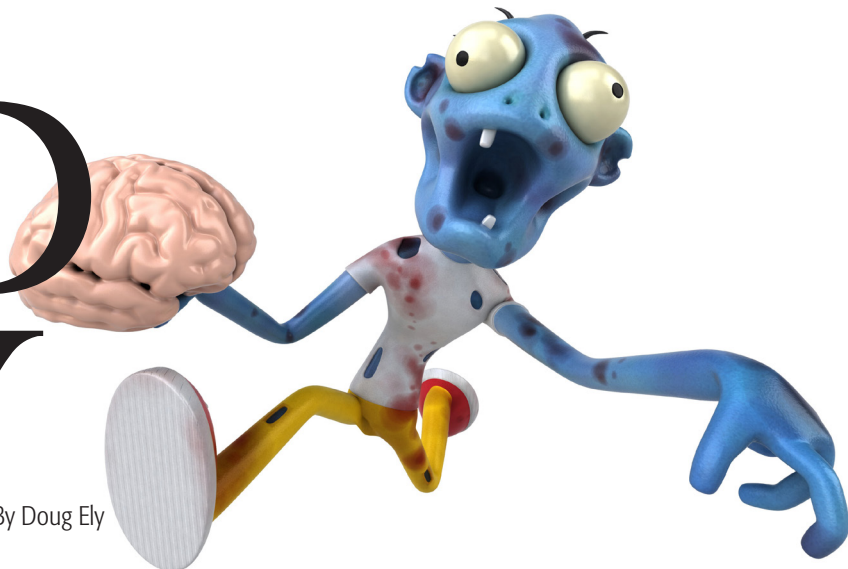


MIND PLAY

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By Doug Ely



A great swing, custom-fitted clubs and endless hours of practice aren't always enough when the mind decides to not play nice.

Maybe it was, or maybe it wasn't the power of the mind at play on the day of my worst fiasco on a golf course—I'll get to that shortly—but there is no denying that when you think too much in this game, things can often go completely awry.

On the one hand, you're taught to 'visualize your shot' as part of a good pre-shot routine to help your mind make your body do what it needs to do to make it happen. I believe in that concept, to a certain extent. I can't say every time I visualize the good shot I want to pull off, I can actually do so. Yet, it surprises me how often that I can. And the more I'm able to do it during a round, the more it seems to work. Grasping that positive energy and making it work for you is an integral part of playing the game well.

On the other hand, how many times have you stood over a shot and thought: don't go left, don't go left, don't go left? Then you pull the trigger, swing away and to your dismay, you pull it LEFT, directly into the bunker, or woods, or hazard that you told yourself specifically not to do!

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In golf, the mind can work for good and the mind can work for evil. I think it all depends on your level of confidence when you stand over the ball. And it seems your confidence depends on how well your mind is helping you control your shots. Sort of a catch-22.

In any case, back to my worst fiasco on a golf course. It happened over 10 years

ago, but still seems quite fresh in my mind. It was a day on which my mind worked clearly for evil.

So to set it up, I am about to go out to play 18 as a single, late one afternoon at my old home course, where I had recently become a member. As I approach the first tee I see two middle-aged guys getting ready to tee off. Rather than go out behind them and be on their butts all 18 holes, which might pressure them and frustrate me, I figured I'd ask if they'd mind if a third middle-aged guy played along with them. They seemed friendly enough. It would be a nice time. Both were very welcoming chaps.

We teed off on the par 4, first. Neither of them hit it very well off the tee, while I drive it 40 yards past both, straight down the middle of the fairway. My confidence inches up. They each hit their 2nd, then 3rd, before finally reaching the green with their fourth. I stand over my 2nd shot, plan where I want to land it on the green, "visualize" it and then just do it.

It ends up just as I planned. Man I'm good. Confidence creeps up higher. I make my putt for birdie. Confidence oozing out my pores. They both congratulate my impressive play. I treat it outwardly as if it was no big deal, but inside, my feathers are in full bloom.

We start the small talk. "So where ya from?" "What do you do for work?" "Play here much?" Yada yada. Come to find out that Rich and Charlie both live in the nice development that encompasses the course and both are regular golf club members here. Rich lives just off the 12th hole over-

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looking the green and Charlie's place looks down on the 4th fairway from high up on a ridge. We'll be going right by it in a few minutes.

We tee off on the par 3, 2nd. It's playing about 180 yards. A bit down hill, but surrounded by water and deep bunkers. My tee shot finds the green, not too far from the hole, while theirs both require some chipping and pitching. I two-putt for par, while they card 4s or 5s. I hear a "Nice par, Doug." Though I reply with a simple "Thanks," there may have been a touch more confidence attached to my voice as well, almost as if I said, "Thanks, but get used to it."

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We head off to the near-600 yard, par 5, third. This is a long, uphill, very difficult hole—the #1 handicap hole—with no room for error on either side. 3-4 yards left of the fairway is OB for most of the length of it, and right is cart path butting up to hazard, again, for the whole length of it.

No matter how well I played the first two holes, the third is really the test of whether I am as good as I think I am at that moment. But, my confidence is flying high now. So far, I have hit all quality golf shots. My mind has me believing I'm gonna par this testy hole before I even tee off. I hit my drive dead down the middle. Then stroke a nice 3W up the long hill to center fairway, then I'm on in regulation with a sweet little short-iron approach to about 15 feet. It's a tough green, very undulating and fast, which I again, 2-putt for par.

I have now played the first three holes very solidly. Rich and Charlie each doubled or tripled the third. I really wasn't paying much attention to their games, I was so into my own. I was on fire. I'm overflowing with confidence now. They were really im-

pressed. They asked "Why don't you play in more tournaments here Doug?" You should join our men's association. We have tournaments nearly every week.

As we approach the fourth tee, Charlie mentions again that his house is on the right side of the fairway and points it out up high on the top of the ridge that runs along the fairway, way out of bounds. "Even way up there," he says, "I get balls hitting my house off the tee, seems like every day." "Really?" I reply, "That's surprising. It seems so far out of range." It looked to me to be about 280-300 yards away and 60-70 yards from the fairway.

I started trying to "visualize" how anyone could hit his house. It didn't really seem possible off the tee, except for the biggest hitters with the wildest slice. Even on my worst swing, I couldn't slice it that far, and on my best swing I couldn't hit it that long.

But, the seed was planted.

As I stepped up to the tee I could not get the image of Charlie's house being hit out of my head. I tried, but the more I tried the deeper ingrained it became. I addressed the ball with an uneasy feeling that this wasn't going to end pretty. I started my takeaway. I was uncomfortable. It didn't feel right. For the first time this round I showed I was just a mere mortal golfer. I heard the crack of the ball and, you guessed it, watched in surprise as it headed directly for Charlie's house!

Now don't jump to conclusions. As I already said, even on my best swing, I could never reach it. And, I didn't. Yet the look on all our faces was one of pure disbelief. Even after playing the first three holes at 1-under and hitting virtually all quality shots, with just the simple suggestion from Charlie that hitting his house was possible, my crazy mind decided to see if it truly was! Well, thankfully, as it turned out, it wasn't. Though I came close, I ended up about 30 yards short of his home, way up

high on the side of the ridge in the rough, with a spattering of trees all around.

Charlie and Rich, by the way, hit their drives perfectly, straight down the center of the fairway. Of course they did. This all put a crack in the confidence. And, not just a little one.

Okay, so now is really where things start to get a little twilight-zonish for me and greatly supports my belief that your mind can SO control your game. The old Yogi Berra suggestion that "Golf is 90% mental and the other 10% is all in your head," really rang true after what happened next.

I get to my ball and find, as expected, that it will be well above my feet at address, at almost waist high. I am still 180 or so out, yet have a clear shot to the green through the trees, albeit from a very awkward lie way up on the side of the hill. I'm trying to focus on making a good shot. I choke down an inch on the grip for a little more

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control and hopefully, cleaner contact. I look up diagonally to my right and now see Charlie's wife, a mere 30 yards away, standing out on their back terrace waving hello to him and Rich. I need her there right now, like I need a hole in the head. Confidence leaking at a quickening pace.

Now, the thought of that last shot, which I still could not believe that I pushed way right, combined with the image in my head of Charlie's wife standing within talking distance was starting to take over my head, be it consciously or subconsciously. I had just hit it way right when I didn't think I would. Could it happen again? That would not be good. Go away bad thoughts, go away. Confidence leaking like a sieve.

I take a last look at the green, try to get balanced securely on the severe slope, then start my #4 hybrid back on a much shallower path to account for the ball so far above my feet. As I get to the top of my backswing, I lose a bit of my balance due to the awkward slope, and everything goes into slow motion from there. As I start my downswing, I can see and feel the club head coming in at the wrong angle, too low, as the toe barely clips the inside of the ball sending it speeding (though, still in slow motion) directly at Charlie's wife! "Nooooooooooooo! Fooooooooo!" Too late.

Luckily, it narrowly missed...his wife...but, not the custom-made glass wind chimes they had found at some quaint country store many years ago in a sleepy little town in Vermont. It was priceless to her. And now it was gone. Smashed to smithereens. Why couldn't I have hit a window? That's easily replaceable. Well, at least it wasn't her head.

I am now totally mortified. I don't know what to say or do. I run up the hill to Charlie's wife, who is absolutely livid. I am so embarrassed. I apologize profusely. She won't even speak to me other than to say, "Just go away." I am just another a--hole golfer in her mind, though she may have said that out loud. I look back at Charlie and Rich who are still down on the fairway looking up in disbelief. They too are at a loss. How could this happen? Mr. Hotshot golfer from the first three holes has been exposed and proven to be a simple hack.

What's to blame? My weak mind control. I say to them, trying to keep my ego in tact, "I don't know how that happened. That's never happened to me before. Really, I'm not that bad!" They both agreed. "Yes, we saw the way you played previous to this." They were feeling sorry for me. Not as much as I was. (Why do we have such egos? I nearly just killed his wife and I'm making sure everyone knows I'm a better golfer than my last shot would suggest.)

I told Charlie that I had tried to apologize to his wife up there on the hill, but she would have none of it. He said, "There is nothing you can do right now, so don't worry about it. Let's just continue the round." He wanted to get out of there as badly as I did. I think he was afraid of what his wife might do. He explained to me how important those wind chimes were to her. Very sentimental. Something special she so cherished. She and Charlie had found them many years ago on a long weekend they spent driving around New England. I promised to make good to her, somehow.

We were all amazed at what I had just pulled off. Not just hitting the house, but hitting the cherished wind chimes on the house of the guy I just met, who I'm playing with for the first time, right after he told me his house gets hit all the time. What are the odds?

I was shaking when I finally got to the green after hitting a substitute ball I dropped from where Charlie and Rich were hitting their approaches. There was no way I was going to drop anywhere up there on that hill. The rules were out the window by this point. I probably 5-putted, I can't remember. Everything is kind of a blur after that. I do remember that I was not able to continue with any command of my swing. Couldn't hit the ball straight at all. I had no control over what

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my arms and body were doing. I was in a zombie-like state. I had started the round playing like a pro and quit shortly after the incident playing like a lowly duffer.

I told Charlie and Rich I was not up for finishing. My mind was shot. They could tell I was not the same guy with whom they had started the round. They understood. And, Rich was probably thankful that I gave up, before we made it to the 12th hole, *where his house sat*.

I promised Charlie I was going to take care of the damage somehow (though he told me not to worry about it). I then just went home, still stunned, still mortified.

Confidence? 100% kaput.

I normally played there three or four days a week, but after that, it took me a while to go back. The first time I did, I was so nervous when I got to the fourth tee, I just skipped the entire hole. I felt like all the homeowners up there on that ridge along the fairway would be looking out their windows, pointing at me. "There's that hacker who almost killed Charlie's wife."

I needed some time to get over it. To this day, no matter how well I'm striking the ball, there is always a little uneasiness when I come to the fourth hole there. I could be striping the ball down the middle on all other holes, but when I come to the fourth, I rarely hit it well. I always keep my head down when I play that hole. I don't want Charlie's wife to notice me and have it bring back memories. And, whenever I hit one up on that ridge by their house leaving myself a steep side hill lie, I'll just swing easy, aim well away from their house and back at the fairway, rather than attempting to go for the green. What are the chances I can hit the new wind chimes they bought with the gift card I sent them? The amount of the card was enough to buy three or four new wind chimes—*just in case*.

So, this is just one very extreme example of how negative thoughts on the course usually equal negative results. And positive thoughts can often equal positive results, as evidenced by my first three holes, filled with confidence that day. Unfortunately,

training your mind to be able to hold back the negative thoughts and to only allow in the positive ones, for me anyway, is the hardest part of playing the game of golf. I know I have the physical skills to play the game relatively well. Mentally, not so much.

Before that fateful day and many times since, my mind has ruined what seems like more than a fair share of shots for me and subsequently eroded my confidence over too many rounds to count. It usually starts with a simple questioning or bad swing-thought in the middle of my backswing. A lack of commitment to the shot at hand, in any form, is usually all it takes. One thing leads to another and before I know it, I am questioning my ability over every shot. "What am I doing wrong?" Hitting the ball crisply, on the sweet spot, becomes nearly impossible. I know I have the ability, so what happened? My evil golf mind has won out.

Then again, I have gotten much better over the years, so there must be some good thoughts working and winning out as well.

I've hit some really great shots when I believed I could. I'm still waiting for the day that I step up to a par three, visualize my shot going into the hole and then with the power of my mind, aided by skill and a high level of confidence, just make it happen.

I wish I could find a way to stop any thought from popping into my head during my swing. Ideally, I just want to see the target, visualize my shot, check my tempo with a practice swing, and take dead aim. Then a final waggle, focus on the ball, start the club back and not think again until I feel my right shoulder touch against my chin as I finish my follow-through and watch my ball fly perfectly, just like I pictured. It seems so simple.

Playing against other, even better, golfers is not always the toughest competition. Whether it be a friendly foursome made up of hackers and duffers vying for happy hour bragging rights, or the top-tier guys in the club with mucho bucks on the line, the toughest competition could just well be in your own head. I know in my case, it always is.

If I can ever conquer the mental part of golf, the game would be easy. But, what fun would that be?

Doug Ely is an avid senior player, student of the game, equipment geek and single-digit handicapper, playing out of Worthington Manor Golf Club in Urbana, MD. As a teen, he played a little golf, caddied at an exclusive country club and worked on a greenskeeping crew, but sailing captured his imagination, so golf was moved to the back burner. Other than some sporadic play when business opportunities arose or invitations to benefit tournaments came up over the years, sailing and his marketing & corporate communications firm consumed the bulk of his time. After an adventurous and accomplished career on and around boats, he gave up ocean yacht racing and cruising 15 years ago and re-entered the game of golf with a passion that matched that of his sailing career—living, breathing and dreaming of the sport 24/7/365. His writing work, both humorous and instructional, has appeared in regional golf and sailing publications, as well as online in a number of national blogs and electronic sporting publications.

