



# Mastering the Mental Game

How to tame the inner you  
that's wreaking havoc on your  
golf game.

By Joe Bissen



**N**o two golfers are the same. Nor are any two golfers' personalities. Fred Couples is not Tiger Woods. Lee Trevino is not Vijay Singh. Annika Sorenstam is not Craig Stadler.

Personalities are as much a part of golf as pitching wedges. Sometimes they get in the way, erecting psychological barriers that are incarnated as double bogeys. And sometimes they spark the best round of a golfer's life.

Even among those who study golfers' personalities for a living, there is considerable debate on how one might master the mental game. Greg Cylkowski, a sports analyst in Little

Canada who has counseled PGA Tour players, encourages golfers to set game plans for their rounds. Mike Barge, the director of instruction at the estimable Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, advises golfers to brace themselves for the bad shots that they will inevitably hit. And Dan DeMuth, the Minnesota Section PGA teacher of the year in 2005, preaches "commitment to the target instead of getting caught up in the process."

Golf psychology can be revealing. DeMuth, who conducts a continuing experiment in his indoor teaching studio in Golden Valley, has players putt conventionally, then with eyes closed,

then looking at the hole, then one-handed, then putting to a club rather than a hole. By a recent count, 7,200 golfers had tried the experiment—and only 48, less than 1 percent, putted better conventionally than by one of the other styles.

"When we take their thought process of all the 'how-tos' away, they focus on the target and their natural movements come out," DeMuth says.

But back to golfing personalities. With a little poetic license and sage advice from our experts, we present a few personality types you're bound to spot on the fairways. Maybe one of them is you.

## Donald Trump with a Driver

Donald Trump the golfer would never play to the fat part of the green. Golfers like this are Type A's; they will go for birdies, by God, or flame out trying. They rarely use the words "course" and "management" in the same breath.

"I know people who will try the one-in-100 shot just because they enjoy it," Barge says. "They're out there just to hit the 'hero' shot once in a while, and that's what brings them back." Still, Barge's preference is to "put the percentages on your side. I never hit a shot that I don't think I can pull off eight or nine out of ten times."

Cylkowski compares Trump golfers to downhill ski racers. Their performances can be spectacular, or result in spectacular catastrophes. "The game of golf is not for the risk-taker," he says. "It's more for the compliant, the non-aggressive personality."

## Tony Randall with a 2-Iron

This golfer is a perfectionist—analytical and meticulous to a tee, or to a fault. He might know the wind speed, the yardage to the hole, and the precise effect of the moon's gravitational pull on the ball during neap tide, but there isn't a snowball's chance in hell he'll hit the shot on the sweet spot.

He's a worrywart who frets about everything from whether he'll make it off the first tee (a common fear) to whether the pleat on his pants is off-center. "They'll worry about it when they shoot way above what they usually shoot and way below what they shoot," Barge says. "They're too score-conscious instead of going ahead and enjoying the game."

"Analysis leads to paralysis," Cylkowski says, citing Scott Hoch's famously over-read and missed two-and-a-half-foot putt in the 1989 Masters. "If you're overanalytical," Cylkowski says, "I'm going to teach you a pre-shot routine so you shut [the overanalysis] down." ♦

## Robin Williams with a 7-Iron

Like a Trevino or a Peter Jacobsen, some golfers are as good at making friends as they are making pars. There's nothing wrong with this, as long as they can tune in when necessary. Cylkowski quotes Trevino who once said, "All I want to be is focused for forty-five seconds for seventy-two shots a round, and the rest is bull----."

"The key for the extrovert is to play to their strength," DeMuth says. "We have them talking while they're hitting, whistling through the shot, whatever we can do to keep them within their strength."

Barge calls it "turning the computer on," focusing on the shot—but not overfocusing. "Thinking about golf for eighteen holes for four-some hours is not a good thing," he says.

## Tonya Harding with a Gap Wedge

Who doesn't know a golfer with a hair-trigger temper? Experts agree that divorcing yourself from your personality isn't a good idea, but adapting to it is. "If you take a ten on the first hole, it doesn't mean you can't shoot in the seventies," DeMuth says. "If you look at the average golfer who has played the same course many times, he or she has parred every hole. You have to help them realize they're not done with the round."

Blowing off steam when you're on the course might not even be a bad thing. Barge cites the nonpareil Tiger Woods, who isn't exactly a Zen-like model of equilibrium. "People see Tiger Woods," Barge says, "and they'll say, gee, Tiger loses his temper and he'll bang clubs. The key is that it's an outlet for him, and then he's over it. You can't seethe the entire round or it's going to affect your shots."

Give in, you might say, but don't give up. "Kick your bag if you have to," says Cylkowski, "get it out, come back, and get on with it." ♦