

Playing Through

- CHRISTIAN SMITH



Sometimes my game presents itself like a fine Eggs Benedict, poached eggs, beautiful hollandaise, everything in its proper place.

Right now, it looks more like scrambled eggs from a burner stuck on high. The dreaded slump.

Since I got back from the tournament in Santee, I've been a little out of sorts. I've been working on a minor swing change to get out of a bad habit I formed over the summer, and I attribute some of my poor performance to adjusting to a new feel. So I want to focus this article on the psychology of a slump and ways to help yourself out of it when things aren't going your way.

I find it interesting how people deal with the psychology of golf. Jack Nicklaus had one of the most positive outlooks of any player in history. I'm paraphrasing, but he said something to the effect of, "I never hit a bad shot. I only hit shots that turned out badly." To me, that is a little myopic and not a mindset I can maintain when I've chunked a wedge and hit two out of bounds on the day. Tiger Woods was equally defiant when his confidence was questioned. He would often point to swing changes he was putting into place, or physical ailments he felt he was experiencing. How can we ever forget "my glutes aren't firing"! On the flip

side, you have someone like Lucas Glover who was completely candid about his putting yips. This is a former U.S. Open champion, All-American at Clemson, and multiple-time winner on the Tour. He owned up to his deficiency and went back to work. After ten years between victories, he won twice in 2023. I think the most important thing is to be comfortable in your own approach to dealing with poor play and, most importantly, not let it define you.

So...how do we get out of the rut?

Too many times, golfers start to look for the miracle cure. New swing thoughts. New grips. New YouTube videos. New equipment. Rapid-fire range sessions. Before long, we've turned one small leak into five different problems. Golf is hard enough as it is, so introducing a lot of new variables in search of a miracle cure can create a tangled web very quickly.

What I find most effective is to go back to the basics: grip, stance, posture, and alignment. The majority of the time the culprit for your struggles comes from one of these things; it's rarely a change in your actual swing.

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For me, in this endeavor over the last few weeks, I realized that my grip had gotten progressively weaker, particularly my left (lead) hand. This tracked with my misses typically being right of the target. It hasn't been as much of a contact issue, but more of a direction issue: I'd feel like I hit a good shot, then look up and the ball is 15 – 20 yards right of my target!

Here are a few things I find helpful in my practice when you are feeling out of sorts.

1. Use an alignment stick or club across your foot line to ensure you are setting up parallel to the target (the old train tracks analogy): foot, line and club are pointing on the same lines. Other training aids can be helpful but can also create more confusion. Getting your alignment correct is a great starting point.
2. Take your time when you practice. Be diligent in your setup and keep mental notes of how your swing feels. Rapid fire hitting balls is not helpful. Hitting 30 balls with intention and reflection is more meaningful than hitting 100 balls just "trying to find it."
3. Hit shots at 60-70% of your normal speed just focusing on making solid contact. Also, hitting half and three-quarter shots can be extremely helpful in re-establishing your feel through the strike.

4. Watch where your ball is starting relative to your target. This can help you understand where the clubface is facing at impact, which is ultimately the most important thing.

Slumps are both psychological and physical. The psychological side can convince you that you've lost your game for good. That's when it's important to focus on your process rather than the result of any single swing. Physically, the answer is usually simpler than we think. It's rarely a complete breakdown of your golf swing. More often, it's a small deviation from the fundamentals that has slowly crept into your game.

At the end of the day, the sun will rise again, and



somewhere beneath those burnt scrambled eggs, the Eggs Benedict is still there waiting to reappear.

-CHRISTIAN

