

Lessons From The Last 2009 Major

No doubt like many of you, I followed the events at Hazeltine National as the events of the USPGA Championship unfolded. As usual, several players were striking the ball well enough to feature at the top of the leader board. Generally, there are around a dozen competitors who play the last 18 holes with some chance of winning any tournament and we were treated to some nerve-racking moments as Lee Westwood again fought to win his first major. Not only did he fall short by a few strokes but Pádraig Harrington, now a serial major winner, suffered the vagaries of the game of golf by taking an 8 on a par 3!

In taking such a horrendous score his ambitions on winning his 4th major evaporated but I want to thank him on everyone's behalf for two positive issues. Firstly, the way he behaved after the embarrassment of a quintuple bogey (not sure this is in the dictionary but it was referred to by the American TV coverage) on the 8th hole was testament to his positive attitude and an example to us all. As Rudyard Kipling said so eloquently in the poem 'If,' ".....if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two imposters both the same." Harrington seems quietly capable of this and truly knows how to conduct himself as a champion golfer.

Secondly, he showed us all that even the greatest golfers get it wrong sometimes and can suffer the same indignities that we suffer on a regular basis. Yes, I know they don't take those kind of scores as often as we do but isn't it nice to know that they are human?

Let's look at the difference between the winner and the runners up?

Of course, you have to say that lady luck will have her say. Even the great Jack Nicklaus said that luck represented 25% of his game. However, there is another essential aspect of the last rounds, in particular, how well they hole out from short distances.

Statistics from all the major PGA tours around the world inform us that, throughout the year, professional golfers hole only 50% of putts from 2 yards. Furthermore, this percentage never seems to change year on year and from one tour to the next.

Wow! They miss one in two? Surprising, isn't it? But, you don't see that on the TV because the cameras only cover the players in contention and never show the guys who missed the halfway cut by 10 shots. They're the ones who bring the stats

down by missing more than they hole whereas the winner invariably has high stats that week.

However, in this year's USPGA things didn't go according to plan for Tiger who was expected to win. After all, he had never lost when leading going into the last round. He added spectacularly to the missed putt stats because he couldn't get the ball in the hole from short distances. Yes, even Tiger is human and again showed us that we are all playing a game where inconsistency is possibly the only consistent factor.

Let me reflect for a moment about the importance of 'expectations' and 'embarrassment.' We feel embarrassed when we miss short putts, so much so that we can make the simple act of rolling a ball towards a hole seem like an impossible and daunting task. When the frustration and tension levels get too high we can even develop the dreaded 'yips,' a sort of muscle spasm that makes our hands do all kinds of unpredictable things with the putter. The fact is that most golfers believe that the pros hole 80% or even 90% of putts from 2-yards. With this impression in our subconscious mind, we stand over short putts unaware that our expectations demand that we should hole the ball and our anxiety makes us worry about the effects of missing.

The mind starts to imagine the consequences of failure on such a seemingly simple task and starts to produce tension associated with the fear and embarrassment of failure. Simply lowering your expectations to a realistic level can have a marvellously positive effect on your performance. Why not accept that you are not a professional golfer who plays and practices 6 days a week and adapt your goal to holing 1 in 3, or even 1 in 4, from 6 feet? If you start from this point but also say to yourself that there is no reason why you can't put the ball in the hole you will start to putt in a relaxed fashion and your hands will regain the talent you thought you had lost or never had.

I once played with a lady who took 5 putts on the 1st green having hit 3 lovely shots finishing about 15 feet from the hole. As she got her putter out her whole mood had changed and she literally became a bag of nerves. She admitted that putting had become a dramatic and painful part of her game to the extent that she started to tremble every time she even thought about putting. On the way to the 2nd tee I asked her how many putts she thought she should take on the green.

"Oh!" she said, "I should never take more than 2."

After another nice drive and a good fairway wood, her third shot landed on the green 30 feet from the hole. I suggested a new 3-part strategy;

1. greatly reduce the distance between the hole and the ball on the first putt without going past it
2. stick the ball so close on the second putt so that
3. she wouldn't be able to miss the third

“But, that's 3 putts,” she exclaimed. “You should never take 3 putts!”

“It's better than 5,” I replied.

Although she couldn't argue with my statement she didn't seem too convinced as I repeated the mantra as she stood over the ball. However, she proceeded to stroke the ball beautifully to within two feet of the hole. Before she took her second putt I repeated that all I wanted her to do was glue it to the hole and not worry about holing it. Another nice fluent stroke and in went the ball. We repeated the mantra on every putt all the way round and she two-putted every green. She finished up holing a 15 foot double-borrow putt on the last hole and, as the ball popped into the hole, she shrieked, “Oh, I'm so sorry. I wasn't trying to hole it!”

Sometimes we try too hard to do something our mind says is difficult. Our potential to perform the task is inhibited by the interference that comes from within. Clearing your mind of misguided expectations will have a major effect on the ease with which you putt.

Find out more about how Brian and Positive Impact Golf can help you to perform better, hit more good shots and become more confident on a ONE-DAY COURSE at Manston Golf Centre near Ramsgate in Kent by visiting: www.positiveimpactgolf.co.uk or call Brian on 01843 590005