

February 26, 2009

Tiger Returns From Injury

Less than a year ago, Tiger Woods displayed incredible focus despite pain and injury to win the U.S. Open title. Reconstructive surgery on his left knee followed. It was the third time in five years he's had surgery on the knee.

Many athletes, when returning from such a serious injury, have concerns that can distract them from their performance, "Will my knee hold up? How much pain will I have to deal with? Will I injure it again? Have I lost any physical skills or endurance?" **These questions take your attention away from the only thing that matters when you play ... execution in the present moment.**

Tiger began yesterday's Accenture's Match Play Championship with a birdie-eagle en route to a victory over Brendan Jones. "Walking down the fairway, it felt like business as usual," Tiger said. "I thought I would be more nervous on the first tee. It just came back down to playing the game again, and that felt good." **Blocking out distractions and focusing on what you can control is the key to emotional control and performance.** And that is how Tiger plays the game.

"And even Jones, who appeared to be overwhelmed, got caught up in the commotion," reports the Associated Press. Distractions are everywhere and they will hurt your performance if you let them. Coming back from an injury can add more things to worry about. **Addressing these concerns have value, but should be done before you compete so you are free to focus on what is important at the time of performance.**

Here are the strategies I use with my athletes returning from injury to build confidence and focus:

- **Trust your rehabilitation:** You should have a doctor and therapy team that you believe in. Understand why you are doing each therapy exercise and how it promotes healing, strength and endurance. When they clear you to return to play, you can then have the confidence in the injured body part, knowing that you followed their prescription and healing is complete. You can then challenge your inner doubts with scientific evidence that you are back to 100%.
- **Test it:** Under the supervision of your doctor, physical therapist or athletic trainer, test the rehabilitated body part with increasingly difficult challenges. With each accomplishment your confidence will grow until you are performing to pre-injury form or better. If you fail a challenge, ask your trainer what you can do to regain that skill. When you pass all the tests, your mind will be free to focus on competition.
- **Commit fully to your focus plan:** Now that you know the injured body part is safe, you can go back to focusing on sport performance. Return to your pre-performance routines and focus on the critical aspects of your performance, just like you did before the injury. When athletes struggle, it is often because they have shifted their focus to protecting the injured body part, become more aware of fatigue, or listen to their nervous mind chatter.
 - Remind yourself why you are fully healed, believe it, and **identify what your job is - at that moment - to perform your best** (in other words, where should your focus be and what should you be doing?).

As play continues, Tiger is likely to feel some discomfort. As one of the most mental tough athletes we've ever seen – I expect him to focus only on the shot he is making. Enjoy the rest of the tournament.

Eddie O'Connor, PhD