

Assessing Your GOLF EQ

By Dr. Izzy Justice

I used to believe that every professional athlete was looking for that edge that would allow them to perform at a very high level to beat the competition. Having now worked with many professional athletes from a myriad of sports, I am convinced that what they are actually looking for is to merely perform at their best when it counts the most, not necessarily to uncover the hidden secret of their sport or craft. There is a marked difference in the latter way of thinking and one I would ask you to consider.

In professional or competitive golf it means that you are not looking for an extra ten yards off the drive on the back nine on Sunday, or in your club championship. Nor are you looking to develop a new shot shape, a new shot trajectory, or a new putting stroke. If you are playing golf competitively, what you seem to be looking for is how to use the skills you already have, without succumbing to the pressure of the moment. In other words, it's not a technical skill of the sport that is in question, it is something else.

Golf Emotional Intelligence (Golf EQ) is a term I coined three years ago and it is exactly what that something else is that allows you to perform at your best in a high-stakes situation. In this article, we will explore what happens to our bodies under the proverbial pressure and begin to understand what it takes to be able to manage the variables which cause that pressure.

The Most Difficult Shot in Golf

When I ask golfers about their most difficult shot, I typically hear the same answer. They say it is the first shot, the

50-yard bunker shot, or the putt on the last hole with a chance to win. I would like to argue that the most difficult shot in golf is the one immediately after a bad one. And as we all know—no matter our skill level—we are all going to have not one or two, but several undesired shots during a round of golf. In other words, we are guaranteed to experience the most difficult shot in golf multiple times during a round of golf.

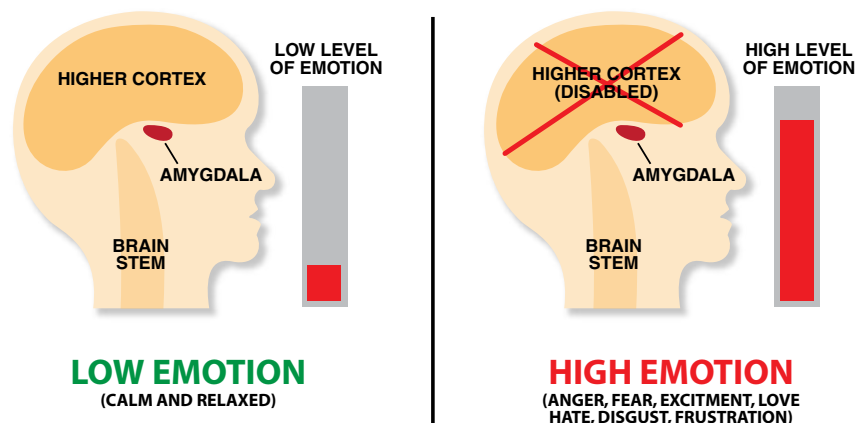
To explain why the shot after a bad shot is the most difficult shot in golf, let's look at how our body works physiologically. I will do this in a very simplified manner. Our brain is where all our cognitive functions reside. Cognitive functions include our long-term, short-term, and working memory—together comprising a collection of abilities that allow us to cogently piece together different data points. Put simply, the brain is our command center.

From the command center, all orders are sent to different parts of the body. The body itself cannot do anything. Your hand, for example, cannot decide

on its own to wave at someone. Your brain has to decipher an experience and instruct the body to respond. If you learn something, say how to hit a high fade, the memory of that skill resides in your brain, not in any other part of your body. To enable us to use the skills we possess, the brain sends all its instructions through the spinal cord. In other words, the spinal cord is like a bundle of cables for that critical information to be sent to parts of your body. Now, as shown in the graphic shown at the bottom of this page, conveniently located between the spinal cord and the brain—between the command center and cables—is the amygdala.

The Instinctive Emotional Response

The amygdala is a gland that secretes hormones in your body. It is situated there because its job is to identify danger. Microseconds within sensing a potential threat, it releases hormones in your body that either partially or entirely disable your brain. This disabling of cognitive functions enables your body





to respond quickly and instinctively to that danger. This is essentially a safety mechanism, which is triggered as a reaction to every threat, no matter whether the danger is perceived or real.

For example, if you're crossing a road and you see a car coming at you from the corner of your eye, you would—without thinking—instinctively jump or run to get the heck out of the way. You would not think about it; you would not analyze, "I wonder how fast the car is going. What are my options here?" If you did that—if you used the cognitive resources of your brain—you wouldn't be able to respond fast enough and you would be hit.

Similarly, cognitive functions are disabled when a golfer misses a three-foot putt, hits a drive out of bounds, or double-bogeys a hole. The physiological response in the body after a bad shot is virtually identical to that of a car coming at us. In other words, the amygdala does not make the distinction between the threat of a car coming at us, and the threat of the consequences of a bad shot when it counts. Look at the body's physiological automatic and instinctive response, depicted in the image on the bottom right of this page. In this state, no golfer can perform at their best. Golfers put themselves in this state constantly as there are very few 'perfect' shots they hit. Ben Hogan famously said he only hit one perfect shot per round.

In golf where you are guaranteed to hit bad shots, the golfer's body automatically goes into this state because the imperfect shot is perceived as a danger to perhaps the score of the hole, the round, the tournament, or the match at hand.

This physiological state leads to a "high alert state" where the brain is operating in "lock down mode." The following consequences apply in this state:

- Have decreased cognitive performance
- Have less oxygen available for critical brain functions
- Tend to over generalize
- Respond with defensive action
- Perceive small stressors as worse than they actually are
- Are easily aggravated
- Will struggle to get along with others
- Cannot perform at your best

This is a fact and this is why the most difficult shot in golf is the one immediately after a bad one. At that point, access to our rational ability and skill memory has been disabled and we are in the instinctive fight-or-flight mode. Again, no golfer can perform their best at this stage. They simply are hijacked by their own bodies in the most natural and instinctive of ways.

Practicing Well

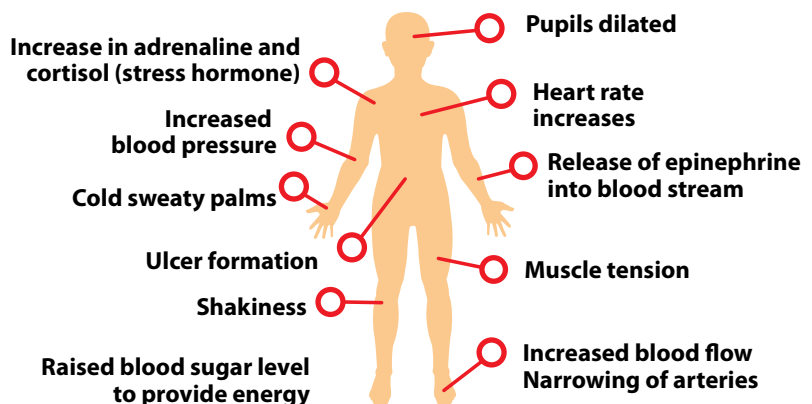
It is for this reason that I see most golfers working on the wrong things during practice. If one is successfully making several three-foot putts in a row dur-

ing practice, yet missing such shots often during a round, the issue is not the skill to make a three-foot putt. However, that golfer will likely continue to go to the putting green and practice hitting three-foot putts for hours. If one is hitting their driver very well on the range, one after another, but on the first tee in a game they hit it out of bounds, the issue is not a skill issue or even an equipment one. Yet that golfer will either go to the range and hit a bunch of drives or go to the trailer and get a new driver.

The difference between a good golfer on the practice green versus a good golfer on the course is not skills, maturity, confidence, cognitive ability, height, or weight. The difference is entirely their lack of awareness of their emotions and the resulting hormones in their body and their ability to manage them. It is their EQ. Yet, it is the least understood and the least practiced dimension in golf.

Developing Your Golf EQ

So what can you do? Emotional intelligence has several dimensions to it but self-awareness and self-regulation are the two key components relevant to golf. Developing your Golf EQ is as simple as mastering the ability to recognize what kinds of situations cause the amygdala to be triggered. That's the self-awareness dimension. As for self-regulation, recall that earlier in the article we established that we will hit not one or two, but several, bad shots in a round of golf. Self-regulation is the ability to disable the amygdala and enable the brain so you can access the skills you already have.



Self-Awareness

Here are some tips to increasing your self-awareness. First, come up with an imaginary tool called an Emotional Thermometer which shows only three temperatures, similar to that of a traffic light. Green indicates that you are comfortable, happy, stress-free, and can think and act clearly. Yellow indicates that you are a little stressed and anxious, but not to the point where you are implicitly or explicitly out of control, filled with anger and rage, or disappointment and frustration.

For example, a yellow state in golf might occur when you miss a ten-foot putt for birdie on the first hole that you felt you should have made—you are disappointed but hey, it's only the first hole. Or it could be hitting a critical drive into the first cut of rough. It's not ideal, but it's not out of bounds either. Finally, red is when you have really hit a terrible shot. It's missing a one-foot putt or a hitting a drive out of bounds or making a triple bogey on a hole.

It is very critical for you to first understand what your emotional temperature is because the remedy (self-regulation) is based on making the right diagnosis. What I tell golfers to do is to take their temperature every three hours for one full week. Do this by simply asking yourself whether you are in a green, yellow, or red state. This is a way to practice your self-awareness so you can improve your ability to self-assess. You can make this assessment yourself, or you can even teach your caddy or another trusted friend to help alert you when you are in a yellow or red state.

Self-Regulation

The ability to manage your emotions is highly predicated on first knowing where you are emotionally. You might hit a bad shot, take an honest temperature of yourself, and notice that you are actually just fine. If the experience did

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not shake you and you are exhibiting none of the symptoms of a red state, then there is nothing you need to do. You are fine. Conversely, if you find yourself in a yellow or red state, it is time to use some strategies. Try the following:

Yellow State

When you are aware you are in a yellow state, immediately take slow and very long breaths in and out. This will expand bronchi in your lungs (which are constricted under pressure by the amygdala) to increase some blood flow, reduce your heart rate, releasing albeit temporarily, the physiological impact of the amygdala.

Additionally, make a card that you can keep in your back pocket and call it your yellow card. On it, write down, for all fourteen clubs in your bag, the specific date, time, hole, golf course (in one short phrase) of where you hit that specific club the best. For me, the best 5 Iron I ever hit was on hole #2 last year when I had to hit it about 185 yards and hook it about 25 yards around some trees. I hit it to about 5 feet from the hole. That is the best memory I have of my 5 Iron. You need to write down the best shot with every club on your yellow card.

When you have diagnosed yourself as being in the yellow state, then simply look at this card and think of the club that you will likely use next and read it over and over again until you get to your ball. This memory is what we call a trigger stimulant—it's a memory that triggers the release of other hormones that dilute the impact of the negative hormones (and thus, negative emotions) in your body. Because these are such positive trigger stimulants, they are guaranteed to extend the impact of the slow breathing, and in many cases allow you to return to a green state before you get to the ball.


Red State

So what if you are exhibiting all the symptoms of the red state? You know it, your caddy knows it, and your player's partners know it. Start again with the same breathing as in the yellow state. Create a red card. On this red card, write down the following:

- The names of the most important people in your life—you may want to have actual pictures of them.
- The name of the place where you were most happy or felt relaxed.
- A short list of the most amazing accomplishments of your life (not just in golf).

These are also trigger stimulants, but they are much more powerful than the ones on the yellow card. They have the opposite physiological effect of the very bad consequential shot you hit. Just like the trigger stimulants on the yellow card, they dilute the negative hormones in your body and allow you to access your brain so that you can access the skills you already have to execute a good shot.

The danger in not diluting your yellow state and red state is compromised performance. The decision is yours. Will one bad shot remain just that—one bad shot? Or will you allow the negative emotional effects of one bad shot to compound to the next, leading to a worse and worse game?

Golfers must understand that in a four to five hour round of golf they are only hitting shots for less than fifteen minutes. The rest of the time is where the real game and competition is. Who is managing their emotions better, who has higher Golf EQ, and who can recover from the inevitable bad shots better. 

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