

Picturing perfection

Karen Francis discusses the importance of visualisation and how to encourage your clients to imagine the perfect shot before they execute it

Have you ever woken up from a dream and taken a few moments to realise that it was imagined rather than real? That's because our brain finds it difficult to tell the difference between a real or imagined event. So how can you use this phenomenon to help your clients on the golf course?

As coaches you have probably already looked at the relationship between the brain and golf, but in this article I would like to re-visit the mechanics of how decisions are made by the various parts of the brain of which there are three:

- **Thinking:** this part of the brain has a left side which focuses on analytical information such as the club to take, the weather, the lie, the type of shot to be played and begins to create a strategy. This is then relayed to the right hand side of the thinking brain which is mainly concerned with creativity and starts to visualise how the shot is going to happen.
- **Emotional:** once a thought has been decided, it passes through the emotional part of the brain which is concerned with whether the shot is a good idea or not, and is also where confidence sits. This part of the brain is very influential in terms of the outcome but is an article on its own, so let us assume at this point that all is good.
- **Doing:** the information then comes into the reptilian part of the brain, which is concerned with movement and executing the shot.

The challenge

This three-way communication is fraught with misunderstanding, because the thinking brain sends instructions via language, but the doing part – being the oldest – only understands patterns such as pictures.

A common scenario is a golfer standing on the tee thinking, 'Hmmm...water on the left, not going to go in the water – instead, I'm going to aim right so I don't go in the water'. The doing part of the brain tries to understand what the pattern is here and comes up with the conclusion that water is the common theme; it will then look to create movement so that the ball goes towards the water. In my experience, clients tend to focus on what they don't want to



happen and fail to shift their attention to what they do want to achieve. How many clients do you have who are convinced that they cannot putt? This is mainly due to them providing a picture to their doing part that shows them missing the putt. Help your clients learn how to 'see' the shot before they play it.

The solution

There has been some excellent research into how our athletic brain looks to create the movement needed from images that we form. Recently, a team of scientists asked an international downhill skier to sit and watch himself skiing in a competition while attached to a number of probes to record muscle movement.

What they found was that tiny sensory parts of his muscles started mimicking the movements as if he was actually skiing, which supports earlier evidence of the connection between imagery and muscle movement.

Gaining an internal picture of how a shot is to be played has a huge influence on how well your client plays overall. As part of the pre-shot routine, ask them to describe the shot they intend to play and encourage them to pick a precise target where the ball is going to land, such as a darker green patch on the fairway, or a feature that the ball is going to travel towards. Putting in as much detail as possible such as colour and sound will really clarify the image which the reptilian brain will look to re-enact.

Another way of creating an image is to create a kinaesthetic vision of how the shot is to be played. Some people like to feel that they are hitting the shot from behind their eyes, watching the ball flight and seeing it land and bounce, while others create an image by standing apart and watching themselves hit the ball – both work well.

Not only do your clients need to see the shot, they also need to feel it so the body knows how it is going to enact what the strategy is. Tour players will often shape the shot with their hand while explaining the type of shot they intend to play as a rehearsal of the movement that is needed to make it happen. While many of your clients take practice swings to rehearse the shot they intend to play, ask them to perform this while looking down the line of their target. This creates a very powerful link between seeing it and feeling it, and communicates an excellent message to the reptilian part of the brain to execute the swing movement to get the ball going in the direction they have visualised.

This was recently reinforced by Ian Poulter in a Sky Sports masterclass (at the British Masters, Woburn), when he stressed the importance of looking down the line while practising a putting stroke to really embed the intended direction of the ball along with the feel of the stroke.

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