

April 1, 2009

How Golfers Fool Themselves

It is getting warm and the excitement for spring sports begins: baseball, soccer played outside and golf! So in the spirit of April Fool's Day, **I want to warn all you golfers about the ways you can fool yourselves on the golf course.** These "positive illusions" may make you feel better, but they will cost you strokes in your game. See if you are guilty of any of these thinking errors:

The Gambler's Fallacy: Believing an event is more likely because it hasn't occurred in a while.

- Golf example: You've been putting poorly for a long time, so you are "due" for them to start dropping.
- How it hurts you: By waiting for a good performance, you do not take control of your game or address the cause of your problem. This keeps you playing poorly even longer than you need to.
- What to do about it: Practice. There is no substitute for identifying your weaknesses and training to correct them.

Assume that two things that happen at the same time are related, or that one caused the other:

- Golf example: Deciding that practice interferes with your golf game because you were playing better at the beginning of the season when you didn't practice at all, compared to the middle of the season when you practiced regularly.
- How it hurts you: You believe that the cause of a particular event is due to something that is actually unrelated to the event. Any changes you make regarding this will be in error. In the example above, you may practice less out of fear that it is hurting your game.
- What to do about it: Find the true cause. In the example above, what are *all* the things that have changed from the beginning to the middle of the season? Are you more tired, feel more anxiety, or are you injured? These factors could affect your swing and concentration. Which ones *consistently* show up when you are playing poorly? Address them one at a time and measure their impact on your performance until you find the true cause.

Exceptions become the rule when you don't consider all the results that occur with a change. You then select one possibly unique outcome as the general rule.

- Golf example: You skip your pre-shot routine and hit a long, beautiful drive into the middle of the fairway. You conclude that you don't need a pre-shot routine to play well.
- How it hurts your game: One occurrence does not establish a pattern. Any decisions regarding your performance based on this potentially non-typical result can set you up for poor planning decisions in the future. Poor planning equals more mistakes and more strokes.
- What to do about it: Be sure you have enough experience before deciding what works for you and what doesn't.

"It's all about me": This occurs when you attribute results to personal characteristics, but ignore the situational causes that may have played a more important role.

- Golf example: You believe that the different grip you used in the last round helped you hit the ball further, overlooking the fact that it was a particularly dry day and the ball rolled further.
- How it hurts your game: You risk making changes in your game that have nothing to do with the outcome. You may add something that doesn't help or stop doing something that is essential to success.
- What to do about it: Balance your evaluation of shots by considering all the things that are both under your control (your thoughts and actions) and not under your control (course conditions, weather, etc.).

Unrealistic Optimism a.k.a. Over-Confidence: A belief that you will perform better than you have in the past without training for improvement in that specific skill.

- Golf example: You attempt a difficult shot between several trees to gain an extra 20-yards, rather than chip safely out to the fairway.
- How it hurts your game: Most golfers will hit the trees and add strokes unless they have very, very good control of their ball flight. When you expect your best shots, rather than your average shots, you tend to take more risky shots than you should.
- What to do about it: Be sure you understand what your usual performance looks like. Plan your shot according to how you typically hit that club.

Certainly, these “positive illusions” can affect all sports:

- Imagine the 10K runner who skipped her long run this week but raced very well and thinks maybe so much mileage isn’t helpful.
- Imagine the soccer player who hasn’t scored a goal in 3 games but feels is “due” in the next game.
- Imagine the hockey player who scored 3 goals and believes he is “the man”.

What thinking errors might hurt their performance, and how would you address them? (answers below)

Until next time,

Eddie O’Connor, PhD

Answers

Runner: Exceptions Became the Rule ... rest may have helped recovery this week – but what is her experience with a lack of distance running over the course of a season? Probably greater fatigue, slower times and a general feeling of being under-trained. How many miles does she run when she has had her best seasons?

Soccer Player: Gambler’s Fallacy ... unless he improves his ball skills, tactical approach, etc. there is a risk of not scoring again. What does he need to do to increase his chances of scoring?

Hockey Player: It’s All About Him ... Perhaps the 3 goals were a result of his teammates passing to him twice as much this game than in the past, or he played a much weaker opponent ... falsely believing that he has all the skill he needs to dominate, he may not realize that his puck handling skills could really be improved and such an attitude could delay his development.