcia's ball striking is very appealing to a number of people. The less said about his mental control and putting the better though. ☺

The process of modelling is somewhat complex from an NLP perspective but initially it involves three parts:

1. ***Focusing on what*** the person does who you are modelling. So you focus on the various movements that Jim or Sergio or whoever is making. You imagine that you are there doing that thing that they do yourself. In this case you are swinging that club and hitting the ball instead of them. So it's the behaviour and physiology you are specifically looking at.

2. ***Focusing on how*** the person does it. So as you're are directly imagining them swinging the club, you focus on how they might do it. You think about how they move their muscles and how it all comes together. These are the internal thinking strategies.

3. ***Focusing on why*** they do it. The internal beliefs and assumptions. So in Sergio's case you focus on what levels of belief he must have (at least in his iron play) you focus on the countless articles he must have read arguing that he is the best ball striker on tour (and hopefully ignore the "choker" articles ☺).

In NLP terms you explore the second two aspects by asking questions of the person being modelled. Since I don't have Sergio's number on my speed dial I have to dig deep in and try to work these out for myself but it's a crucial part of the process. It's this part that really helps you to feel that you actually are Sergio, or Jim or Tiger when you're hitting the ball and gives you a little of the inherent confidence that brings.

Traditionally in modelling now you remove aspects of the model to see if it makes a difference. So you end up with the core of what it is that is the difference between A Sergio and you and I. Again this is tricky without actually being able to sit and discuss it with Sergio, but you can amend your model to see how it affects your ball striking to simplify it.

My modelling reached a new plateau when I bought Seve's short game video. Yet another one of my £1 ebay video purchases it turned out to be the most effective video I bought all year by a long, long way.

Seve is, in many ways, the perfect person to model because, for a male of a certain age who was exposed to golf as a teenager, Seve is pretty much the man. It is Seve who we really wanted to be. From a modelling perspective too his short game was utterly inspirational. It was the work of a true genius.

So what I did was to simply sit down (more than 20 times) and watch his short game video from start to finish. But in every shot he played it wasn't Seve hitting the shot it was me. I would sit and repeat his phrases in a Spanish accent and really imagine myself growing up in Spain jumping over the wall to practice with a hand-me-down club.

And then I took this to the course. Every single shot I play from forty yards and in is played as if I'm Seve. So much so that I even (regardless of how much an idiot I look) put on Seve expressions and talk to myself in Seve's accent. I imagine I'm wearing his gold Rolex and the famous dark blue Slazenger sweater. This may well be the weirdest part of the whole challenge but it was also one of the most effective.

I also bought most of Seve's great victories on DVD so that I could really get inside his head when he was on a charge.

But it doesn't have to be Seve. It can be anyone you want. You could easily choose to model Tiger and really immerse yourself in his world.

The final phase of modelling is taking this distilled model and finding a way to teach it to others. So here is my basic rule for applying it to golf.

1. Find someone to model. Ideally this should be someone you can personally relate to. Someone whose behavioural characteristics you can understand and observe outside of when they actually swing the club.
2. Watch, on a repeated basis, them striking a ball and really imagine that it is you inside their head. Feel, see and hear what they hear. Totally immerse yourself in what they are experiencing. Try to understand what they are thinking. What is it that has given them the belief that they can perform at that level.
3. Take this to the range or the course. Pull back that feeling and experience by whatever means possible. Amend your physiology so that it is more like theirs. If it means speaking to yourself in a silly accent then do it. Give yourself every opportunity to make this work.
4. Keep tweaking and amending the model so that you distill it down to it's essence, so that, as much as is humanly possible, you find what it is that helps you play more like the person you're modelling.
5. Keep working at it. Keep watching and studying this person as you improve. Be prepared to change as you get better and need different models.