

Yoga for Golfers

By throwing your goals off the fairway and practicing being present in the process, you can play a better golf game.

By Baron Baptiste and Kathleen Finn Mendola

Perhaps no game is more wrought with mental hazards than golf. The sport introduces a constant struggle between the conscious mind (analyzing, alert, logical) and the subconscious mind (the well of intuition and long-term memory). Though golf fundamentals like body stance and stroke are learned in the conscious mind, they are stored in the nether regions of the subconscious.

This clash between subconscious and conscious mind presents an opportunity for the awakened athlete to override the mental strife created by the overanalyzing conscious mind and reach toward the wakeful, clear mind state accessible through the intuitive subconscious.

Golfers who don't learn the nuances of the mental game of golf remain frustrated or give up before mastering the sport. Yet by incorporating elements of yoga practice, you can develop the mental discipline that golf demands.

The Flow of Concentration

The breadth and depth of available instruction contributes to golf's reputation as an intensely mental game. Detailed videos and books on the science of the game abound, and golf's one-on-one coaching is considered incomparable to other sports. Yet all the instruction in the world won't help you if you allow stress to seep into your game.

When dedicated golfers are making progress, hitting the ball well, and feeling on top of their game, they're "in the zone" a state of being athletes reach where thought is suspended and focus and concentration are heightened. Many golfers invariably bring in the element of performance pressure and -wham- the zone disappears. The conscious, analyzing mind steps in and they begin to think their technique is faulty. They tell themselves they have to practice more, hit harder, and correct their imperfections.

In these cases, it's usually not faulty technique but the stress of negative self-talk that disrupts the flow of concentration, and therefore, impairs the physical aspects of the game. In his book, *Training a Tiger: A Father's Guide to Raising a Winner in Golf and Life* (HarperCollins, 1998), Earl Woods, father of golf great Tiger Woods, reminds his son, "If you don't clutter your conscious mind with endless pointers and tips, you make it easier for your subconscious instincts to guide you."

This is not to say that you can ignore the physical game. There's always a need to practice, learn the fundamentals, and focus on technique. However, there also comes a time to let it all go and let the subconscious take over, allowing hours of practice and experience your long-term

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memories to flow through you. Then you can move beyond logical thinking to intuitive, "thoughtless" action.

Freeing the subconscious is contingent upon the body's ability to relax. When you've entered a deep state of relaxation, you're able to experience the "now" and your mind becomes clear. You know how to react or not react by anchoring yourself internally. When your mental chatter quiets, you're able to approach your golf game with focus and awareness.

Throwing Away Your Goals

Focus is the last word you would use when observing cliched images of the frustrated golfer: heaving golf clubs, making vehement self-incriminatory remarks, swearing, and throwing temper tantrums that would rival those of a 2-year-old. These golfers are outcome-focused, under self-imposed pressure to meet their goals, whether that's hitting a bogey, a par, a birdie, or striving to lower their handicap. They are intensely attached to the game and their results. By throwing your goals off the fairway and practicing being present in the process, you can free yourself of stress, and ironically, play a better golf game.

Legend speaks of a group of Zen monks who practice archery for hours on end attempting to master the physical components of the game. Once they achieve this mastery, they toss away their bows and arrows. They're not attached to the game. They're not attached to winning or achieving a particular score. They use sport merely as a tool for reaching a state of consciousness.

Before you throw out your golf clubs, call on your yoga practice to help you connect with the body and breath, and thus, the various sensations that occur at each moment. Observe your breath to invite feelings of non-attachment, non-judgment, and presence. Pay attention to physical sensations, pain and stiffness, or ease of movement, using the body like a ground wire for the mind.

By connecting to the subtleties of breath, you clear the conscious mind. Light shines on your path, and you're able to see and act with clarity. Without any expectation of outcome, all natural resources can flow forth from the storage house of the subconscious and play through the body like wind through a flute.

The Physical Game

In order to reach the mental peak of your game, you need the instrument of your body to be well tuned.

A strong, stable body that is fluid and flexible creates the foundation for a healthy, injury-free athlete. Consider a lone tree whipping in the winds of a hurricane. A brittle, stiff tree will crack

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and fall, while a fluid, flexible tree will bend and lean, ultimately withstanding the fiercest of storms.

For many, flexibility, or fluidity, may be more difficult to achieve than strength and stability. Internal and external stressors can block energy in the body, limiting range of motion and causing your body structure to be off center. An off-kilter stance may manifest in the golfer as a stroke that's off by a fraction of an inch. Power, balance, and weight transfer all depend on fluidity in the body.

Due to the fact that golfers swing from one side of the body, there is asymmetry inherent in the sport. Overtraining and repetitive motion manifests as larger muscles on one side of a golfer's body; specifically, the shoulders, biceps, forearms, and upper back will be more developed on a golfer's dominant side. These stronger muscles are also tighter, while the weaker muscles are more flexible. The tight muscles, in turn, restrict the free movement of surrounding muscles, ultimately leading to limited range of motion.

A symmetrical golf stroke is not only going to be more accurate and go farther, it is also going to produce less strain on the body. To create more equality on both sides of the body, golfers need to hold strengthening poses on the weaker side of the body and opening poses on the stronger, yet tighter, side of the body. This is in addition to a regular yoga program of poses performed equally on both sides.

Striving toward symmetry and balance is the essence of a yoga program, which breaks down tension the body has learned to work around. It is an intuitive process that takes practice to develop, much like a good golf game.

A balanced body is a flexible body, and flexibility remains the cornerstone of a good golf game. As Earl Woods tells his son, "What you're looking for is a soft, flexible, fluid swing that's power."