

The Psychology of Golf

by Dr. Louis Robinson

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Golf is generally regarded as a hobby which should be followed with a single mind, and some enthusiasts may possibly resent its being used as a kind of philosophic stalking horse for approaching certain shy problems in psychology. I have found, however, when conversing with many confirmed golfers that any subject which has a colorable connection with their favorite sport is treated with tolerance. Hence I trust that a brief discussion of some of the nervous and mental processes involved in the game may interest the golfing readers of this Review.

It must be evident to everyone who has watched a golfer's progress that there must be some remarkable affinity between the human mind and the royal and ancient game. Every golf club becomes a mission centre for the surrounding district and one continually sees that those who come to scoff remain to play. It would be easy to justify the game of golf on rational grounds and to show that it affords one of the most beneficial forms of relaxation for brain workers who are not able to indulge in violent or fatiguing sports. But, as is generally the case in human affairs, the tyro's impelling motive is seldom based upon reason.

At present, although the game is played the whole world over, one finds that it has not obtained a firm foothold except where the English language is spoken. Hence, if we wish to enquire into the psychic idiosyncrasies which conduce to golf contagion — in the way that physicians enquire into the predisposing causes of disease — we must seek them among the mental peculiarities of the Anglo-Saxon race. Now, to the outsider who has never handled a club the game looks ridiculously easy. The object which has to be struck is stationary; hence the man who has played cricket, or fives, or baseball, thinks that it is the simplest thing in the world to hit it in the direction in which he wishes it to go. He takes hold of a club (which he generally handles as if it were a cricket bat) and strikes at the ball. As often as not he misses it altogether, and even if he chances to aim correctly he finds himself completely outdriven by men whose athletic capabilities he holds in contempt.

On following up his first attempt with the stern determination to better it, our beginner, after striking with all his might three or four times and plowing up the ground around his ball, manages at length to move it fully two yards.

The difficulties seem unaccountable. Although the ball sits still to be hit he cannot hit it; and, the more he sets his teeth and exerts his muscles in attempts to send it soaring forward after the manner of his opponent, the more complete is his humiliation.

Now, I think we have discovered the first element of golf-mania in the stiff-necked and pig-headed. After such a defeat it is absolutely impossible for him, consistently with retaining his self-respect, to leave things as they are. To give up golf at this stage is to acknowledge that he cannot do something which is obviously and ludicrously simple. He must either go on or else acknowledge himself an impotent paralytic.

Yet, the more he concentrates his soul upon the game, the greater becomes the contrast between his miserable attempts and the feats of the players whom he lately despised. Although in the very slough of despond he grimly (and literally) plows his way onwards, determined not to be beaten. At length — usually when his humiliation is complete — by a lucky chance he makes an effective stroke, and the ball springs away from his club-head like a thing of life and flies an incredible distance. It was the one thing needed to weld the fetters of golf slavery. He goes home with blistered hands and aching shoulders, and before he sleeps he has re-struck that miraculous stroke a hundred times.

Next morning finds him again upon the links. Ere a week is out he is armed with all the complex paraphernalia of the game, which he formerly regarded as contemptible superfluities, and is practicing approach shots in his garden to the ruination of the sacred turf. He buys sundry handbooks on golf and spends a small fortune in lessons from the club professional. All his thoughts and conversation are saturated with golf, and his friends sum up his condition by saying that he has "got it badly."

Having thus suggested the chief reasons why the game is so seductive to most people who allow themselves to tamper with it, I will now endeavor to explain what takes place in the brain and nervous apparatus of the learner before he becomes adept. Perhaps it is taking rather a liberty with the word psychology to apply it to nervous processes in which conscious thought has but little share, but at present we have no other term which can be used in its place. The nervous processes to which I shall refer are by no means peculiar to golf; in fact, they come into play on almost every occasion when we perform any act requiring the combined efforts of various muscles. Probably it is because they seem so

much a matter of course that they have hitherto received so little attention from students of mental science. They belong, in fact, to that animal or automatic part of us which it has been the fashion of nearly all moral philosophers to ignore, and which we are only beginning to understand.

He who takes up golf in early life probably learns to play as unconsciously as he learned to walk, and if the game were a development of any other branch of athletics in which most youths acquire proficiency, most of us would probably drift into it in an automatic fashion and acquire a fair amount of skill without knowing how. It is because golf compels those of us who take it up in adult life to begin again at the beginning that it helps us to appreciate some of the elementary conditions of semi-automatic acts.

Another peculiarity of golf which renders it useful as a revealer of psychic methods is the fact that each player acts independently and pursues his course without let or hindrance, except from his own want of skill and the condition of the ground. In football, cricket, and almost all popular athletic sports there is a continual interaction of wills and the constant excitement of opposed endeavors. Hence the mental and nervous processes involved are extremely complex, and no chance offers for calm introspective analysis while the game is proceeding.

But the golfer, from the time he leaves the first tee until he finally holes out, usually has the ball solely at his own disposal, and there is abundant time for meditation as he follows it after each stroke.

Proficiency in other games instead of assisting the golf player rather stands in his way. The driving stroke at golf is utterly different from a stroke at cricket, hockey, tennis, or baseball. It must reduce the muscular action of the arm to a minimum and do all with a turn of the body and a pendulum-like swing of the club. This is why even the accomplished all-round athlete has practically to begin over again when he becomes a golfer. The muscular habits which he has acquired during his boyhood, and which give him easy skill in other games, are worse than useless, and an entirely new set of automatic actions must be evolved.

Probably, few of my readers are conscious of the extremely complex nature of some of the simplest muscular acts. A little thought will show that both in ourselves and in the great majority of the lower animals' elaborate calculations are unconsciously performed almost every time the body is put in motion. Look how exactly a beast of prey calculates the distance of its quarry before it makes a spring, and what a complex business must be the adjusting of all the muscular forces so as to enable it to alight upon the back of its victim.

Mental science has now arrived at a stage when we can no longer be content with the explanation that such actions are instinctive. Every athlete is perfectly aware that as he approaches a jump a calculating process is going on within him, and he knows before he arrives at the obstacle whether the forces he can summon are sufficient to carry him over. Like the beast of prey above alluded to, he can without difficulty estimate the propulsive force required so that he can alight at any point he pleases within the limits of his jumping distance. That this capacity for mental calculation is something quite distinct from the ordinary mathematical faculty is shown by the fact that it exists in great perfection in early life, before the power to deal with figures develops.

As I have said, golf compels those of us who take up the game after we have arrived at manhood to fall back upon subconscious mental processes which are common in young children and in the lower animals, and I shall show that most of the well-worn maxims of professional instructors are calculated to aid us in this attempt.

Take, for instance, the two phrases which are dinned into the ears of every beginner, "Keep your eye on the ball," and "Slow back." Every tyro finds out that it is by no means easy to estimate the distance of the ball correctly enough to enable his club to strike it. We find, however, that among the lower animals this power to estimate distances is very widely distributed. Even as low down in the scale as the chameleon, or the serpent, the distance of any object to be struck seems to be reckoned with unerring accuracy.

Skill in this direction has scarcely any relationship with ordinary mathematical aptitude. I once knew an extremely thick-headed farm laborer, unable to read or write, who possessed the faculty to an extraordinary extent, and who would tell you on the instant how many yards an object was from where he stood. I once had the curiosity to ask him how he made his wonderful calculations, which were almost always justified by subsequent measurements. He replied that he did not know, but while he looked at the object he felt the answer coming, and by and by it came, and when it had come he felt perfectly sure of it. This seems to be very like the reply given by several of the calculating boys whose remarkable mathematical powers have astonished the world.

Now, the simple act of staring hard at the ball while preparing to strike enables the golfer to judge its distance with exactness, although no conscious effort to form such an estimate in occupying the mind. When one begins to analyze the physiological processes involved in driving, one soon becomes astonished at their complexity. Almost all the muscles in the limbs and trunk have to take their share in the action. Each must act in concert with all the others and not one must shirk or overdo its part.

Obviously, the message which each receives as to the expenditure of power expected from it must proceed from some central source. Think of the generalship required by the nervous head-centre in controlling such complex manoeuvres!

Von Moltke's historic combinations at the outbreak of the Franco-German war are mere child's play in comparison. *[Editor's note: Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke was the chief of staff of the Prussian Army for thirty years, and is regarded as the creator of a new, modern method of directing armies in the field. He planned and led the Prussian armies in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), which paved the way for the creation of the Prussian-led German Empire in 1871.]* It is obvious that the innumerable orders telegraphed down the motor nerves are sent off practically at the same moment, yet the second precept ("Slow back") to which I have alluded shows that an appreciable time is required for a successful solution of the problem to be worked out. I have seen several of our great professional champions make their strokes with a very rapid back swing, but to the beginner this is absolutely fatal. While the club is being slowly lifted a tremendous amount of business is being done in the telegraph department of the golfer's body. Doubtless it is because of the unaccustomed character of the movements required in golf that an appreciable amount of time is necessary to enable groups of muscles, not habitually working in concert, to act harmoniously together. The fact that the eye must be kept upon the ball during the whole swing suggests that the controlling agency within the skull is all the time watching, criticising and adjusting all the forces marshalled at its command.

I have heard many people who are not golfers, and who know nothing about the difficulties and refinements of the game, make great sport of the "preliminary waggle" of the club when a player is addressing his ball. If I have succeeded in making myself intelligible so far, I think the use of this manoeuvre will now be fully appreciated. In all probability the immediate problem before the golfer is worked out theoretically, or, at any rate, is "enunciated" during the "preliminary waggle," and the time taken up by the slow backward swing is occupied by the work of turning theory into practice.

Now, if the ball always lay in the same position relatively to the player, and he always used a club of the same length and weight, one can understand that he would soon acquire mechanical accuracy in making his strokes. But, as a matter of fact, as soon as a golfer has driven from the tee he hardly ever gets a ball lying in such a position as to be able effectively to reproduce the action which was successful at the outset.

As often as not, when playing through the green, he finds himself obliged to stand upon a slight eminence above the ball or in a slight hollow below it, and that he must use a club of different length and weight from his driver. Hence, on each occasion, the calculation has to be based upon fresh data, and it is only by observing the same two principles which guide him at the start that he can hope to make a successful shot with his iron or cleek.

How independent the whole proceeding is of the mental faculties which habitually obey the will is shown by the disastrous result of bestowing too strenuous attention upon the strokes. True enough, it is essential to give one's whole self to each stage of the game if anything like success is to be hoped for. But one must do it in a kind of passive and animal fashion, committing the business as it were to that sub-agent of the will who has charge of the automatic department. Any attempt to bring the conscious will into play, as one is often tempted to do after a series of exasperating failures, at once sets the automatic department on strike.

Hence a third motto that is repeated ad nauseam by all instructors, "Don't press." It is not altogether easy to give a sufficing verbal definition of "pressing," although all practical golfers know perfectly well what is meant by the term. Broadly speaking, a player who "presses" endeavors to enhance the effect of the swing of his club by a vigorous use of the muscles of his arms. This, however, is only the mechanical part of the vice. It really originates from the interference of the active will with the plans of its automatic deputy.

The proceeding and its results remind me of what I once observed in a well-organized factory, when the principal partner, who knew but little about practical details, threw a whole department into confusion by appearing personally on the scene in order to hurry on work during an important crisis.

The invariable failure of a stroke to which too much conscious will and attention have been given greatly puzzles the average beginner. In most of the affairs of life we find that a victory can be gained over difficulties by strenuous endeavor, and usually the powers which we desire to bring to bear are so fully under the control of the will that they yield obedience to its imperious mandates. But in golf, at any rate in the case of the beginner, this is not the case.

Still, it does seem extraordinary that stroke after stroke may be made by a novice with the whole strength of his muscles without the club-head once chancing to meet the ball in the proper manner. Probably, the explanation is that the conscious will and the automatic calculating department are pulling in different directions.

One vice of almost every novice throws an interesting light upon the nervous processes which we have been discussing. Every beginner fails in many of his strokes by striking the ball upon the top. He may have observed the instructions of his teacher to the letter, especially as regards the three principles which I have already dealt with, and yet time after time he somehow finds himself striking half an inch short, and therefore failing to touch the ball at the necessary spot. In reality, the precept rather than the player is to blame for this fault. It seems due to a too exact and scrupulous observance of the rule, "Keep your eye on the ball."

Now, naturally, when one is standing over a small object, such as a golf ball, and looking at it steadily, one sees the upper surface. Hence, the automatic calculator within takes the distance between the top of the ball and the player's body as the guide for the length of the stroke. Obviously, if we wish to move such an object as a golf ball in a horizontal direction, we need to strike it about on a level with its centre. But the centre of the ball being invisible, and its horizontal equator but dimly seen, these do not receive the recognition which is their due. Hence, it becomes necessary for the golfer to keep not only his eye upon the ball, but his mind's eye upon the ball's invisible centre, otherwise the stupid exactitude of his automatic calculating machine will make his stroke too short.

Probably, the best style of golf is acquired not through any special efforts to assume correct attitudes on the part of the learner, but simply by association with really good players. We all know how remarkably independent of the rational intelligence is that faculty for mimicry which we share with our arboreal cousins. One continually notices that tricks of speech and of expression have been acquired in this way, not only without the knowledge of the imitator, but even against his will. The eye does not report to the conscious ego all that it observes. In common with other departments of the frame, where various functions proceed without the cognizance of the proprietor, it has certain independent duties. Many an impression received by the eye is passed on to the storehouse of memory without the conscious intelligence being aware of the fact, and, more than this, information so acquired is continually acted upon in such a manner as to bring into play nearly every part of the system except that central conscious particle which we call "I."

This is remarkably shown in unconscious mimicry. Two people living together may gradually grow almost exactly alike in feature, through the organs of expression in each bringing themselves into conformity with the impressions received through the sense of sight. This is all done not only without intent, but without the least rumor of the change reaching the consciousness of either person. One can therefore understand how it is that, since most of the actions required at golf require the free use of the

automatic forces of the body, it pays for the learner simply to attach himself to some superior player in order to absorb his style.

Unfortunately the precept, "Evil communications corrupt good manners," applies especially to golf. I have seen a novice acquire some vicious habit, such as a hurried or jerky swing, after a single round with a player whose style was bad. In a club where I sometimes play, there is one gentleman who, in spite of an abominable style, achieves considerable success. He, therefore, frequently plays with some of the other leading golfers of the district, and it is not difficult to observe in those who have been most often upon the links with him the results of his evil example.

This unconscious mimicry is notably displayed in single acts. One often observes during a match that if one player tops or slices his ball when driving, the other does likewise. The fault of the first may be so exactly reproduced by his opponent that the two balls are found lying within a few feet of one another, although both are far away from the line to the next hole.

The automatism which we have been discussing shows itself in many interesting ways. We all know how inveterate is the tendency to repeat some act which is performed under the auspices of this department of the mind. In this way most of the habits are formed which go to make up our manners and our morals. Now, most players discover that if they strike a ball wrongly once, either by topping it, slicing it, or pulling it, they are extremely prone to fall into the same error over and over again.

I remember seeing a man who was a fairly competent player, and who usually drove with force and accuracy, strike his ball from the tee into a pond just in front. He teed up a new one and tried again; this also went into the pond at almost exactly the same spot. With increasing exasperation he put down four more and apparently took infinite pains with his driving. They all splashed into the water within a radius of about three yards. This tendency to repeat any vice in method is so fully recognized by golfers that some players make a habit of at once changing their club when they have made a false stroke. Although the one they select may not be so well adapted for the immediate purpose, the slightly changed conditions enable them to escape the risk of repeating the failure.

It is a common experience also that on successive rounds upon the same links the mistakes of the first round are repeated. Thus, supposing a player slices his ball at the first tee, tops it at the second, and skies it at the third, he will be very likely to do exactly the same when making his second round. Apparently this is due to some miscalculation dependent partly upon the player and partly upon special

external circumstances. Such a case is very similar to the experience of a schoolboy, who, on going over the same mathematical problem over and over again, makes precisely the same error at the same spot.

Does not the fact that all the innumerable component acts of a faulty drive are thus reproduced, so as to place the ball twice in succession in almost the same spot, prove the astonishing precision of automatic psychic processes? A good deal of instruction can be gathered from a careful study of the causes of "foozling." Probably an incorrect attitude on the part of the player is the most common, and it is easy to see how this will interfere with any attempt to adjust the various forces to be brought to bear upon the ball. Probably the most exasperating experience of the golfer is when he drives his ball into some awkward hazard which he is especially desirous of avoiding. This is often done over and over again during a single round, and the apparently malign perversity of the ball appears due to some diabolical agency.

The explanation is, I think, somewhat as follows. In spite of his miraculous generalship over the muscular forces, our mechanical Von Moltke often shows himself ludicrously stupid. To do him justice I believe that he is always exceedingly anxious to carry out orders correctly, and is quite incapable of playing tricks with his superiors. If he acts in apparent disobedience to the wishes of the conscious ego, it is because he fails to understand his orders. When we direct our attention to some particular object, just at the moment when our forces are being marshalled for action there seems a great difficulty in making it clear to this inward agent whether this object is to be aimed at or avoided. Hence if some particularly awkward hazard in front occupies the attention of the player when addressing his ball, although he may desire above all things to avoid it, his orders are misinterpreted by the zealous servant within, much as the words of King Henry III regarding Thomas a Becket were misinterpreted by his knights.

The very fact that the attention is directed toward any object is often sufficient to send the ball spinning in that direction, although the hazard was in reality looked at merely that it might be avoided. I remember on the old links of the North Surrey Golf Club (a club, by the way, which has always been popular among the Americans resident in Loudon) there was one short hole with certain sheds and a cycle track just to the right of the course. Seeing that a ball sliced in this direction was almost certain to be lost, most players scrupulously endeavored to drive straight or even to pull slightly when playing from the tee.

Here the objects to be avoided were so conspicuous and so ugly as almost perforce to occupy the attention at the very moment of driving. The result was that innumerable balls found a resting-place in

the ground beyond the cycle track, and one seldom passed the spot without seeing some frugal-minded golfer groping among the rubbish and weeds in the hope of recovering his lost treasure.

When the golfer's soul is torn with discord after repeated failures of this kind, and one side of himself curses the other side for its confounded stupidity, one can understand the brow-beaten Mechanical Superintendent of Automatic Acts replying somewhat as follows: " But if you didn't wish me to direct the forces at my command so as to drive the ball in that particular direction, why in the world did you turn your attention thither just at the moment when I had everything prepared for action ?"

It would be easy to show that this identical hitch in the nervous process of translating thought into action is responsible for much "foozling" and failure in other spheres besides that of golf. On making enquiries of various old-stagers as to whether they were subject to this infirmity, and if so how they overcame it, I was told that such errors are best avoided by fixing the mind solely upon the object to be achieved at the moment of driving to the exclusion of all else.

Thus, supposing we were addressing our ball upon a tee with a yawning quarry in front, some trees to the left, and a water hazard to the right, but with a fair piece of the green within easy reach of an ordinary drive, the mind should be fixed upon this spot absolutely, and the perils to be passed should be studiously ignored.

Probably, many other points will occur to the minds of golfers, especially if they have but recently learned the game, which offer food for reflection to those who are curious about the working of that wonderful and intricate machine, the human nervous system. I have merely selected a few which seemed to throw a little light upon the nature of those semi-automatic actions which seem so simple at first sight, but which, when analyzed, astonish us with their wonderful complexity.



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