

THE
TOURNAMENT
GOLFER'S
PLAYBOOK

Change your mind,
Change your life:
The Path of the Tournament Golfer

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BE YOUR OWN BFF

It's not what you say to everyone else that determines your life. It's what you whisper to yourself that has the greatest power.

—Robert T. Kiyosoki

POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Tournament Golfers must be their own best friend. Golf is difficult and solitary, so it's essential to be positive to yourself to be an effective Tournament Golfer. It's okay to demand much of yourself and even to be disappointed in yourself from time to time. That's an inherent part of the game. Unlike most mainstream sports, there is no teammate to pick you up when things get tough. There's no one to cover for you—it's all on you.

Positive self-talk is crucial. Science backs up this claim: According to Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*, “nothing can sap your belief in yourself or in your dreams more quickly and thoroughly than you, your own negative self-talk. For a variety of evolutionary reasons, the human mind automatically gravitates toward negative, frightening, and depressing thoughts.”

DEFY THE DESTRUCTIVE VOICE

Pay attention to any negative self-talk going through your mind during a competitive round. It usually takes the form of the second person, as in *You are a terrible putter*. It's never *I am a terrible*

putter. Golfers will allow their inner critic to speak to them in abusive ways they would never tolerate from anyone else. Learn to listen for negative self-talk when it pops up and recognize it for the lie that it is. Dr. Csikszentmihalyi refers to this negative self-talk as graffiti being sprayed on the walls of the mind. Immediately counter this negativity with a positive affirmation. Importantly, Dr. Csikszentmihalyi recommends countering the second-person criticism—*You* are a terrible putter—with a first-person affirmation: *I* am a *great* putter. The key is to learn to catch the negative self-talk and reverse it immediately and repeatedly.

Psycho-Cybernetics had a big influence on me in high school. The author, Dr. Maxwell Maltz, was a plastic surgeon. Through his practice, he discovered that people are who they believe themselves to be even if there is evidence to the contrary. For example, after a significant facial plastic surgery, many of his patients would see no change in their physical appearance. He theorized that although people are not conscious of it, their self-image develops because of their past experiences. A person tends to believe this self-image, and live their life based on this belief of themselves. This explains how some people seem to always be successful, and others constantly fail.

Their subsequent experiences will support the self-image they have of themselves. Interestingly, Maltz also discovered that negative self-images can be adjusted, tweaked, and even completely reversed through the use of the imagination—simply by picturing success. He believed that the conscious mind imagines the picture of a goal, and the subconscious mind goes about accomplishing that goal.

SHORT-TERM MEMORY LOSS

To truly become a Tournament Golfer, you must be able to conjure up a short-term memory loss on demand. A major

difference between a Tournament Golfer and a Golfer-Who-Plays-Tournaments is the ability to move past a bad shot, a bad decision, or a bad situation—immediately after it occurs. It is not an exaggeration to say that virtually every time you play golf, things won't go your way for a variety of reasons.

Bobby Jones said, "On the golf course, a man may be the dogged victim of inexorable fate, be struck down by an appalling stroke of tragedy, become the hero of unbelievable melodrama, or the clown in a sidesplitting comedy—any of these within a few hours, and all without having to bury a corpse or repair a tangled personality."

There is just no getting around it: If you cannot be your own best friend when things go awry on the course, you will not only have difficulty overcoming the varied obstacles on the golf course, but you may also become a victim of your own self-hatred. Think about the negative self-talk you've had with yourself. It's easy to say horrible things to ourselves from time to time. So, ask yourself this: *Is this something I would say to a good friend who just hit the same bad shot that I did?* Of course not! If that is true, then why in the world would you ever say such a negative thing to yourself?

SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion is what develops once our self-talk is consistently positive in nature. Self-compassion is simply treating yourself with the kindness and dignity you give those you love and care about. Self-compassion is not the same as self-esteem. Self-esteem can cover up personal flaws by making broad positive statements such as "I am a nice person" or "I am a great putter." You may generally be a nice person or even a great putter—but when you yell at someone for no good reason or experience an atrocious day on the greens, then what? Chasing self-esteem can

pose issues when relying on outcomes that are intended to match up with the self-concept. Since outcomes are often unpredictable, working on self-esteem based on them is not effective.

According to a study on self-esteem by Kristin D. Neff, “Self-esteem is largely the outcome of doing well, not the cause of doing well. For instance, self-esteem appears to be the result rather than the cause of improved academic performance.” She points out that although there have been a number of large-scale programs to promote self-esteem in schools, many of these self-esteem programs for school kids tend to emphasize indiscriminate praise. Elementary schools in particular assume that their mission is to raise the self-esteem of their pupils in order to prepare children for success and happiness later in life. For this reason, they discourage teachers from making critical remarks to young children because of the damage it might do to their self-esteem.

The desire to raise children’s self-esteem has led to some serious grade inflation. Forty-eight percent of high-school students received an A average in 2004, as compared to eighteen percent in 1968. So, is all this emphasis on raising self-esteem actually a good thing? Not necessarily.

Self-compassion, as opposed to self-esteem, means recognizing and accepting all of your blemishes, appreciating the positives you possess. One huge advantage of practicing self-compassion over self-esteem is that it is available precisely when self-esteem fails us—when we go out and shoot a terrible score and feel embarrassment. Studies have shown that self-compassion lessens the “threat system” (defensiveness and self-doubt) and activates the “self-comforting” system. While self-compassion is linked with well-being because it makes people feel safe and protected, self-esteem makes people feel superior and confident.

Because of this, self-compassion is not just more honest, it is more genuine. Golf, particularly tournament golf, highlights

our shortcomings. Therefore, self-compassion must go hand in hand with being your own BFF. You've been criticizing yourself for years, and it's been preventing you from being your best—a Tournament Golfer. You'll always be a work in progress, so give yourself a break by valuing the positives along with accepting the the negatives.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness might be the second cousin to self-compassion, but it is a bit different. The forgiveness I'm talking about is self-forgiveness—and it has to start before you actually commit the action that needs your forgiveness! What do I mean?

It goes like this: We are human beings and so, by definition, we will screw up. A lot. On top of that, we've chosen to play the game of golf, which was seemingly invented to highlight our weaknesses. Once we recognize that we are all destined to make mistakes, then it is easier to forgive ourselves *in advance*. Every mistake is a valuable lesson—and when framed as such, moves us ever closer to accomplishing our goal. We learn from mistakes; thus we improve.

Mistakes can inspire you to make progress and, if handled correctly, play a significant role in making you better in the long run. We are human. We are mistake-making machines. Get over it. Forgive yourself and drive on.

GOLF DOESN'T DEFINE YOU AS A PERSON

I have to be honest here. In my case, this is not 100 percent true. Golf is such a big part of who I am that it is disingenuous to say golf doesn't play some role in who I am. There have been a few times in my life when I realized I had let the game climb too high on my list of important stuff in my life. For a serious golfer, this situation is going to happen from time to time, so it's a good idea to keep a lookout for it when it happens.

In my experience, this feeling of golf defining your self comes from really good golf—or really bad golf. When you win an event, you naturally feel good about yourself. When you bomb out in a tournament, you feel like a dog. My advice is to be aware of this tendency and avoid letting yourself get too high of an opinion of yourself with the wins—or too low with the poor performances. Make the effort to keep things in perspective and avoid letting results dominate your persona.

If need be, take a break and get away from the game when it starts to play too big of a role in who you are. Golf is bigger than all of us, but we get to choose how big it is in our life.

I made a 10 on a par-five final hole in a state championship one year. Nice way to finish. Lucky for me, I was not in contention that year. Was I embarrassed? You bet. All of my friends wanted an immediate recalling of every shot from one to ten. As a younger man, posting a score in the 80s was devastating. I let the bad result creep into defining who I was as a person. This time, I was much older, and had more mental scar tissue to help deflect the pain, so it was easier to laugh it off and put it in the rear-view mirror. This 10 was not going to define me. This is what the Tournament Golfer does so well.

Jack Nicklaus, the greatest golfer of all time, was asked in an interview what was the one thing he wanted to be remembered for. The questioner was expecting something like, “My eighteen major championships” or “My victory in the ’86 Masters at age forty-eight.” But Jack said, “I want to be remembered as a good father.” If Jack Nicklaus chooses not to let golf be the sole definition of who he is, neither should we.

PERSPECTIVE

The above is also about perspective, but there’s more. It’s easy to let golf climb to the top of the list of what our lives are

all about, forgetting it's just a game we play. Especially true for the young Tournament Golfers, lack of perspective typically leads to burnout and total disillusionment. In some cases, these disheartened people quit playing altogether. I have witnessed this scenario more than once, and it was always with junior golfers. Perspective was difficult for them to acquire.

One such Tournament Golfer was a few years younger than I. His name was David. We were both "Range Rats," spending all our after-school time at a local driving range. The outside flood lights at this range would automatically turn off at closing time, 10:00 P.M. There were numerous times that a putt was hit across the green in a tight putting match at 9:59:59 and we would have to run in the dark after the still-rolling ball to access the result.

David turned into the best twelve-year-old golfer in the state of California. He played in hundreds of tournaments and won seventy percent of them. I remember a photo of him kneeling in front of a mountain of trophies. He was a world beater who, in many people's opinion, became the best junior golfer California ever produced. I convinced him to consider joining the golf team at the University of Houston soon after I graduated. He flew to Houston to tour the school and meet everyone. But he decided to attend another university.

David put a tremendous amount of pressure on himself, and much was expected of him. In the middle of his freshman year, he reached the burnout stage and quit golf for good. With golf being the total sum of his life at his young age, its departure from his daily routine left an enormous void in his life. He filled the void with a new bad group of friends and the drugs they introduced him to. I never heard from David again, but I heard that he had hit rock bottom and stayed there. A little perspective in David's life would have saved him from this fate—and everyone reading this book would know his name.

Perspective comes from experience and a recognition of the world around you. As you already know, my golf team won the NCAA championship in 1977. What you couldn't know is that on the 72nd hole of that tournament, I hit a beautiful shot twelve feet below the hole for a birdie opportunity. I knew we were either in the lead or very close to it. The next hour would tell what team was to be crowned National Champion. Every shot carried incredible weight. I was not a Tournament Golfer yet, and all I could think about was the result of winning or losing the National Championship, and that I must do my part!

I stepped over the putt trying to make the birdie that might lift my team to the title. I ran it by the hole a couple of feet and missed it coming back. I felt I had singlehandedly sunk my team's chances to win. In my head, I could hear all 35,000 students at the University of Houston groan in unison over my careless 3-putt bogey. I had let them down, too. I was a senior, so there was no "get 'em next year." There wasn't going to *be* a next year. My college career had just ended with the choke stroke of all time. To this day, I have never been more furious with myself.

I headed over to the locker room at a breakneck pace and slammed open the door leading into it and proceeded up the stairs to my locker. As I glanced up, there was a teenage boy struggling with his two crutches to make his way down the stairs toward me. They weren't the sort of crutches one uses when one has a sprained ankle or knee. These crutches were custom fit, and it was obvious this boy had permanent mobility issues. He was severely handicapped. In this moment of clarity—of perspective—I felt the anger and despair drain out of me like someone had just poked a water balloon with a pin. Instinctively, I knew I had no right or license to feel sorry for myself. I recognized instantly what a difficult life this young

man had had up to this point and how much tougher it could well be for the rest of his life.

I received instantaneous perspective at the moment I needed it the most. I was grateful then for this gift of perspective and I remain grateful still.

Golf is just a game. Don't let it own you.

RESILIENCE

The definition of *resilient* is the ability to recover quickly from difficulties. This can mean recovery from a poor swing, or it can mean overcoming a longer-term challenge. It is a mental toughness that allows the Tournament Golfer to bounce back from adversity. Being your own best friend is at the core of resilience. You need to have a support system of people who care about you.

But true resilience all starts from within. Resiliency doesn't happen after the fact; it is a decision you make in advance. Resiliency is a mental perspective you put in place prior to making the bad swing or the bad decision. You know it's coming and you have decided in advance to respond to it in a resilient way.

One year in the Texas State Amateur, I set out with a primary goal to avoid beating myself up over poor shots or scores. I have never been accused of being a perfectionist, but most of my golfing life I have demanded much from myself. I thought this was how the great players acted. A secondary goal of this tourney was to avoid making any big numbers. This goal came about because I found myself in this unexplainable cycle of making doubles and triples in an otherwise solid round of golf. These big numbers seem to come out of nowhere, and they would blow me out of contention. I was determined to play it safe and not blow my rounds up with these damaging scores.

The very 1st hole of the State Am this year was a par five, and I made a triple-bogey 8. First hole! Failing at my secondary goal

was immediately out of the way, so I could focus on achieving my primary goal. I have to say, I did not get upset with myself nor did I succumb to becoming a victim. I kept my cool and, though disappointed, I was determined to rebound and see this thing through.

I did not win the Texas State Am that year, but I did finish ninth and I was my own best friend all week. I showed resilience. Mahatma Gandhi said, “We may stumble and fall but we shall rise again; it should be enough if we did not run away from the battle.”

Life Hack

There is immense power in being your own best friend. Self-talk is a part of that, but there is much more to it than just words. The people closest to you—your spouse, parents, or kids—will never make you completely whole. Your occupation will never make you whole, either. Possessions will certainly never make you whole. Your relationship with yourself will be the longest relationship in the history of your life. To be whole, you must learn to respect and appreciate yourself. To be whole, you must understand that you are worthy. To be whole, you must stop punishing yourself. Finally, to be whole, you must focus on the positives about yourself and not obsess about the negatives.

Being your own best friend and showing kindness to yourself has obvious benefits. But it also has verified health benefits. “Harsh self-criticism activates the sympathetic nervous system—fight or flight—and elevates stress hormones such as cortisol in our bloodstream,” says Emma Seppälä, PhD, author of *The Happiness Track*. “[T]oo much cortisol can lead to problems ranging from weight gain to cardiovascular trouble. Treat yourself the way you’d treat a friend who’s going through a hard time—with support and understanding, instead of criticism.”

Other studies have found that using self-compassion techniques can reverse the negative trend of criticism and cortisol. “When you practice self-compassion, you reduce the stress hormone cortisol, which takes away the state of stress,” says Deborah Serani, PhD, award-winning author of *Living with Depression* and a psychology professor at Adelphi

University. “The more you stay with positive thoughts, the more dopamine surges, which floods your body with feel-good hormones.”

Be your own best friend.