

Take Relief

Uncover the
Myths & Misunderstandings
of Golf Performance



Sam Jarman

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By Sam Jarman

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Acknowledgements

This book was a different experience from writing *The Three Principles of Outstanding Golf*. It seemed less of a struggle. I didn't set out to write the previous book. It started as an article for my website and just kept going.

This time was different. I knew there were things in *Three Principles* that needed clarification, and my understanding moved on almost the moment the book was published. In that regard *Take Relief* is the next step on the journey.

There are many people I would like to thank for their help and support along the way.

My dear friend Garret Kramer, whose words set me on this path nearly 10 years ago. His clarity and depth of understanding continue to be a source of inspiration and guidance.

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Hopefully the ongoing conversation has made golf a more enjoyable experience for us all and will continue to do so.

Foreword

I met Sam in November 2015 in London at a talk. We didn't know it at the time, but that day was the start of a close friendship and an ongoing conversation, about the nature of high performance and mental wellbeing in sport and life.

As a professional rugby player, I'm often pointed to what other people believe the source of excellence and consistency to be. Mostly outwards towards 'how tos' and behaviours, visible symptoms, effects.

In the modern sporting world we are conditioned to latch on to things that are tangible and measurable.

Some coaches point to a player's stats. Others believe that a great environment or culture is the key. Some players believe that performance is enhanced by finding a nice partner and being settled off the pitch.

Many fans believe that a player's motivation comes from being successful or earning a lot of money. Psychologists or performance coaches will suggest that focus and peace of mind can be attained by applying a technique or practising a mantra.

At some point, everyone has experienced wellbeing, excellence and contentment. Somewhere within us we have an inkling that it wasn't caused directly by the past or the future, by what we acquired, achieved or what has happened to us.

In sports and in a society where psychological struggle is on the rise, we rarely consider whether our true nature could be the source of our happiness. Yet when we look past our conditioned beliefs and explore our direct experience, we see that it can't be found anywhere else.

It's our birthright. A knowing that occasionally gets clouded due to a set of beliefs that we take to be true. It's the one thing we share that lies at the very source of the mind.

Our attention is constantly focused on objects; thoughts, ideas, the future, the past, people and circumstances. All of this arises within something. What is the space in between two thoughts? We take it to be nothing important, because it doesn't have much to say. It's silent. But the words on this page cannot exist without the white space that surrounds them?

Our minds love to point to things in the world to justify why we feel the way we do.

"It's because of what I was thinking."

"It's because the weather was great today."

"It's because we had a good weeks training."

What if the freedom we felt was actually the attachment to these things falling away? The knowing that shines in our heart that we are way more than what we may be thinking in any moment. Could this recognition help us deliver consistency of performance regardless of the objects and perceptions that show up in our experience?

You could call it a deeper recognition of being OK, even when thoughts may suggest otherwise.

As young athletes, at a certain age a question comes to mind. "What do I need to do to reach my potential? How can I perform as consistently as I possibly can?"

This question and the search which follows normally takes us away from the source. We look to techniques, visualisations and practices. They can be helpful for people to a degree. They can also be detrimental.

If a player begins to believe that the source of confidence or great performance comes from the thing they did, that belief will take the player further into the world of form, and further from the true source of excellence, happiness and contentment.

I was on that path after being introduced to visualisation techniques and mantras. Slowly over time I became confused as the techniques stopped working. My exclusive focus on them made me feel more anxious rather than when I allowed the mind to relax. Without knowing I began to cloud the innate potential and

wisdom which had been guiding me. I stopped feeling the freedom I experienced when playing as a boy.

Confidence, consistency and contentment drifted away.

In the blink of an eye, we can fall of out misunderstanding. We can be reminded by our heart, which is what guided us to play as young kids. This fortunately happened for me. We can enjoy our sport with more ease and clarity. We begin living full out, we let go of misunderstandings and concepts, throwing ourselves into the game knowing that our wellbeing never goes anywhere.

The following pages will clear up many of the misunderstandings and myths which plague the mental side of sport.

The knowing that Sam points the reader towards is universal. The understanding in this book will benefit everyone, not just golfers, and not just on the field of play.

Adam Ashe
Professional Rugby Player
Glasgow Warriors and Scotland

“It is the real secret of life – to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now. And instead of calling it work, realise it is play.”

Alan Watts

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I PLAYED HIGH-LEVEL GOLF for 10 years, starting in the early 1990s as an elite amateur, and then as a professional. I have been a coach since 2007.

Over the past 20 years, I have seen many theories, concepts and strategies aimed at helping golfers become more consistent, play their best golf in important tournaments, and enjoy the game as much as they remember doing when they started playing.

Unfortunately, these techniques and approaches seem to have the opposite effect than intended. They all have the same damaging flaw. They encourage golfers to think about what they are doing and how they are doing it.

I have asked many of the golfers I have coached and played with over the past 20 years the same question:

“What are you thinking about when you play your best?”

I usually get one of two answers.

“Nothing,” or “I have no idea.”

When golfers are struggling, they invariably have a lot of thinking. Suffering from information overload, they get in their own way. Swing thoughts. Strategy and decisions. Things to do. Things not to do. What ifs. If onlys.

This leads us to the first—and perhaps most-important—question this book will address:

Can a human being control or divert the flow of thought?

If you've ever tried to manage or manipulate the content of your felt or perceived experience, you might have wondered about this. Most golfers have at some point attempted to block out the thought of missing a putt, to change an uncomfortable feeling or to have a more positive mindset.

It is implied that most golf psychology or performance-coaching approaches will help us to manage our thoughts and feelings and to control our state of mind. But do these interventions make golfers play better? Do golfers enjoy playing more now than they did when they first took up the game?

Look to your current experience, how you feel about your game right now. Would you be reading this book if you didn't think that playing better might make you happier?

In the following pages, I will ask some questions that will point in a different direction to that suggested in

most golf instruction books, magazines and videos. There will be no positive thinking, no visualising, no routines and no 'five step plans' to boost motivation or build confidence.

We will examine some of the common misunderstandings about the 'inner game' that have taken root in our golfing culture, and in sport generally, over the past few decades.

I hope this book will simplify your approach to playing your best golf. It will clarify what is important in terms of performance and enjoyment, and expose what is myth, superstition and self-deception.

Six Myths About 'The Inner Game'

Here are six common beliefs about the mental side of golf. How many of these do you think are true?

1. Your feelings when you play are affected directly by external factors. The significance of the competition, your previous performances, who you are playing with, and the difficulty of the golf course can all have an impact. Confidence results from playing well, and it can be damaged by a bad shot or a bad round.
2. The key to golfing success and enjoyment is consistency. This leads to other beliefs. For example, that in order to play your best golf more often, you need to follow a consistent pre-shot routine, to practice hitting the same shot over and

over again, to visualise good shots, and to have a repeatable golf swing.

3. You need to be in a confident, calm, relaxed, focused or other positive state of mind to play well. Golfers spend time and energy monitoring and then trying to either maintain or change how they feel in the belief that one mindset is better than another and will lead to improved play.
4. You need to 'control the controllables'. The best golfers always think positive, overcome doubts, feel motivated and are the masters of their golf swings, ball flight and emotions.
5. Hard work is the key to success. You need to perfect your swing technique and groove your putting stroke. You need to become mentally tough. When these things are done, you will play well all the time.
6. In order to learn and develop, you need to figure out and be in conscious control of the learning process. You need to have a 'growth mindset'. Golf will be more enjoyable when you are a better player than you are now.

How many of the six beliefs do you subscribe to? I know my behaviour during my playing career was shaped by all of them. In the following pages, we will question these concepts. We will try to find out why, if they are true, so many golfers who abide by them are struggling.

What if these ideas are taking us further from what we are looking for, rather than bringing it closer?

Better Information, Faster Learning

This book seemed easier to write than my previous one. Perhaps because exposing what isn't true is easier than trying to describe what is. Inspiration arose whenever I went to my bookshelf, picked up one of a dozen or so golf-psychology books, blew the dust off and started reading. A few pages in, I'd get annoyed and frustrated at the strategies suggested, and the ideas and words would flow.

So many myths and misunderstandings have sprung up over the years and then been repeated by well-meaning coaches, sports psychologists and commentators. Theory becomes accepted as fact.

I'm sure these books were written with the best of intentions. As an author all you can do is share your perspective from a moment in time. That these ideas became accepted laws about how golfers think and feel just shows the strength of an illusion most of us never escape from.

That our wellbeing and happiness depend on the circumstances of our lives.

This illusion gives rise to the beliefs we will examine in the rest of the book. Doing so will perhaps allow you to trust your own gut instinct and common sense more

than you do at present. To follow your heart as much as your head.

The aim is to simplify rather than complicate. To strip away layers of thinking rather than add. To reveal truth rather than obscure it.

Unfortunately, the swing-technique side and the mental side of the game of golf have gone in opposite directions. One has become more definitive, the other has become more confused.

Our understanding of what happens when a golf club strikes a golf ball has become clearer. Launch monitors, motion sensors and high-speed cameras have made it possible to get better-quality information than ever before about how the golfer's body, the club and the ball interact during a swing or stroke.

We no longer need to estimate or guess. The days of a coach suggesting to a player that her swing might have 'come over the top a bit', or that she 'got ahead of that one' are hopefully coming to an end.

We can clearly see the combination of face angle, club path, speed and angle of attack that caused the ball to fly or roll in the way it did. For many good instructors, this has meant a simplification of how they now teach the game.

The first step is to help students fully understand the principles and implications of the ball flight laws. The second is to help them to feel what their own swing is

really doing. Is it delivering the clubface to the ball in a manner that, according to those laws, will produce the desired ball flight?

With good understanding and awareness of the swing, golfers will often find their own 'best way' of creating a functional blend of club face alignment, path, speed and angle of attack with minimal 'how to' input from the coach.

When golfers have a clear understanding of the task, they have a much better chance of completing it successfully. Young players these days, in terms of their understanding of what makes a golf swing powerful and efficient, are miles ahead of where I was at the same age.

Access to accurate information speeds up the learning process by exposing blind alleys and eliminating wild goose chases.

Unfortunately, the field of sports psychology seems to be heading in the opposite direction to that of golf-swing coaching.

Strategies and techniques are put forward, often based on the latest interpretation of brain science or learning theory. Rather than simplifying and clarifying our understanding of the human experience, further layers of complexity are added. They lead to more theories about what golfers need to think, or must not think, in order to play well. Many of these strategies collapse under a simple examination of cause and effect.

Reading the Mental Map

We all have a set of mental constructs, a mind map, of how we believe the world to be. Within this map, are theories about relative aspects of how that world works. We struggle when our beliefs about how golf should be and the reality of it fail to match up. In other words, when the map turns out to be inaccurate.

Unfortunately, our faith in the map is very strong. We become very attached to the ideas of how reality should look so that we might feel happy. When a conflict between belief and experience happens and our mood darkens, we blame the world for being out of sympathy with how we think it should be, rather than entertaining the possibility it might be the other way around.

'Reality' is how it is *regardless of our ideas or beliefs about it*. Unfortunately, most people prefer their beliefs over their own direct experience. As you can imagine, this leads to a good deal of anxiety and distress. Trying to change the world to match your expectations is a frustrating and time-consuming endeavour.

Imagine you had a tourist map of London. As you travel around, you discover that some of the landmarks depicted on the map don't match what you see when you arrive at the location. This is frustrating, but the map was free, so you make notes of the errors and keep going about your business. You adjust your map to suit what you discover to be true.

What you don't do is start making plans to have roads and buildings moved to match the piece of paper you were given.

Based on our actual experiences, we constantly make small adjustments to our mental maps of how the world really is. It's a built-in function of the human operating system. We call it learning. When things go wrong, one of two things has happened:

We've forgotten that the map is just an interpretation of reality, and we try to change the outside world to match our beliefs. Or we've forgotten that map adjustments happen naturally, and we try to manually override or force the learning process.

Both courses of action lead to annoyance, frustration and thoughts that we are helpless, incompetent, or both.

A Plan of Action

Initially, we will look at how our mental maps of the world of golf are currently drawn. We will explore the relationship between our thoughts and feelings.

We will examine how thought works. How the beliefs and ideas that make up our mental map come to be and are updated and adjusted. You will see how a better understanding of thought is a game changer when it comes to getting out of your own way.

With a better understanding of the system, you might see that letting it work as intended, rather than

fighting it, gives you a better chance of playing the golf you are capable of more often.

The most important moment in my adult life was the moment I saw that reality wasn't what I believed it to be. My map was fundamentally flawed. The world worked differently to the way I had come to believe.

I don't know exactly when confusion set in. But I seem to remember that up to age 11 or 12, life seemed simple and straightforward, becoming increasingly more difficult and complicated from then on. So, I guess that was the time when I started to get more caught up in the powerful illusion mentioned earlier.

I'm sure it didn't happen overnight, but I slipped into a belief that my wellbeing was conditional on what happened to me, on my outside circumstances. On how well I was doing at school, on the sports field and in my relationships.

Once this belief took hold, it seemed the only option was to keep monitoring, judging and manipulating those circumstances so I would feel happy more often than not.

I struggled and strived, thought more, worried more, worked harder. Sometimes I was successful. But even when things were going well, I became insecure about losing what I had. Low-level frustration, anxiety and self-doubt persisted throughout my teens and early adulthood, both on and off the golf course.

I was in my late 30s when I was shown the nature of the misunderstanding I had been living under. Golf and life looked simple again. I felt the freedom to just play as I had done when I was a young boy.

For our behaviour to change, for us to drop old habits, we usually need to let go of something we believe to be true, but isn't. This is why so many of us get stuck. We prefer to cling to our beliefs rather than opening our eyes, our hearts and our minds to the light of our direct experience. To the present moment.

I hope this book will assist you in so doing. That you might feel able to question what you currently believe to be true about your golf. Does every thought you have about the game need to be taken seriously? To what extent are you in control of what you think and, as a result, of how you feel?

Why does it seem that you need to become something more, someone better, in order to enjoy your golf again?

If you can find the courage to question those long-standing and strongly held beliefs, a range of new possibilities for you and your golf might arise.

A belief or mindset is just a thought that we take more seriously than other thoughts. It is usually propped up and supported by a framework of habitual thinking and confirmation bias, built up over time.

Fortunately, it only takes one insight for a strongly held belief to be relegated back down to the level of ‘just another thought’.

I’m sure you can think of beliefs that you didn’t question some years ago, which don’t make much sense today. Father Christmas? The tooth fairy? That the sun rises and falls?

With these examples in mind, let’s set a challenge for the rest of the book.

What are you going to trust more—your existing belief structure, or your direct experience in this, the present moment?

One will keep you stuck where you are. The other can set you free.

CHAPTER 2

Why Are You Reading This Book?

WHEN I'M NOT PLAYING GOLF, writing or coaching, my favourite distraction is fishing. More precisely, salmon fishing. The Atlantic salmon is one of the most prized sporting fish in the world. It is powerful, elusive and is found in some of the wildest and most beautiful places on earth.

Sadly, due to years of overfishing and river mismanagement, catching an Atlantic salmon is increasingly difficult.

Many anglers go for weeks at a time without hooking a fish. So, when the line eventually does tighten, the moment lives long in the memory.

Living the Dream

A keen angler had been looking forward to his fishing holiday for many months.

He spent the preceding weeks watching the weather forecast and preparing his tackle. He packed a wide range of lines and lures to ensure he could cope with whatever challenge the river conditions might present.

The long drive north was filled with anticipation. He arrived at his rented cottage in the late afternoon. After a good meal and a couple of pints at the local pub, he was in bed before closing time, ready for an early start.

The following morning, conditions were perfect as he arrived at the fishing hut on the bank of the river. The water was at an ideal height and temperature. The ghillie (his fishing guide) said that a large run of salmon had come in from the sea on the recent high tides. The anticipation increased as he pulled on his waders and set up the rod and line.

Hands shaking as he tied a favourite fly onto the end of the line, his heart skipped a beat as a big silver fish leapt out of the pool in front of him before crashing back into the peaty water.

With a dry mouth and a racing pulse, he walked upstream through the pine forest to the head of the pool. He carefully waded across the shallows, pulled a few yards of line from the reel and began to cast, gradually increasing the distance until he was covering the water close to the far bank.

The lure swung across the river in a shallow arc as the line was carried downstream by the current. As it came over the main flow into the quieter water on the near side, there was a large boil on the surface of the water, then a determined tug, tug, tug on the line.

A fish had taken the fly!

Any salmon fisherman will tell you that the take is the most exciting, most magical part of the whole experience. The feeling is indescribable. Addictive, like hitting a drive right out the middle of the club, or rolling a long putt, dead weight into the centre of the hole.

The fly was hooked securely in its top jaw. After a good fight the fish was ready to be landed. The angler carefully weighed it, took a photograph, then gently supported it in the current until it had recovered sufficiently to swim away.

He was ecstatic. A fresh run 20-pounder on the first run down the pool! The stuff dreams are made of!

When his pulse had returned to normal, he walked quietly back up to the head of the pool. Taking a couple of paces downstream in between each cast, he carefully fished down to the same spot. The fly plopped into the quiet water by the far bank. Swinging slowly over the main part of the current, again there was a strong draw on the line.

Another fish! This was incredible! To catch one the first morning of his holiday was a pleasant surprise. Two was unbelievable!

Again, it was well hooked. After a few heart-stopping moments as it ran downstream through the rapids into the pool below, it was safely landed by the ghillie before being released back into the river.

He walked up to the head of the pool for a third time and proceeded to cast across, gradually lengthening line until he was covering the full width of the river. He reached the same spot, when, for a third time in the space of a few minutes, the line went tight, and a large salmon leapt from the water. Shaking its head, the fish charged off across the river taking yards of line with it.

The fisherman was stunned. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

Barely believing what was happening, he carefully played the fish to the net again before weighing it, taking a picture and releasing it back into the stream. He was in heaven. It just didn't get any better than this.

Three fresh-run salmon in one morning! Thank goodness he had pictures and the ghillie as a witness. No one would believe him otherwise! Thoughts of interviews with fishing magazines and articles in the local paper raced across his mind.

After a short break to settle down, he walked downstream through the heather and silver birch trees to another of his favourite pools.

Again, he made a few casts across the river. Again, as he reached the middle of the pool a salmon took the fly. Astonishing! That run of fish must be huge. He played it to the net and released it back to continue its journey upstream.

Five minutes later from the same place, exactly the same result!

And again.

And again.

With every fourth or fifth cast producing a similar large fish, even the excitement of the take dwindled. He was almost expecting it. He suddenly noticed his arms were sore, and his back ached. Gradually his enthusiasm for playing yet another salmon dropped away.

He sat down on the river bank. His head was spinning as he slowly came to the awful realisation. It wasn't a dream he was having.

It was a nightmare.

The Balance Between Challenge and Mastery

Most golfers will understand the paradox in this story and the parallels with golf.

The game is a physical and mental challenge. It's hard to play it well. No matter how good you become, there are always dreams that you could improve, and nagging thoughts that form could desert you at any moment. Trying to realise the former can lead to the latter. If golf was easy, would we be as captivated as so many of us are?

Once you solve a Rubik's Cube, you don't want to play with it every day. A joke isn't as funny when you

know the punchline. A thriller isn't thrilling when you know the ending.

For the recreational golfer, it's hard to imagine that shooting in the 60s every time you step onto a golf course could become tiresome. Yet, over the years, many successful golfers have lost their enthusiasm for the game. Some start looking for other challenges or distractions to get the buzz they once got from golf, occasionally with unfortunate consequences.

It seems that seeking is human nature. Even when successful, we want more. We look for the next challenge, to prove ourselves once again. When our feelings for golf change over time, as they inevitably will, it's important to realise that the game itself hasn't.

The game of golf is neutral. How we feel about it depends on our expectations, our beliefs and the judgements we make. It depends on who or what we believe ourselves to be in that moment.

Which brings us to an important question . . .

What Sort of Golfer Are You?

Let's get it out of the way early so we know where we're at. Cards on the table, so to speak.

I doubt you would be reading this book if you were playing to your potential and loving your golf. Or if you didn't think that improving might make you happier than you are now.

You would be out on the course or the driving range enjoying yourself. Or getting some other stuff done so that you can go and play or practice later.

Every golfer has their own reasons for playing. How well do you understand yourself? What makes you pick up the clubs and head out for a few holes? What do you want from the game? Would knowing make the experience more enjoyable? I hope this book might help you answer these questions, and to see more clearly what golf means to you.

If you stop enjoying the game, it's probably because your standard of play isn't meeting your expectations. But is your game poor, or are your expectations unrealistic? Where is the sweet spot between your ability and the challenge? The first step to getting back on track is often to figure out exactly what is going on. Where are those feelings of lack coming from?

Below, I have described four types of golfer.

They are caricatures, but hopefully they will give you an idea of where you might currently be on the spectrum of golfing satisfaction. They might help to pinpoint the reason you picked up this book.

1. You aren't playing well, and as a result you aren't enjoying the game.

This is a common situation. Golf feels like hard work. You think you need to improve some parts of your game in order to play better. You believe

that when you play better you will enjoy the game again.

You have tried lessons, magazines, YouTube videos—the usual routes to improving—but the results haven't been what you had hoped. You are looking for some fresh ideas before you find a new teacher and buy another new driver.

2. Golf is fun most of the time, but you want to improve and play better more often.

You're a bit frustrated. The improvement in your game seems to have plateaued. You have had the same handicap for a while, and you seem to keep coming up against different variations of the same obstacles. You can't get all the parts of your game working well at the same time.

You are passionate about golf and suspect that those feelings come partly from the challenge of it. You just wish you had a clearer picture of what you need to do to reach the goals you have set.

3. You are playing OK, but you just aren't enjoying your golf as much as you used to.

The enthusiasm you used to feel for the game isn't there. You aren't excited about playing or practising any more. You aren't getting out as much as you used to and are worried you might

have had enough of it. What will you do with yourself if you don't play golf?

You wonder if a different approach will help you enjoy the game again, but you don't know what it is or where to look for it.

4. You could be in all three of those categories. How you play and how you feel about your golf varies from day to day.

You have good days and bad days. You're aware that golf is like that. You'd like to get a better understanding of how your mind works. About why you feel how you feel about your golf from day to day and week to week.

(You secretly hope that understanding yourself better might knock a few shots off your handicap and win you a few club competitions.)

What Do You Want From the Game?

Likely you can identify with one or more of those categories. It might surprise you that the remedy for all these apparently different issues can be found in the same simple understanding.

For most people, it looks like several different things need to happen for them to enjoy the game. I'll list them shortly. The following chapters are intended help you to clarify the relationship between events and your

feelings. In doing so, your investment in the game might make more sense.

You may think you already know what would make that investment seem worthwhile. If so, that's great.

Just hang in there, though, because a lot of people think they know. But when the question is asked another way, they find the answer changes.

OK, that list I mentioned. Most people would like:

To play to their expectations more often.

To get their handicap down.

To improve their golf swing.

To win a few competitions or beat their friends.

To enjoy the game they invest so much time, effort and money in.

None of which will probably come as a surprise. But it's the next question that causes the head scratching.

Why do you want those things?

What would achieving or accomplishing them do for you? Would the way you feel about your golf, or about yourself change? Take a moment to have a think and maybe jot down a few ideas. At the end of the book, it might be interesting to see if those answers would be different.

I'm aware that some golfers have no interest in exploring the more cerebral aspects of their chosen

pastime. They play well, they enjoy it. They play badly, they don't. Either way, it isn't a problem.

If that's you, let's not set off a train of unnecessary and irrelevant thinking. Please put the book down and head to the driving range or onto the golf course. It's all good. No hard feelings. (Just come back to it if you change your mind.)

If, on the other hand, you are interested in knowing a bit more about why the game grips you as it does, and how you might play it a bit better, please read on.

In the coming chapters, I'm going to point towards the real reasons why golfers find it so hard to improve. Why they enjoy the game one day but not the next. Why they struggle to play their best golf when they really want to.

I doubt you will have heard these ideas anywhere else, although the understanding that underpins them has been around for thousands of years.

I believe we are at the beginning of a new era in understanding where golfing performance comes from. And the good news is, our love for the game originates from the same place. Nowhere in the rules of golf does it say that you must struggle and grind in order to play well. Great golf and enjoyment can co-exist.

But to experience them more often, we might need to kill a few sacred cows. These take the form of ideas and beliefs that almost certainly affect how you feel and the

decisions you make whenever you step out onto the golf course.

These theories are so deeply ingrained in golfing culture, it's unlikely that you have questioned whether they might not be true.

Let the myth busting begin!

CHAPTER 3

Is Golf Psychology Working?

I'M NOT A PSYCHOLOGIST.

I jumped at the chance to study it at A-Level, but quickly became disillusioned. I couldn't see how the statistical element (which seems to be a major part of the subject) was relevant in helping people understand their thoughts and feelings.

To be honest, I still don't.

Some of the theories about how the brain works are interesting. But I don't see how it's possible to change someone else's thoughts or fix their unwanted behaviour. Most therapies, interventions, techniques, strategies, or methods work with the same level of consistency as an 18 handicappers golf swing.

I occasionally get challenged by a psychologist who believes that in order to help people who are struggling with their feelings to find relief, you need to have had years of training from other psychologists.

I'm not sure what qualifications are required to offer someone support, kindness and to encourage a different

type of enquiry into the nature of their current experience.

If you come from a paradigm that sees a suffering person as 'broken', that it's your job to fix them, then I guess that having a toolbox of approaches and therapies to use might make sense.

If you live in a paradigm where you believe that someone is feeling the way they feel because of the situation or circumstances of their lives, then offering strategies to help them cope with those circumstances, or to suggest ways to change them, might seem like a good idea.

The warnings from psychologists that 'patients' could be damaged by an intervention from an unqualified person might be an unintended judgement on the methods that are practised in that profession. Electric-shock therapy is still administered to depressed individuals in the hope of curing them.

If you appreciate that we all struggle from time to time when we lose sight of the true nature of our experience, then you start from the point of view that no one is broken. With that understanding, to suggest that a bagful of approaches, techniques and therapies are needed to help someone, looks like a case of the blind leading the blind.

Why not just offer love and support and point to the misunderstanding that is the source of the suffering?

Might that not be a kinder, gentler and ultimately more productive way of helping than insisting the sufferer relives past traumatic events and 'deals with them'?

Contradiction and Confusion

For the past 150 years, the study of human psychology has been confusing and confused. The field has been spread wide with numerous theories, hypotheses, ideas and speculations.

Many of these theories are contradictory. They are based on correlations that are observed and judged to be significant, rather than on scientific method, which can be rigorously tested.

Sports psychology is no different. Many techniques and approaches offered to golfers are based on observations and subjective interpretations that don't stand up under the scrutiny of either common sense or our direct experience. I know this. I spent most of my playing career trying to make them work despite the doubts I had at the time.

Looking back, I can see that when I played well, it was despite whatever mental strategies I was employing at the time, rather than because of them.

If you're a sports psychologist reading this book, I acknowledge that describing as myths and superstitions the interventions you are offering to your clients might be troubling. You have probably invested a considerable

amount of time and money on an education that you now worry might be wasted.

There is another way of looking at it.

A number of my colleagues come from different branches of the field of psychology. It would be understandable if they felt insecure about, or even threatened by, a new and different understanding of the nature of human experience that says pretty much the opposite to what they learned at university.

Instead, they have embraced this new perspective and quietly incorporated it into their work, often with impressive results.

Dr George Pransky was a clinical psychologist for 20 years before he had an insight into the true nature of how the mind works. Upon the realisation that feelings are generated moment to moment via thought, rather than caused directly by our situation or circumstances, he said:

“I saw that I had just spent the past 25 years learning about the history of psychology. I had extensive experience of what helped people and what didn’t. With my new understanding, I now saw why certain approaches worked while others didn’t. And more important, I knew the underlying reasons for both success and failure.”

It’s my hope that more people currently working in the field of sports psychology will start to look beyond

the attachment they have to strategies and mind-management techniques.

Deep down, many of these well-meaning individuals realise through their own direct experience that these interventions don't work consistently and therefore fail to serve the people that they are trying to help.

What Is Psychology?

There are several definitions, the most common being 'the study of the human mind and behaviour.' Most people understand and can describe behaviour. But what do we really mean by 'the human mind'?

Is it the brain? Is it something more nebulous, less tangible?

Thinking? Feeling? Perceiving? Is it an object, or an activity?

The lack of a clear definition and blurred parameters of what is being studied might explain why the field of sports psychology finds itself in such a confused and fragmented state.

It doesn't really know what it is. Or what its function is. Coaches and players are confused by the terminology and methodology of the research. Researchers don't know how to transfer their findings from an academic environment to the field of play.

Is it sports science? A social science? Is it a field of academia? Is it a branch of philosophy, biology or sports medicine?

As it stands, it seems wrong to describe psychology as a science. Unlike the hard sciences, physics and chemistry, there isn't an established set of principles, or laws against which theories and hypotheses can be evaluated and tested.

Much of what psychology is attempting to study can't be measured or quantified. How does one judge the relative importance of a thought? Or objectively measure the strength of a feeling such as confidence or composure? In trying to quantify such things we are completely reliant on the perception of the experience by the person describing it.

It is subjective.

Can you accurately remember how confident, relaxed or nervous you were the last time you played golf? Did the feeling last for the whole round or did it ebb and flow? If you can't recall accurately, how can you compare it to another occasion when you might have felt something similar? Or something different?

Human perception is not an accurate representation of reality. Memory of those perceptions is even less reliable.

Many psychological studies are conducted by asking questions about how someone is or was feeling. Setting

aside the likelihood that asking such questions could lead to a change in the way someone feels, these so-called 'qualitative surveys' are inevitably subjective.

If an academic endeavour cannot define itself, or agree on how it measures whatever it is supposed to be measuring, how can it know what is being studied or how to draw conclusions from what is observed?

This problem was identified as far back as 1890 by American philosopher William James, widely regarded as the founder of modern psychology.

He stated that until the principles of psychology were established, the field would remain confused and fragmented. While James predicted that principles would one day be uncovered and defined, confusion remains to this day.

For psychology to be able to defend itself against suggestions of being a pseudoscience, the field needs to agree upon a set of fundamental truths. Agreeing a set of principles or laws would underpin research, allow theories to be tested, further discussion and lead to a deeper understanding.

What Is a Principle?

In the absence of such agreement, the following pages suggest a framework that might help golfers better understand their thoughts and feelings. The first step is to establish a definition for a principle. When we recognise a principle, we can understand the

implications of that principle in the light of our experience. We will explore this in more depth shortly.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definitions of *principle*:

“A fundamental, primary or general law, from which others are derived. For example, the principles of modern physics.”

Or:

“A fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour, or for a chain of reasoning.”

And:

A fundamental source or basis of something. ‘The first principle of all things was water.’

What properties or attributes would a principle have in the context of understanding more about the relationship between our thoughts and feelings?

The following criteria have been suggested by clinical psychologist Dr Keith Blevens. Dr Blevens is a pioneer of what is sometimes known as the ‘Inside-Out understanding’—that our feelings are a result of thought, not circumstance.

A principle is:

1. **Constant.** *A principle is always true. It never varies. There are no exceptions.*
2. **Explanatory.** *A principle provides a complete account for how something works. There are no anomalies.*
3. **Predictive.** *Given the principle, one can predict outcomes in advance.*

As an example of how such definitions might be helpful in the real world, we can test these attributes in the context of hitting a golf shot using a well-known principle of physics.

Newton's first law of motion states that 'an object at rest will remain at rest, and an object in motion remains in motion until acted on by another object or force.'

This scientific principle allows us to determine:

that given identical impact factors, launch conditions and atmospheric conditions a golf ball will have the same flight, trajectory and landing point every single time it is struck (*the principle is a constant*).

that the forces acting on the ball at impact were what caused it to fly in the manner it did (*the principle is explanatory*).

how changes in the forces applied to the golf ball at impact would cause the ball flight to be different (*the principle is predictive*).

For example, if the club head is moving faster at impact, all other factors being equal, the ball will travel further.

An *implication* is something that can be explained by, or is in relation to, a *principle*.

For example, a putt that rolls to the edge of the hole but doesn't fall in can also be explained by Newton's first law of motion as stated above.

The *implication* is that gravity and friction—the forces acting to slow the rolling ball—were strong enough to overcome the energy imparted at impact by the swinging club head before the ball reached the point where gravity could pull it to the bottom of the cup.

The principles of the 'hard' sciences—physics and chemistry—have been well established for many years. Some have been updated or superseded as our understanding of the world has deepened.

Understanding the implications of principles uncovered by Newton, Einstein, Faraday, Heisenberg, Dirac and Bohm, has enabled the building of bridges and skyscrapers, communication over vast distances, travel across oceans and continents and the investigation of other planets. The entirety of human knowledge can be summoned to a battery powered device that can be carried in a pocket.

Uncovering principles has changed the course of human history.

Unfortunately, the field of psychology lags in relation to these other fields of science. We could describe it as being in a *'pre-principles paradigm'*. Before Ignatz Semmelweis's theory of germs and bacteria was accepted, the field of medicine languished in a similar situation. Lavoisier's development of the periodic table altered the paradigm in which chemistry was studied.

Change is coming. Principles of psychology are being uncovered. I believe they will become widely recognised and accepted in the coming months and years.

In the past, it has taken decades, sometimes centuries, for new paradigms to become mainstream. The speed by which information and ideas can be developed, challenged and shared via the internet will mean that new perspectives will take far less time to become the norm.

Once Semmelweis uncovered how germs and bacteria caused illness and death, educating doctors, nurses and medical professionals to wash their hands and sterilise their instruments improved the physical health of millions of people.

Establishing principles for psychology will have a similar impact on mental health.

Mind, Consciousness and Thought

While no concept from the human intellect can be considered an absolute truth, the understanding

described in my previous book has been a valuable step to realising more deeply how my experience is created.

The definition of these principles of human feeling and behaviour is simple, but profound. They were given the names 'Universal Mind', 'Universal Consciousness' and 'Universal Thought', by philosopher and author Sydney Banks, who had a revelatory psychological experience in 1973.

The sharing of his insight among his community in British Columbia, Canada, gave this understanding a foothold from where it has gradually become more widely acknowledged and shared around the world. Syd Banks's books and videos are available on several websites and sharing platforms.

The greatest steps forward in our development as a society, it seems, have come from simplifications in our understanding of how our experience of the world is created and realised.

Banks's concept is one of these simplifications. If the field of psychology moves in the direction he was pointing, I believe it will get back on track and become more relevant.

He describes these principles as follows in his book *The Missing Link*.

1. **Thought.** *"Thought is the creative agent we use to direct us through life. Thought is not reality, but it is through Thought that all realities are created."*

2. **Consciousness.** *“Consciousness is the gift of awareness. Consciousness allows the recognition of form, form being the expression of Thought.”*
3. **Mind.** *“Every human mind has direct access to its experience here on earth, and the human mind always has access to its spiritual roots from whence it came.”*

If one of these elements is missing, you would not have a human experience.

My interpretation of these principles has developed and changed somewhat since my last book was published. Through reading and listening to Syd Banks’s early teachings, I saw more clearly the underlying nature of what he was pointing to.

As he himself explained on various occasions, these principles cannot be separated or exist in isolation. In that sense, they point to one principle rather than three. The eternal paradox is that the underlying truth to which they refer cannot be conceptualised or explained with intellectual ideas, words or concepts.

Banks referred to electricity as an analogy. It’s easier to see and feel what it does, than to see it and explain what it is.

Even wise sages and enlightened teachers find the true nature of the human experience hard to grasp and impossible to describe. But that makes them no different than anyone else. All that any of us can do is to examine

more closely our current experience, to differentiate between what is true, and what is belief or conjecture.

Implications For Golf

The most powerful implication is often the simplest.

Once we can isolate and know for certain in what direction truth lies, we can also see definitively what ideas are not pointing in that direction. We can put aside a raft of myths and misunderstandings that might have been preventing us from playing to our potential and enjoying our golf.

By knowing for sure what is not true, numerous possibilities and distractions are swept away. We dramatically simplify the way we see things, both on and off the golf course. This clarity leads to better decisions and to actions that are appropriate. We can test the thought-feeling connection in our everyday lives, simply by being aware of how it works and asking some direct questions about what is happening.

You don't need a sophisticated research instrument. You can use your own direct experience to cut through any doubts, rather than relying on beliefs, conditioning or someone else's thoughts, observations or concepts.

That's why it's important you don't take the words in this book at face value. They are a signpost, not a destination. I hope that you will be inspired to explore your own experience, to come to your own conclusions.

Just replacing one set of beliefs for another set doesn't move you closer to the truth.

Answers as to the true nature of the human mind will be found with a rigorous examination of deeply held theories, ideas and concepts. You will see clearly that much of what we take to be cause and effect, in golf and in life, is, in fact, correlation reinforced by confirmation bias. The intellect fabricates all sorts of theories and concepts to explain the way life seems to be unfolding.

From childhood, we are conditioned to follow the hypothesis that we are feeling a certain way because of 'something'. We then look outwards to the world of form to find what that 'something' might be. Our beliefs are always created in hindsight.

We drive down the road looking in the rear-view mirror.

In the next chapters, we will explore the conflict between belief and our direct experience. We will look at some of the myths that have built up around the way we play the game of golf. We will find out why they endure and what might be true about life and golf once we have seen beyond the misunderstanding.

What might that mean for us as golfers? As people? Could we play the games of golf and life in a simpler way than we currently believe is possible? We might come to realise that the struggles we face are innocently of our own making.

Rather than being something we need to work at, relief could be a single insight away as we gain a deeper understanding of our true nature.