

## The Chicken or the Egg Question: Which Comes First – The Mental Game or the Physical Game?

By Rick Semple

Which comes first, the mental game or the physical game? I get this question a lot, and it's a good one. My answer is always the same – you need to work on both of them *together*. Many players are under the mistaken impression that you wait until you have a super swing and an excellent game and “go pro” or play in championships at your club, then you use the mental stuff to fine-tune your game and “psych out” the competition. **The truth is, mental golf is valuable for every golfer at every experience level to use all the time.** As an example, if you are striving to improve your swing but not getting the results you desire, it is likely that negative mental golf habits like self-doubt, self-induced pressure, fear, and old beliefs about your abilities and techniques are limiting your improvement. On the other hand, you may have a beautiful swing and a superb game, but you experience a series of bad shots or bad rounds. Here again, it is likely that you are inhibiting your swing and your performance with mental habits like self-doubt, self-induced pressure, fear, holding on to the memory of bad shots, and old beliefs like inclement weather “makes” you play you play poorly. Even if you are using a positive mental technique like visualization, these other negative mental habits are going to get in your way and interfere with your swing and your game. It happens to the best of them, including Tiger Woods.

**The key to remember is that you want to be working on your mental game and your physical game together, all the time, regardless of where you are in your experience level or the way you are playing at the moment.** (In other words, you don't wait until you're in a pressure situation or you've reached the “upper echelon” and you're trying to fine-tune your game.) At The Heart of Golf, we call this concurrent practice of the mental and physical games “the blend that makes the difference” – **we know that the mental game sets the stage and has a profound influence on the physical game, and they should always be practiced together – no waiting for the “right” moment or the “right” level of your physical game.** And one more key thing to remember is this – mental golf is much, much more than visualizing good shots or “psyching out” your competition. There are so many factors to mental golf, in fact, that we have been working for nearly a year to create a *Positive Golf Handbook* to help golfers understand, address, and strengthen these factors in order to boost their game. In the book, we address nearly twenty critical mental golf factors!

**During the 2008 Masters, there were some excellent examples of some of these points I am making.** In an interview after his excellent round on Saturday at the Masters, Paul Casey said that to prepare for the Masters, he worked on his fitness, his swing, *and* his mental game. (A good, well-rounded approach that included all the key elements of an optimum game, I might add.) Paul also said

that during the Masters, he was also practicing “rebounding” – letting go of bad shots and not letting them hang over him, but “moving on” instead. He was also savoring the moment and allowing himself to “have fun” (which helps the body relax and the swing to flow). In contrast to this, we could see what happened to Tiger Woods when negativity crept into his mental game. Even the best swing in the world is affected by negative self-talk and self-induced pressure. David Farady said this about Tiger: “He’s been battling against himself more than anything else.” Tiger may have been visualizing great shots, but tension and anxiety definitely got in the way.

**And then there was Trevor Immelman and Brandt Snedeker who were a joy and an inspiration to watch and to listen to in their interviews.** A lot of great, positive mental golf techniques were expressed by them and also pointed out by the commentators (particularly Nick Faldo who does an exceptional job at highlighting the mental side of the game). Here is a highlight of the mental techniques used by these two great young players who expressed such poise and did not succumb to pressures from without or from within. **Note the mix of mental techniques they use – it’s not just about focus and visualization, although these are part of the mix – it is a combination of multiple positive factors:**

For Brandt Snedeker:

1. Be patient.
2. Rebound – let go of those bad shots and move on.
3. Trust your swing – analyze, choose, then go.
4. Allow yourself to have fun.

For Trevor Immelman:

1. Positive, complete preparation – “no stone unturned”.
2. Determination.
3. Belief in yourself and your abilities – “I can do it!”
4. Focus on *your* game – don’t get bogged down in self-comparison and focusing on what the other person/people are doing.

**These are practical, real-life mental skills that can (and should!) be practiced by an golfer at any level – and practiced all the time, right along with the practice of your physical game.** Remember – don’t wait or hold off on practicing mental skills (they physical game doesn’t come first – they are done *together*). The mental game should be practiced by every golfer in every round as a regular, natural part of your game. *That* is when you will realize greater satisfaction and greater success.

**Remember – always keep the mental game “in the mix” of what you do on the practice range and on the course!**