

Price of Perfectionism

Continuing his exclusive series of articles for *Asian Golf Monthly*, Jonathan Wallett, director of the Elite Coaching Golf Academy, assesses the damage that a player who demands perfection can cause.

IT'S ALL VERY WELL being a perfectionist. But, as I see increasingly in my work with talented young golfers, those who have perfectionist attitudes appear to suffer more than those who have learned to accept the slings and arrows that are so much a part and parcel of playing golf, especially at a competitive level.

Indeed, I don't think I'm over-stating **"HAVING HIGH EXPECTATIONS IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHY PERFECTIONISM CAN UNDERMINE PERFORMANCE. SOME GOLFERS SET THEIR EXPECTATIONS SO HIGH THAT ALL THEY ARE ACTUALLY DOING IS SETTING THEMSELVES UP FOR FAILURE."**

the case if I say that how perfectionists cope with the often unrealistic demands they place upon themselves can be the difference between whether they succeed ... or fail.

When it comes to golf, how do you perceive yourself? Are you a golfing perfectionist?

Here are some tell-tale signs. During or after a round of golf, do you feel any of the following?

- ▶ Frustrated
- ▶ Disappointed
- ▶ Angry
- ▶ De-motivated
- ▶ Going around in circles with your game

Perfectionism in golf is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, perfectionists tend to possess the following traits:

- ▶ Committed, hard workers
- ▶ Ambitious
- ▶ Strive for excellence

On the negative side, though, perfectionists are often guilty of:

- ▶ High expectations (demands that they place upon themselves)
- ▶ Self-critical
- ▶ Judgmental – always comparing their performance against their perception of 'perfect'
- ▶ Confidence consistently undermined because not 'reaching' perfection level

In their thinking, perfectionists tend to be 'all or nothing'. They place a judgment on their performance as either good or bad, with no grey area in between. In thinking this way, they maintain high, often unreasonable, expectations about their performance. It's very rare, therefore, that they'll ever feel satisfied with their performance.

This, in turn, will inevitably lead to emotions such as frustration, anger and disappointment. Having high expectations is an example of why perfectionism can

undermine performance. Some golfers set their expectations so high that all they are actually doing is setting themselves up for failure. Over the long term, what do you think this does for a player's confidence?

Many perfectionist golfers struggle with fear of failure. Fear of failure causes them to become anxious and tight and to worry about making mistakes. Fear of failure also causes a loss of composure when under stress in competition because the individual becomes so anxious about results or outcomes and not failing.

Other disadvantages of perfectionism include:

- ▶ Over-motivation leading to over-training – a feeling that they are never training 'hard enough'
- ▶ Draining of self-belief over time as confidence is consistently undermined
- ▶ Caring too much about what others think

▶ A lack of trust due to being stuck in the training mindset, and not being able to switch to a 'playing mentality' in competition

Many golfers, and most perfectionists, do not understand the difference between high expectations and high ambition. Well, in a nutshell, I would define it this way: high ambition is excellent; high expectation is bad.

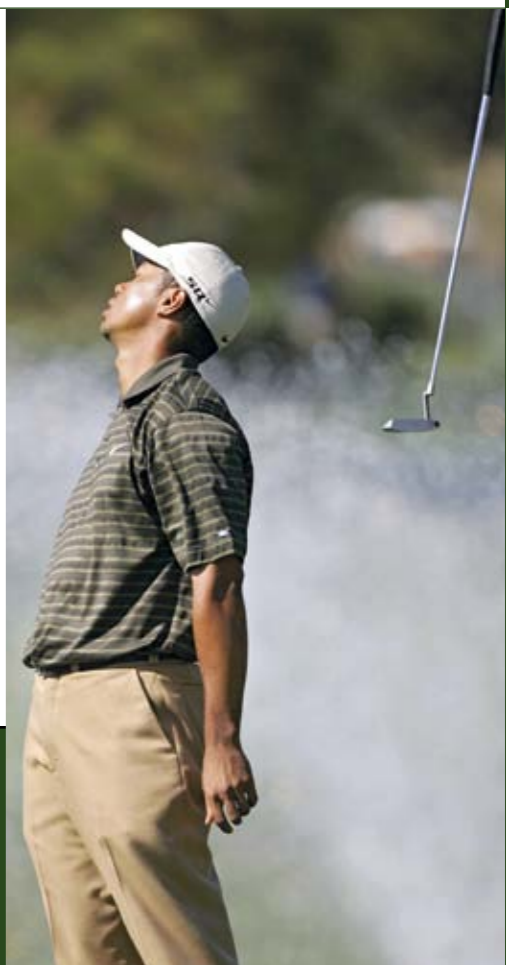
That said, there is only a subtle but important difference between the two – expectation being a demand, and ambition being a desire.

So how can we change or learn to manage perfectionism?

Among the ways you can learn to manage perfectionist attitudes are:

1. By striving for perfection in practice, but accepting on the course that you

"MANY PERFECTIONIST GOLFERS STRUGGLE WITH FEAR OF FAILURE. FEAR OF FAILURE CAUSES THEM TO BECOME ANXIOUS AND WORRY ABOUT MAKING MISTAKES – AND CAUSES A LOSS OF COMPOSURE WHEN UNDER STRESS IN COMPETITION."



KEY POINTS

- ▶ Do not demand perfect shots of yourself during tournament play
- ▶ Understand that golf is a game of imperfect shots

To Do: Next time you play, look to see how many times you 'self-criticise'. Take a scorecard, and on every hole make a tally of each criticism you make of yourself. Do this for nine holes, and then count up your 'criticism score'. Do this for five rounds in a row and you should begin to see that automatically you become more accepting and less of a perfectionist.

are human and that you can't be perfect. Accept that 'golf is a game of mistakes' and that you need to learn how to manage those mistakes.

2. Identify the expectations (demands) that you, or others, place upon yourself.



Let's make it clear. Perfectionism will ruin your game and career, without good management. Golf is a game, and a game of imperfect shots.

How this can help the club player

Club players sometimes place unrealistic expectations upon themselves. They expect to hit the ball straight and consistently well, and get frustrated when this doesn't happen. Instead, try to play 'your game' on the course, and look to be 'your own best coach', with supportive self-talk as opposed to criticising self-talk.

Jonathan Wallett is a certified and qualified Sport Psychology expert and a member of the British and Swiss PGA. He is the Director of the Elite Coaching Golf Academy, based at Evian Masters Training Centre, France and Royal Pines Resort, Australia. Jon has been the author of teaching articles, DVDs, elite performance workbooks and mental training CDs. For further details about the Elite Coaching Golf Academy, visit www.elitecoaching.com

