



# Z In the Zone

In this second instalment of a three-part series entitled *Cocoon Concentration* that details the role concentration plays in performing well and suggests strategies you can apply to help you focus better, **Jonathan Wallett**, Elite Performance Coach of the Elite Coaching Golf Academy at the Evian Masters Training Centre in France, cites the five key elements that enable players to enter 'the Zone'.



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Often during professional golf telecasts you will hear commentators refer to players 'being in the zone'. What do they mean by this? What – or where – is the zone?

The zone is the concentration state that creates and delivers peak performance. Players describe the zone as a feeling of superior confidence, effortless and 'in the flow'. When players play their golf from this state they play their best.

An excellent example of being 'in the zone' was **Rory McIlroy** at this year's US Masters. For the first three days he played as though in a trance, effortlessly hitting the fairways, then peppering the flag with his iron shots, and putting like a magician. But on the last day, the anticipation of winning his first Major, the enormity of the occasion in his own mind, led him to being internally distracted. Suddenly, he came out of this trance, this 'zone', and played a horrific back nine of 43 shots to ruin his chance of victory.

The fairytale ending to the story, though, is that McIlroy learned from that painful episode. Two months later, he found himself in a similar situation, having once again succeeded in entering his concentration zone through the first three days of the US Open. This time he was able to maintain his concentration on the last day to march to an emphatic and richly deserved victory ... and first Major win.

## The Five Key Elements of the Zone

It's important to understand that 'the zone' is something that is not fixed or tangible, and hence cannot be forced. There are certain ingredients that are present when a player is in the zone. One-by-one we will take a look at each of these ingredients which, when mixed together, will help a player induce this magical state of being 'in the zone'.

### 1. Stay in the present moment

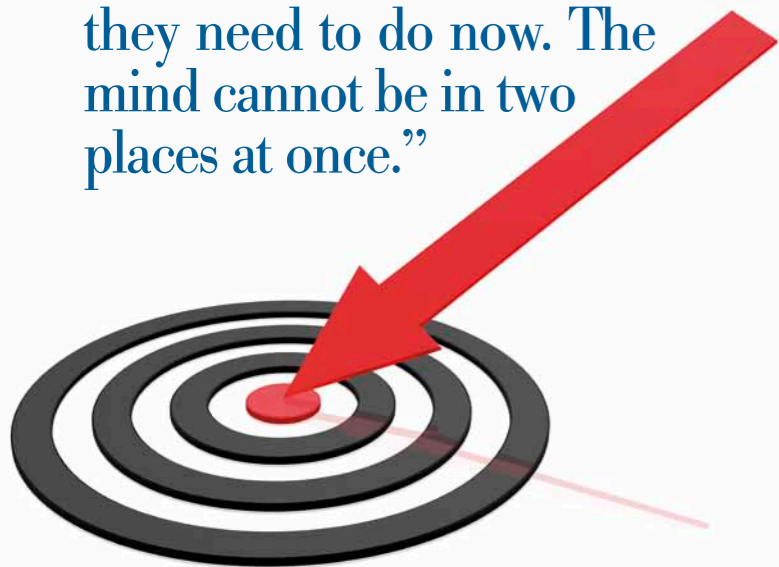
During post-round press conferences, you frequently hear players cite the following phrase: "I was just focused on playing one shot at a time, not getting ahead of myself, and staying in the present."

What exactly do they mean by this? Why cannot a competitor let his or her mind shift to impending success or victory? Well, thinking ahead, or thinking in the past, means that the player is then reducing his or her concentration or focus on what they need to do now. The mind cannot be in two places at once. Would you want to be in a plane piloted by someone who is not focusing on the tasks they need to do for landing?

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### 2. Process or task orientated ... not result orientated

What do we mean by the term: Process or task orientated, not result orientated? One is focusing on the outcome or result while the other is focused on the actual doing. There's a big difference. Generally speaking, it's fair to say that when thoughts are focused on the doing it helps players play better as they are relevant to the shot in hand. Conversely, focusing on the result induces anxiety and tension.

Michael Campbell, during the last round of the 2005 US Open, said that his mind was trying to race away from him, and the internal chatter at times was very high. Campbell had decided to specifically focus on two tasks: (i) visualise every shot in the tiniest detail, and (ii) focus on one shot at a time.

During that final round and down the stretch, even though the pressure of the situation meant that his mind often wandered to thoughts of winning (result-type thoughts), by having these two specific tasks, he was able to focus his attention on tasks that helped him perform. It was this that brought him over the line, beating Tiger Woods into second place for an incredible victory.

### 3. At one with the course, club and swing

Players experiencing 'the zone' talk about a sense of 'oneness' with their equipment, the environment (the course)

and their swing. Trusting the swing you have that day is especially important; you cannot be in the zone when you are bombarding your mind with a multitude of technical instructions two seconds prior to execution! After one race, the late, great Formula One driver **Ayrton Senna** said: "I felt as though I was driving in a tunnel. I had reached such a high level of concentration that it was as if the car and I had become one."

### 4. Mind-Body connection

The mind and body are inseparable. What do we mean by this? An internal thought will stimulate a physiological response; for instance, just close your eyes for a moment, and visualise your favourite holiday destination. This will, most likely, stimulate a slight relaxation in your state. On the contrary, then visualise a past situation where you were very angry and instinctively you may experience a slight clenching of your fists - basically an increase in tension in your physiological state.

How can this help a golfer? A player can control his or her thoughts through controlling his or her physiology. Hence, the importance of composure, body language and good breathing.

### 5. Narrow focus/vision

There are different types of concentration. A footballer performs best with a wide peripheral vision so he is aware of his team-mates and opponents. An archer needs a narrow focus of vision so he can totally absorb his mind in the target. This is the type of concentration a golfer performs best with. It is sometimes referred to as a type of 'tunnel vision'.

There is a story of **Ben Hogan** and his caddy once discussing his alignment. Hogan asked his caddy where he should aim. The caddy responded that Hogan should target 'the tree in the distance'. Quick as a flash, Hogan shot back: "Which branch?" The point of this story is that Hogan knew he would perform his best if he narrowed his focus as much as possible.

### Conclusion

Everyone can improve their ability to concentrate; work on it as you work on other areas of your game like your swing or putting stroke. The ability to 'place one's undivided attention on something', is a pre-requisite for any elite performance. Focus is the vehicle for excellence or outstanding performance.



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\*In next month's concluding instalment of this exclusive three-part *Asian Golf Monthly* series, Jonathan Walleit reveals the secrets to 'entering the zone', and highlights what Rory McIlroy did differently on the last day of the US Open compared to the US Masters.

### Key Points

The Five Key Elements of the Zone are:

- Stay in the present moment
- Process or task orientated NOT result orientated
- At one with the course, club and swing
- Mind-Body connection
- Narrow focus/vision

### How this can help the club player

Understand that you have influence over the level of your concentration ... and the better you can focus, the better you will play. Next time you play, write down a list of common distractions you encounter during your round. Some of the distractions may be external, like the noise of someone talking when you're trying to play.

But most of the distractions will be internal, such as thoughts like 'don't embarrass myself with my first tee shot' or 'don't three-putt'. By writing down the common distractions that interfere with your ability to concentrate, it will help you become more aware and recognise your barriers to concentration.