

CHAPTER XVII

It's All About the Person First

“I have learned, that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN ESSAYIST



SWING KEY: The best golfer you can be is yourself.

Toward the end of Phil Mickelson's 0-for-40 streak in major championships, he was playing in the Bay Hill Invitational shortly before the 2002 Masters. On the sixteenth hole on the final day, Mickelson, trailing by a stroke, drove into some trees on the par-5 hole, whose green is guarded by water. Instead of laying up safely in front of the water and taking his chances of making a birdie from there,

Mickelson hit the high-risk shot and went for the green. What resulted was a ball in the water and the end of his chances to win the tournament.

Mickelson was universally criticized by golf writers, who said the unwise shot that ended up wet was an example of the kind of gambling play Mickelson favored, which would never win a major championship. While it is important to know when to be aggressive, and while it is essential to take advantage of those times when your game is clicking on all cylinders with aggressive play, the truth of the matter is that one of the keys to competing successfully is knowing when to downshift and rein in your game. More tournaments are lost than won, and a car is always under better control in second gear than in fourth. Your career-best score will be the result of a well-managed round as much as the result of a well-played round.

Mickelson responded to the criticism with an interview before the 2002 Players Championship that writers referred to as his "I got to be me" news conference. He said he was only happy when he played gambling golf and that he could play his best only when he was happy. There was a lot of truth to what Mickelson said. Arnold Palmer might have won more than seven major championships if he had played a more conservative Nicklaus-style game, but chances are that the Nicklaus approach would not have worked for Palmer. That wasn't his personality.

It is absolutely essential that you don't separate your golfing self from your actual self. They are the same person, and unless they are totally integrated you cannot play your best

golf. Tom Lehman said that Seve Ballesteros played with a body language that said: "No matter where this shot went, the next shot is going to be the best you have ever seen." Lehman said that Nick Faldo's body language said: "I am the only person on the golf course." Both players were masters of what Faldo said was the most important space on the golf course—the five inches between the ears.

The mistake that Mickelson made during all those years of not winning major championships was in not separating the physical approach that was best suited for his personality from the mental approach that would function best under pressure. Hogan played with a style that reflected the grays and whites he wore on the golf course. Palmer, who piloted his own plane and loved to share a laugh and a drink with friends after a round, went at the course in a more carefree manner. But both were able to make wise decisions under pressure and had an ability to understand when to go for a pin and when to lay up because they played within themselves.

Too often, players go out onto the course and try to be someone other than who they are. A normally talkative person becomes quiet and withdrawn because he thinks that is what concentration is. Or a reserved individual tries to spice up her round with Tiger-like fist pumps because she thinks that will release her inner Tiger. The mistake both are making is that they are not being themselves. What we encourage you to do is to find **YOUR SWING** and **YOUR PERSONALITY**, then follow **OUR APPROACH**. The magic of our approach is that we release the athlete inside you who is capable of being a more consistent, higher-performing physical self.

The THINK BOX and the PLAY BOX are the essential duality of the golf course. The key to a successful golf shot is total commitment to the task at hand. Make your decision, believe in your decision, trust your decision—and then act on your decision. But trust must also be built before you get to the golf course. PREPARATION for a round begins with your practice routine and it begins with the manner in which you physically approach competition. Did you get enough sleep? Did you have a proper meal at an appropriate time—for you—before the round? Did you warm up sufficiently?

In our experience of coaching all levels of golfers, building self-esteem and self-worth *separate from performance* is of major importance. In the game of golf, players will always have ups and downs when it comes to performance. It is a natural cycle. The players who cannot keep their self-esteem at a base level during the “down” times have a difficult time sustaining motivation and energy. The pure enjoyment of playing the game, with all of its inherent challenges, wanes. The same goes for our superstars on tour. They also need to be seen for who they ARE, not always for what they DO.

Toward that end, instead of always asking, “Whadya shoot?” try starting your post-round conversation with some of the following questions:

- What did you learn today?
- How was it for you today?
- What experience do you want to remember from today's round?

- Was there any time you became absorbed in the process instead of concerning yourself with your score?
- How was that different for you?
- Tell me about your best experience on the course today.
- What was one of the critical decisions you made today?
- Where and on what did you focus when you were on the course today?
- If you could have done one thing differently in your round today, what would that be?
- How would you like to prepare for your next tournament or round based on what you learned?

The score will always be there on the card, but by shifting your evaluation of the experience from a quantitative outcome to more of a reflection about the process, the opportunity for learning and insight is greatly increased. The answers for the future of your game might reveal themselves as you look more deeply and widely than just at the number you posted. At the very least, it's a more interesting conversation that will produce a healthier perspective about you and your experience in golf. Remember that you are a human being who plays golf, not a golfer who happens to be a human being. **The best golfer you can be is yourself.**

As with everything, self-understanding is greatly enhanced with the proper tools. A tool we have found very useful is the **DISC** personality profile for players. This simple questionnaire will give you an idea who you are on the golf course. Basically, it defines players in four different personality types.

D: These players tend to be left-brained and short-term oriented. Laura Davies is the classic “go for broke” **D** style of play. We have seen Laura “give up” on the last couple of holes if she believes that she is not in contention to WIN. **D** players see the flag and go for it. They have a blind spot for the “sucker pin.” They stay engaged with practice only if it’s a competition—something they can win or beat someone in. Otherwise it can be boring and they lose intention and attention. Laura sometimes has not known where the driving range was located at a tournament. Once, at a tournament where it was raining, we saw Laura stand under her umbrella watching others warm up, then walk to the tee and shoot 67 without ever hitting one shot or putting one putt. Dottie Pepper’s **D** interpretation of the game is reminiscent of General George Patton. She played the Solheim Cup matches with the tenacity of a great warrior in battle. For her, winning is everything! **Ds** don’t tend to take a lot of lessons. They think they know it all already. They detest slow play. They make their decisions quickly and don’t understand what all the fuss is about.

I: These players enjoy the relationships in the game. They seek them out. They organize the breakfast before playing and the party at the nineteenth hole after the round. They would interpret playing alone as boring and not fun. After all, who do you talk to if you play alone? The worst thing for an **I** would be to execute a hole-in-one and not have anyone to celebrate with. In match play, if they get up by a

lot of holes, they can feel sorry for their opponent and give away a few holes so the friendship doesn't get lost in the competition. Peter Jacobsen is the quintessential I. He loves to play in pro-ams and actually performs better in those conditions. Peter has been known to have the rabbit-ear syndrome and to take a lesson from the guy next to him on the airplane. Jesper Parnenvik is an I. He won the Bob Hope and threw a weeklong party for his fortieth birthday for hundreds of his closest friends.

S: These players love the systems and strategies of the game. They seek them out. They want to know the specs on all their clubs or they keep volumes of statistics on their rounds. They like order. You can see it in their golf bag and how they keep everything organized—just in case. They plan and don't like it when the plan gets disrupted—like a flat tire that leaves them late for their tee time and their required warm-up time before a round. They can get stuck in their own system and not nurture the intuitive voice that says it's a 9-iron even though all the data point to an 8-iron. Andy North has won two U.S. Opens and not much else. Par is the system, and par wins U.S. Opens. Par doesn't make the cut at most other PGA Tour events. When Annika was a younger player, Pia wanted her to work on creating different ball flights. Annika turned to Pia and said, "I don't want to do that until I learn to hit it straight from level lies. I'll get to that later." Or, as a young professional, she disliked playing British links-style courses

because she couldn't control where the ball ended up. She thought it was unfair. If she hit the ball 152 yards, it was supposed to stay there.

C: The game is complex for these players. They have their own internal evaluation of how it is supposed to be played. They believe that there is a right way to play the game. Embarrassment for a **C** is to make a hole-in-one with a topped shot, or a club that was not what they think is the proper one. They tend to be conservative. They actually think the wood should still be made from wood. They are the "keepers of the game," tending to love the history and lore that surrounds it. They love to play or practice alone because then they can stay internal, which is where they feel most comfortable. They are competent players whose confidence can go up and down. **Cs** can leave a day of practice with complete dejection because they didn't accomplish everything perfectly. They need to learn to achieve, then leave. When Fred Couples was the number-one player in the world, he disliked the limelight so much that he once said that when his phone rang at home, he didn't answer it because someone might be on the other end. **Cs** want to play the game and go home to their comfort zone. Pia struggled with winning as a junior because she was afraid to speak in front of a group. When **Cs** become confident they can appear like **Ds** because they have both competence and confidence. Annika is a perfect example of this.

You might have one dominant style or a combination of styles. All of them are great. Nothing is right or wrong. It's all about finding your own tendencies and determining what advantages you can draw from them. As we like to say, anything overused ends up being a weakness. To access more of your potential, your 54, it becomes vital to be honest with yourself, knowing yourself and your tendencies. Realizing VISION54 begins with awareness. **Awareness creates opportunity.** We call it Aware-Manage-Create. To make any change in your swing, attitude, or emotional management, you first need to be aware. After you have become aware of something, you have the option and the opportunity to start managing it and create the future you want.

The beauty of the DISC behavioral model is that it's accurate, it's easy to understand, and the application is immediate. Bobby Foster, former head golf coach and associate athletic director at the University of South Carolina, has created an excellent online mental profile based on DISC, "The Mental Golf Workshop." Go to www.golf54.com under PRODUCT54 for the profile.

Understanding exactly who you are will help you develop the routine that works best for you. Ben Hogan would drive to the golf course below the speed limit on the day of a competitive round as a discipline to insure that he would not rush his tempo. In Hogan's mind, a smooth swing began with a smooth ride to the course. We hope that part of what you learn from us is that a method you trust will always be there for you. Sometimes, in match play, a competitor skillful at

gamesmanship will try to slow-play a player who plays best when playing quickly, or will try to speed up the pace of play for a player who is deliberate. No matter what is going on around you, you will always have the solitude of the THINK BOX, the certainty of the DECISION LINE, and the physical joy of the PLAY BOX. The more you trust that they will work for you, the more they will work for you.

We were at Colonial Country Club that day in May 2003 when Annika Sorenstam became the first woman in fifty-eight years to play in a PGA Tour event. It could very well be that no one has ever had to hit a single shot with as much pressure on her as Annika did when she struck her first tee ball that Thursday morning with the entire world watching. At risk with that shot was not just what the world would think about Annika Sorenstam, but also what the world would think about women's golf. It was a pressure of which Annika was well aware.

As Annika walked from the practice green to the tee box, Pia approached to give her words of encouragement. Annika was so nervous she could not talk. When she stepped onto the tee and waited for her turn to hit, her caddie, Terry McNamara, said he could see the muscle in her neck pulsing with tension. It was in those last few minutes before Annika hit her first shot in a PGA Tour event that we held our breath, anticipating the ultimate test of everything we had built into our system of preparation.

In their time alone together during the three days of practice at Colonial before the first round, Annika and Terry talked at great length but with great simplicity about that first

tee shot. They reduced the approach to this clear thought: Hit the ball and, no matter where it goes, find it and hit it again. Then play the day like any other round of golf. That day, Annika stepped into the THINK BOX with her 4-wood, picked her target, envisioned the ball flight, and then crossed the line into the PLAY BOX. What resulted was a perfectly struck golf shot.

Normally, Annika hits her 4-wood about 220 yards in the air. That day, the ball flew 258 yards. Even with the adrenaline pumping through her, Annika was able to control her emotions by following her plan and by completely trusting that plan. Annika was able to hit that first tee shot at Colonial because she had complete belief in her preparation. She did not try to become anyone other than who she is. Shortly before Colonial, Annika called us and said: "The worst that can happen is that I'll learn something, right?" It was then that we knew she would be all right.

As Annika walked off the tee, she faked a rubber-leg movement that revealed the emotions she was feeling at that time. The magnitude of the moment was greater than any Annika had ever experienced on a golf course, but the key to her success was in knowing that the game plan she had—THINK BOX/PLAY BOX—would work under any conditions. We believe you can learn that belief. When you play with the mind-set that every shot must have a purpose, you will improve. When you accept that it is not about you becoming a golfer but rather about golf becoming a part of who you are, you will play your best.