

# Go with the flow

Adopting a 'flow state' – also known as being in the moment – will help your clients to get out of their own way, as Karen Francis describes

When selecting my shot, somewhere in my mind I'm also effortlessly registering my environment. ... dampness in the air, breeze. ... I see it, feel it, react and execute the shot.'

This is an extract from an article by Nick Faldo who was describing being in the flow, also spoken about as being 'in the moment', a term that describes synergy in which all aspects of a person's being – mind, body, will and intentions – work in perfect harmony.

Research has shown that flow can be experienced by helping golfers to keep their thinking simple and actions intuitive. However, in an age when our brains are overloaded with differing swing theories and tips in magazines, online information and golf channels advertising the latest equipment, this can be challenging for coaches.

Added to this, scientists have found that we have around 5% cognitive capacity in our brains to compute information; the other 95% is consigned to automatic thoughts and habits. So it is easy to see that many golfers end up with cognitive overload – gridlocked by too much thinking.

## Internal v external focus

Initially, acquiring and learning motor skills poses a greater challenge to the cognitive capacity of the learner than a more expert player, as memory and processing demands for performance become more automated.

Traditional coaching methodology has concentrated on the client paying attention to different movement patterns to learn the golf swing. From my own experience, I can still remember trying to put a score together on the course while remembering to shift my weight, turn my shoulders and follow through by turning my hips. This process – while eventually paying dividends – can be painful and frustrating, and create problems for the coach who has to deal with a client who is demoralised through lack of results.

However, there has been some remarkable research over the last few years investigating how the brain learns a motor skill, particularly from Dr Gabrielle Wulf. She has found that rather than concentrating on body movement known as 'internal focus', effective swing patterns can be achieved by an 'external focus' using attentional cues.



For example, in one of Wulf's studies, players practicing a pitch shot were more effective when their attention was directed on the motion of the clubhead (external focus) rather than swinging of the arms (internal focus). This is supported by robust research, notably where two groups of novice basketball players were taught how to score baskets. One group was coached to bend their elbow and flick their wrist; the second group was told to just imagine they were reaching for a biscuit out of a jar when shooting. The end results showed that the second group had more scoring consistency over time.

Considerable debate is needed on whether moving away from technical instruction would still enable novices to become experts, but maybe there is a halfway-house approach. Some coaches have found that by using an analogy of a 'hammer hitting a nail', this can help beginners to gain clubhead speed which is often a problem in early stage instruction.

## Gaining flow for expert golfers

The ability to stay in the moment has been studied over the years in sports psychology; results show that when we are in this state we are more capable of peak performances. However, at an elite level the combination of nerves, anxious thoughts and arousal levels can make this flow state fairly elusive, even with the many psychological techniques.

More recent research has shown that the practice of mindfulness and the flow state share similarities in sport. Olympic swimmers

and 182 college athletes reported feelings of heightened awareness alongside total control and focus, loss of self-consciousness and challenge-skill balance. There is a growing awareness that being mindful is particularly useful in helping individuals to better shift their attention to the current demands of the moment, which leads to the flow state.

Further evidenced studies have found that even with a base level of mindfulness, a positive impact on performance can be achieved. Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment (MAC) is the most tested mindfulness approach in sport and an intervention programme where MAC was added to seven elite golfers' pre-shot routines led to an increase in their world rankings. Encouraging clients to focus on breathing between shots, or the sensation of one's feet touching the ground as they walk down the fairway, can reduce the mind wandering and the potential of ruminating thoughts.

Although not enough space in this article to describe mindfulness techniques in detail, there is plenty of literature and apps on the different approaches. For your more experienced golfers, encouraging them to commit to this type of approach will help them to avoid cognitive overload – in turn, giving them more opportunity to experience and maintain flow states in a competition.

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