



This article is based upon a section of my book, **THE MENTAL SIDE OF GOLF** entitled “Developing a Strategy”. It helps golfers and even non-golfers recognize the importance of having a sense of awareness and a plan which will help them accomplish any given goal.

Developing a Strategy

Recently, when asked about his new driver at the 2006 Buick Open, Tiger Woods exclaimed that the driver was just fine but what was more important was the person holding the club. Interestingly, several of his drives went to the right and into the rough. As a result, he needed to hit an innovative second shot to reach the green. Did Tiger have a mind set operating? Probably he did. Ultimately, he won the tournament by one stroke after two exciting sudden death playoff holes.

Tiger Woods has a remarkable ability to rebound when his back is up against the wall. This takes tremendous self-discipline and extensive physical and mental training. Even though he may get frustrated and even angry at times, he is usually able to rebound, resume focus and return to his zone. I followed him while attending the Rochester PGA Tournament a few years ago. His ability to rebound was apparent throughout the tournament. He may not win every tournament but his ability to adapt to almost any situation provides a great deal of excitement for his fans.

In Tiger's early years in the PGA, he tended to place as much emphasis on the mental side of the game as he did on the technical and physical elements. He certainly developed himself physically to give him the endurance necessary to achieve his boundless potential. When Tiger was younger, I recall how he would seem to get upset when cameras clicked on the sidelines while he putted or when people made noise while he was driving the ball. He would pull back, appear angry and glare at the spectator who caused the distraction.

One of the stories concerns the time when Tiger asked his father to help him overcome distractions. Just before Tiger was ready to putt, his father jiggled his keys to create an annoying distraction. Learning to overcome this distraction enabled Tiger to teach himself to overcome any distraction.

I'm sure there were many other training methods that Tiger used to sharpen his skills by using his mind, body and emotions to enable him to stay in his zone. Developing a strategy for yourself is as important for the amateur as it is for the professional if you want to progress in your game. It would be a good idea if you could consciously develop new ways of training yourself to become more self-disciplined as well. It may not be easy but the outcome will certainly be satisfying and extremely useful in dealing with both the game of golf as well as life in general.

Jack Nicklaus, who is probably recognized as one of golf's most proficient thinkers and strategists had this to say:

“Golf calls for two interrelated but distinct skills. One is the ability to strike the ball, to physically play the shots. The other is the ability to observe, evaluate, plan and think your way around the golf course, to play strategically and tactically - in short, to score. No matter how good you become at the first, you'll never be a successful golfer if you are not equally good at the second.”

This statement is a clear and definitive way of understanding the importance of the mental side of the game of golf. Gaining a sense of satisfaction from your golf game is not only derived from striking the ball but striking it and landing it strategically in an area that will afford a good, effective subsequent shot ***in order to score well***. There is a great deal of emphasis placed on ***power*** golf. However, it seems to me that power golf can only be effectively practiced until a golfer is able to develop a strategy for playing the game. Distance does not necessarily insure accuracy.

This kind of thinking places the game into our hands and not into the occasional lucky chance shot that keeps you coming back. This kind of thinking will allow consistency in your game that you can count on in future rounds. The lie of the ball, the choice of the club, the length of the backswing, the area into which you want to place the ball, the anticipation of the next shot...all of these factors play into the thinking and strategy that you can bring to your game.

A good friend of mine likens the game of golf to a game of chess. Instead of focusing on the score or the mechanics of the game, he maintains that golfers should be more aware of the layout of the course. He contends that the strategy behind the game, for both beginners and professionals, should deal with beating the course architect. Golf course architects trick players with obstacles and mirages that tend to cause golfers to take risks that are beyond their current ability. For example, there might be long distances that appear short or unseen water hazards that block the entrance to a green. Another example is that although it might appear that a wood should be the club of choice off a tee, you might be better off using an iron to hit short of water hazard leaving a safe and high probability chip to the green.

My friend also approaches his game with a different perceptual outlook as well as how he might play a course. He always acquaints himself with the course design before playing. A commentator at the 2006 Master's Tournament, while commenting on the participants' progress, said, "I am afraid that the course has won this round." The commentator's remark supports my friend's approach.

When we develop the strategy of beating the course, the competitive aspects take on a different sense. Essentially, play becomes a mind game where you can have some fun indulging in outsmarting the architect's attempts to entice you to take too many or too few risks. Andre Agassi, the tennis player, once did a TV commercial that claimed perception is everything. Perception is everything but it is not only a matter of what we see but of how we see it.

When you choose a particular club to make a shot, your choice is based on your prior experience. You remember how you approached this shot in the past and how it felt. You also take a moment to remember and focus on what you were thinking and feeling. There was probably a feeling of confidence that you would make the shot.

You might remember taking a lesson on how to use that club more effectively and how you were able to reformulate what the instructor was saying into your own words. And you might also recall the feeling that you had once you had accomplished striking the ball and sending it to the desired location. These are all your thoughts and feelings. You can recall and use them whenever you wish. Retrieving prior thoughts and feelings is truly an effective strategy.

Now, let's look at the flip side of the positive example. What if the last time you used a club, you hit a poor shot. You can still employ a positive thinking strategy. Remember what you were thinking of and how you felt the last time you were disappointed. Try recalling those thoughts and feelings as clearly and precisely as possible. Being aware of prior negative thoughts is a totally different situation. You can use your mind to move away from those negative thoughts and create new thoughts and feelings. Of course, you must also recall swing fundamentals. Take a little bit of time to imagine a correct swing and then execute your swing in a positive manner. Learn how to rid your mind of negative experiences as you recall swing fundamentals and execute each shot knowing that you will succeed.

You don't have to feel something that will further complicate your problem. You can always feel confident and focused on the next shot that is within your ability to execute. Don't rush your thoughts. No one else needs to know what you're doing. That's it! Notice how positive your thinking is and how good this feels. Take a practice swing with these thoughts and feelings. It feels good doesn't it? Now, address the ball, take your time and swing with the confidence that the ball will jump off the face of the club and land where you want it to go. This type of confidence will usually produce a positive result. With time, this practice and attitude will work consistently.

There is something about a score that not only makes some golfers tense and jittery, but also prevents them from relaxing. All of this results in a less than desirable effect. In golf jargon, it's called the yips. Trying to kill the ball frequently reduces distance just as an overly competitive attitude can increase your score. Although scoring is a necessary part of the game it should never more important than remaining focused, implementing your strategic plan and staying in your zone.

The more relaxed and focused you are as you approach a round of golf, the more effectively you will be able to play. This does not only refer to relaxing your mind and body. You need to also place emphasis on developing a strategy for playing the game to minimize tension, improve play and help you enjoy the game. This same principle can be applied to managing your life. Learning how to accomplish this will make a big difference in your golf game as well as in your life.

And now, I want to introduce you to a strategy exercise so that you can see in detail how you might approach any course that you might play. If you play only one course, you can apply the strategic elements to every hole on the course. I believe that if you are sincerely dedicated to using this approach, you will shave strokes off of your game in a relatively short period of time. Let's first examine what the specific purposes are for developing a strategy.

PURPOSES OF A STRATEGY EXERCISE

- A strategy allows us to approach a problem in a systematic and logical manner;
- A strategy must be based in HONESTY, A POSITIVE ATTITUDE, REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS and A WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT CHANGES IN ORDER TO SUCCEED;
- A strategy includes being able to break down complex problems into smaller "pieces" in order to change the whole picture;
- Vision each picture of each shot while remembering the thoughts and feelings of previous shots, practice sessions;
- Off any and all tees, describe how you feel taking the shot and then doffing it into the water/rough/sand trap, etc.;
- The goal is to achieve your PERSONAL BEST for each shot you play;
- Bring a SENSE OF HONESTY and REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS in order to determine effectiveness, changes in approaching each shot, etc.;
- Envisioning each shot, club, swing, where ball's going to land comes from previous experiences with all of them IN PLAY AND PRACTICE SESSIONS;
- Not just THINKING of every swing but what it FELT LIKE WHEN YOU WERE SUCCESSFUL;
- You won't really be able to remember everything unless you write it down since the mind's recall ability needs stimulation.

For your information, you can go to the internet and do a Google search for whichever course for which you would like to develop a STRATEGIC PLAN. Many courses are able to be found together with a layout and description of each hole. That having been said, there are some courses that are not represented in this manner and your going to the course to get descriptive information would be your next best bet or send for that information should you be traveling to the course out of town.

For demonstration purposes, I have chosen the 6th hole on my home course, Bobcat Trail in North Port, Florida. I've chosen this hole because in playing the course, it affords me more trouble than satisfaction. It is the longest hole on the course and the hazards that border it truly tests my ability to hit a straight, accurately placed shot in order to par the hole.

Before sending you to **TABLE 1** I want to say that I've usually bogeyed or double bogeyed this hole. In my last attempt, though, I employed the strategy which will be defined in **TABLE 2**. Instead of using a driver off the tee, I decided to use my three wood in order to gain a greater sense of accuracy instead of going for distance and running the risk of shooting into a hazard. I focused on each of my shots using the visualization techniques described in a latter section of this book. In effect, it worked. Each shot took on a very different perspective both in terms of my choice of clubs as well as my technical form. I was much more aware of my play, my sense of focus and staying in my zone which enabled me to par the hole. I was elated and I believe that you will be as well once you develop your own strategy for your golf game.

TABLE 1 on the following two pages contains an overall description of the course, the Men's and Women's yardage from the 6th tee, the par for the hole and a section asking that you place your most realistic score ONLY UPON COMPLETING YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THIS HOLE.. Descriptions of the fairway leading to the green are added. Then, you are asked to provide your own THOUGHTS and FEELINGS about playing the hole for each shot taken including your putts.

TABLE 1

BOBCAT TRAIL HOLE NO. 6

Bobcat Trail Golf Club plays 6748 yards, par 71 from the tips and is the only Golf Digest rated 4½ star golf course in Sarasota County. Designed by Canadian Open Champion and PGA Champion, Bob Tway, and architect Lee Singletary, "*The Cat*" is a rewarding challenge for players of all skill levels.

Every hole at **Bobcat Trail** is a distinctive "risk-reward" design and any one of the 18 could be considered the signature hole. The keys to scoring on "*The Cat*" are well placed drives on the wide rolling fairways, accurate irons to the proper "shelf" and imagination and steady nerves on and around the large, undulating and well-bunkered greens.

No. 6

Distance: 532 Yards (Men's Green) 428 Yards (Women's Red)

Par: 5

Score: ***Insert your most realistic score after you complete your plan for the 6th hole.***

The 6th hole is one of the most difficult holes on "*The Cat.*" It is the longest hole on the course. The 6th hole rewards accurate play up the middle of the fairway and an accurate approach shot over the hazard that protects a large undulating green that has three shelves.

The initial fairway has a number of slopes on both the right and left. There is a water hazard on the entire right length of the fairway and rough, cart path and homes on the left length of the fairway. Shots such as sliced, pushed, pulled, duck hooked shots cause the loss of one or more strokes.

The initial fairway narrows just where long drives are supposed to land.

The second fairway is protected on the right by rough and a well placed sand trap (medium consistency) and several sand traps at the far left center of the fairway to penalize the errant shots of long hitters. There is another water hazard just over the cart path at the far end of the second fairway.

The approach shot to the green is a dogleg right over a hazard. The slightly elevated green has three shelves and is protected by two sand traps (medium sand) on the far right and banks and rough around the entire green.

Add your own descriptive (thoughts & feelings) comments about the 6th hole below:

1st
Shot _____

2nd
Shot _____

3rd
Shot _____

4th
Shot _____

Putts _____

Add your own comments about your most realistic score below and/or on reverse side:

Add your own comments about "The Mental Side of Golf" below and/or on reverse side:

TABLE 2 is essentially the same as **TABLE 1** except it contains my completion of the required information in order to complete my strategic plan for the hole. I completed it with the help (and criticism) of my good friend, Roy, who designed this Strategic Plan. His insistence on my honesty and what my clear expectations were helped me to focus even more specifically on my play which I tended to take for granted and to which I seldom had paid much attention. It was a very interesting and revealing exercise in which I would invite all readers to engage so that your awareness of developing a strategy can become more astute as well.

TABLE 2

Bobcat Trail Golf Club plays 6748 yards, par 71 from the tips and is the only Golf Digest rated 4½ star golf course in Sarasota County. Designed by Canadian Open Champion and PGA Champion, Bob Tway, and architect Lee Singletary, "**The Cat**" is a rewarding challenge for players of all skill levels.

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No. 6

| | | |
|-----------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Distance: | 532 Yards (Men's Green) | 428 Yards (Women's Red) |
| Par: | 5 | |
| Score: | 6 | |

The 6th hole is one of the most difficult holes on "**The Cat**." It is the longest hole on the course. The 6th hole rewards accurate play up the middle of the fairway and an accurate approach shot over the hazard that protects a large undulating green that has three shelves.

The initial fairway has a number of slopes on both the right and left. There is a water hazard on the entire right length of the fairway and rough, cart path and homes on the left length of the fairway. Shots such as sliced, pushed, pulled, duck hooked shots cause the loss of one or more strokes.

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The second fairway is protected on the right by rough and a well placed sand trap (medium consistency) and several sand traps at the far left center of the fairway to penalize the errant shots of long hitters. There is another water hazard just over the cart path at the far end of the second fairway.

The approach shot to the green is a dogleg right over a hazard. The slightly elevated green has three shelves and is protected by two sand traps (medium sand) on the far right and banks and rough around the entire green.

Add your own descriptive comments about the 6th hole below: This hole is my nemesis. No. 6 appears much longer than it really is. I usually played this hole too long. I was always tense when I stood on the tee and usually sprayed my drives.

1st Shot 3-Wood Concentrate on easy swing with a light grip and my follow-through. Envision my prior 3-Wood shot. The ball will be in the middle of the fairway about 200 yards from the tee.

2nd Shot 4-Iron to center of the fairway. Focus is on smooth takeaway. Envision top of backswing. Ball will be center left about 170 yards from the green (plays like 135 yards).

3rd Shot 7-Iron or 8-Iron depending on distance. Ball position is 1 width right of center stance. Concentrate on slow takeaway for at least 2 feet, a 75% backswing and hitting down and through the ball. Ball will be on the green about 20' from the pin.

Putts Three putts for a bogey 6. I usually score a double bogey or higher on this hole because I have always hit a driver and tried to reach this green in regulation. I expect this plan to enable me to par this hole 30% of the time. A key factor for me is to play this hole as if I am playing in a tournament.

Add your own comments about "The Mental Side of Golf" below: I didn't know that there was this much to the mental side of golf. I must put my expectations into a more practical perspective. I will complete my strategic plan for "The Cat." I will let Charlie know about my experience.

TABLE 3 is simply a prototype of the previous two tables which you can copy and use to develop a strategic strategy for all of the holes on the course of your choice. The process is challenging but enjoyable. I can all but guarantee that you will shave strokes off of your game if you conscientiously apply this strategy to your game. Remember though, before you play a course that is new to you, get to the course early and along with going to the practice range to work on some of your weak points (***SEE SECTION ON "FORMING GOOD GOLFING HABITS"***) you should also spend some time looking over the course layout and determine your strategy accordingly. Take some notes. If you are playing in a tournament and are able to play a practice round, or walk the course, take copious notes to which you can refer in the course of playing a tournament round. You will find that there will be a payoff at the end of the round in terms of better, more focused and confident play.

TABLE 3

GOLF COURSE NAME & HOLE NUMBER

COURSE DESCRIPTION: _____

DESCRIPTION OF DESIRED HOLE: _____

Hole No.

Distance: Yards (Men's Green) Yards (Women's Red)

Hole Par:

Score: *Insert your most realistic score after you complete your plan for this hole.*

Specific description of your desired hole _____

Add your own descriptive comments about this hole below:

1st
Shot _____

2nd
Shot _____

3rd
Shot _____

4th
Shot _____

Putts: _____

Add your own descriptive (thoughts & feelings) comments about this hole below: _____

Add your own comments about your most realistic score below:

Add your own comments about “The Mental Side of Golf” below:

A Brief Biographical Sketch

After an over 40 year career as a professional psychotherapist and Director of The Sports Stress Clinic in Amherst, NY, Charles Bonasera came to Florida and decided to use the benefits of his previous professional experiences in his new roles of Consultant in Life Management and Business Coaching as well as his expertise as a Motivational Speaker. He once again became involved with athletes in different sports training them with his techniques to help them develop and maintain focus as well as staying in their zone. Much of his training methods are derived from the CD collection he developed under the heading of WIN-WIN SECRETS as the President of Personal Identity Controls. This collection consists of thirty-six programs dealing with vital issues in the management of stress.

Another role that he adopted to add to his professional career was that of Author. Early in the 1980's he wrote Guide to a Life Management Process which he has re-written as a workbook to successfully help people manage their stress which includes his own Working Model. As a result in his interest in golf and realizing that it was essentially a “mind game”, he wrote The Mental Side of Golf which can benefit the beginner as well as professionals playing the game of golf.

He then compiled over five-hundred sayings that he had developed in the course of his professional career as stimuli to help people change patterns in their lives entitled How to Stay Well and Live Life to the Fullest. This was followed by a book documenting case studies around disruptive life patterns including ways to change them under the name of How in the Hell Did This Happen to Me? Both his personal involvement in sports as a participant, coach, manager and in his role in officiating, inspired him to write a primer for parents and coaches entitled The Legend of Little League.

Charles invites you to view his website at www.charlesmbonasera.com as well as to write with your comments and questions to his e-mail address (charles@charlesmbonasera.com). He would also be very happy to communicate with his readers by telephone should they desire. His professional motto is “seeking alternative methods to happiness” and wishes those touched by his words to practice the three secrets to a happy life: “enjoy life and enjoy it thoroughly ... develop and maintain a sense of humor ... bring as much love into your life as possible.