

## COURSE MANAGEMENT

“Successful people know how to manage themselves and how to get the best out of other people in their business affairs. However, they rarely seem to take these abilities to the golf course.”

In this month’s article I want to tell you a story about one of my clients which will give you some ideas about course management, or more precisely, how to manage yourself on the course.

When I met Pete he was a complete beginner who came on Staverton Park’s winter golf trip to Majorca in 1980. Pete is a very successful butcher who now supplies the majority of the country’s Michelin star chefs with top quality meat products. He had bravely accepted to make up the numbers on our trip at the last minute when someone dropped out. He had hardly played on a course before and threw himself in at the deep end. We are still very good friends to this day and I have come to understand that this decision was far from uncharacteristic. He is a particularly competitive person in sport and in business and he just loves a challenge.

One day, a few months after returning from the trip, I was waiting for him to arrive at Staverton for a playing lesson. I had finished my previous lesson and was waiting for him on the practice range just by the first tee. No surprise, he was late, eventually appearing at speed, running from the clubhouse. Having apologised for being late and adding that he needed to be back in his office for an appointment in just over a couple of hours, we didn’t have time to prepare with a few shots on the range as we know you should so went straight onto the tee. He hit his drive along the ground off the heel of the club and the ball settled fifty yards away in the long rough to the left of the teeing area.

When we got to his ball he reached for his fairway wood. I asked him what he was intending to do with his second shot and he explained that he needed to make up for such a poor drive and get the ball as far up the fairway as possible. Pete is possibly the most positive character I’ve ever met and I sensed he wouldn’t like my advice but I knew that we were both in for a bad experience if he hit another poor shot. His internal clock was already ticking at high speed after a fast drive from work and, in an effort to rush round the nine holes he was likely to get even more stressed and uptight as the holes passed.

“Pete, your chances of hitting a clean shot from that lie are slim for three reasons. You have already hit a bad drive, you are in a bit of a state due to arriving late and you’re choosing a straight-faced club from a bad lie.

Let’s imagine various outcomes. You get lucky and hit a good shot but there is a bunker on the corner of the dog-leg just at the distance you normally hit your five-wood. Not a sensible play. A more likely result is that you hit a bad shot and feel lousy as you walk up to your third shot. A few holes later, and after more bad shots, you are beginning to tell yourself that you should have stayed in the office. Why don’t you use the same skills you demonstrate in your everyday business life by not making two mistakes in a row? Hit a nice, easy seven-iron. You’re more likely to succeed and will

feel a lot better about yourself. You also won't reach the bunker but will leave a relatively easy third shot to the green."

"But I can get it out with the 5-wood and there's a bit of room to get past that bunker on the left," responded Pete with a look of fighting determination etched on his face.

"Pete, every golfer thinks like that. It's exactly why most golfers don't play regularly to their handicaps. Of course you can do it, but how many times would you succeed out of ten attempts?"

I have since learnt that one of Pete's philosophies in life is that you should do the opposite of what everyone else is doing. When the market is down we all sell our shares because we lose confidence. The clever investor buys when we're selling and sells when we're buying. We lose money because we respond to the market and are easily influenced by what the masses are doing rather than predicting and precipitating the trends ourselves.

My last comment struck a chord and it was if a little light lit up in his head. He hit a lovely seven-iron well short of the bunker and walked up the fairway like a man free from the worries and anxieties he had displayed a few minutes earlier. As luck would have it, and maybe we make our own luck, he hit a nice shot onto the green and holed the putt for a par!

As we played the remaining holes I went on to explain in more detail how most golfers rarely play to their handicaps and I distinctly recall telling him that anyone who does so will win far more than his fair share of competitions and matches. Pete seemed to grasp the point that I was making in that the handicapping system in the UK doesn't produce a handicap based on the average score but is purely the result of a player's best two or three rounds of the year. I have since done studies of competition scores and have proved that the average score is quite a few shots above the average handicap of those competing.

It's a simple fact that in any competition nearly all competitors play above their handicap and only a few either play to it or below. We play most of our golf over our handicap and so often go home disappointed. The next time you go to your club look at the results from recent competitions and you'll see exactly what I mean.

Pete, despite a butchers swing (sorry Pete!), has become one of the most consistent players to his handicap that I know. He has learnt to optimise his talents and uses great course management. The way he manages himself through eighteen holes is testament to the significant philosophy he learnt that day at Staverton.

Yes, I know that you are capable of hitting that 1 out of 10 shot out of the rough but I can assure you that the frustration you'll get 9 times out of 10 is just not worth the risk. On the other hand, hitting a nice easy shot down the fairway, even if it doesn't go very far, allows you to approach your next shot in a state of confidence and relaxation.

Enjoy managing yourself more on the golf course this summer!

*NB This is an excerpt from Brian's book "Positive Impact Golf." Full details about the book will be published in next month's article.*

*Brian Sparks*