

GOLF

Playing the mental game

Dr. Kessler helps players cope with stress on the course



FILE PHOTO

DR. GLENN KESSLER

FROM THE FAIRWAYS

By Todd Piken

The 18th hole is barely visible, and the wind is cutting across the fairway at Augusta National. Down one shot at The Masters, you are 175 yards away from the pin.

The gallery is eight-deep, all eyes fixated on you and your ball.

Deep breaths don't help much as your heart bounces furiously. Your Stay-Dry glove is soaked through with sweat, which has also made two circular spots under your arms, and a straight line down your back.

It's hard to focus on the little white ball, equidistant between your feet as you step up to address.

Looking up at the target, you suddenly realize you are all alone - even though there are 25,000 spectators watching your every twitch.

"Competitive golf is played mainly on a five-and-a-half-inch course, the space between your ears," golf legend Bobby Jones once said, and it matches this situation to a T, or should we say, tee.

The emptiness is slowly engulfing you as you bend down - pick a few blades of grass - and let them fall to check where the wind is coming from.

After addressing the ball, the backswing starts unconsciously, which is something you have done thousands of times. The iron strikes the ball and it flies up in the air. ...

It doesn't really matter where the ball lands at this point because the imaginary golfer has already lost the battle. Mentally, he was not up to par.

Golf may be the most challenging sport in the world, but it doesn't have to be overwhelming. Mental preparation is the key. Just think of the exercise as going to the practice range for your mind.

This is where Dr. Glenn R. Kessler, Ph.D comes into the picture.

He has been practicing in the field of applied psychology for the past 25 years, and frequently deals with professional golfers, including Kirk Hanefeld, who won the 2003 New England PGA Championship.

"I started the golf aspect of this about two or three years ago," said Kessler, who lives and practices in Northborough. "I discovered that so much of the game is mental. What I have done over the last few years is a tremendous amount of research into the mental part of the game of golf. I came up with a program called, 'Why does bad golf happen to good people.' I have been working with a few pros in the area, but these techniques are also for the average golfer. You have to be aware of what's going on inside your body and your mind."

The main aspects of Kessler's plan revolve around relaxation, breathing, visualization and self talk.

"It comes down to controlling your emotions and knowing when you are out of your comfort zone," Kessler said. "I teach different breathing routines. I started doing it on my own when I would line up for a putt. All my friends laughed at me, but by the end of the season, they all wanted to know how to do it. It really works."

Another obstacle most golfers face is negative visions.

"The first thing people think of if they are in front of water is not to hit it in the water," Kessler said. "So the last picture in their mind before they swing is the water. Many times, they will hit it right in. You have to block out that image, and think positive thoughts. Not just saying, 'I hope I hit it over the water,' but 'I will hit it over.' Visualize the ball landing on the other side, and

just get up there and swing."

According to Kessler, being mentally prepared to play well is a major key to success.

"Take Tiger Woods for example," Kessler said. "He is a master of the mental part of the game. When he was younger, his mother taught him meditation, which helps him relax. His father used to throw things at him when Tiger was on the practice range to help him with concentration and focus. Those things helped his game dramatically. Also, his father had a sports psychologist for Tiger when he was younger. That gave him the opportunity to learn certain techniques at a very young age."

Kessler believes that golfers shoot themselves in the foot with negative statements while they are on the course.

"People will say 'I stink at this game,' or 'I can't sink a putt,'" he said. "You have to change those negatives into positive statements. You have to stay positive in your mind, or you are going to lose the battle."

Kessler works with a number of high school golfers on the mental battle they face on the course. What he has discovered is many of them will return to him and explain that they have taken those lessons, and applied them to other aspects of their lives.

"Bruce Jenner has a great quote which explains what I am trying to do," Kessler said. "He said, 'You have to train your mind like you train your body.' He is exactly right. Most people who ask me how they can improve their game. I tell them to work on the mental part of it. Reducing mistakes when you know you are nervous can elevate your game."

For anyone looking to practice what Kessler preaches, he explains his methods in five easy steps.

➤ 1. Focus on what you can control. A lot of things we worry about are out of our hands.

➤ 2. Stay with a consistent pre-shot routine. Also do the same thing before every shot. Think of Nomar Garciaparra. When he fiddles with his gloves, it triggers his body.

➤ 3. Make sure to focus on the process and not the outcome.

➤ 4. Always stay relaxed and try and visualize the shots before you hit them.

➤ 5. The most important of all is to have fun.

To learn more, contact Dr. Glenn Kessler at 508-393-9899, or visit www.next-level-performance.com.