

Air control

Dr Brian Hemmings explains how players can breathe their way to success



Tom Watson

“When I learned how to breathe, I learned how to win,” said Tom Watson, the winner of eight majors. Unfortunately, I have never had the good fortune to meet him and talk through his career but, as a psychologist, my guess is that quote suggests that, in the early days of his career, he often felt too uncomfortable on the golf course in winning situations or let frustration undermine his game.

In my work I find that many players think the top professionals must be doing something unique mentally - which isn't the case at all.

For instance, controlling breathing is one of the simplest, most efficient ways for all standards of golfers to self-regulate high arousal/tension on and off the course and is straightforward to learn.

In my time on England national training over the past 15 years emphasis has been placed on teaching individual players simple breathing skills.

For example, focused breathing is great inasmuch that it can act as a distraction from negative thoughts, lower heart rate, and act as a positive behaviour in pressure situations.

However, players must be aware that, although breathing itself is a natural automatic process, as soon as we shift to controlling breathing it becomes an acquired skill that improves with practice.

“You have to control tension. Just a couple of times I got nervous but I kept it under control. We all get taught by the Swedish Federation certain breathing techniques to help keep calm, it's basic stuff.”

Niclas Fasth

To fully obtain the benefits of focused breathing you need to impress on players the need to practise regularly. This technique involves counting breaths which also prevent negative thoughts as the mind is occupied by the counting involved.

Simply inhale slowly (and normally not deeply) through the nose to a count of four, and then slowly exhale through the mouth to a count of seven. The longer outbreaths induce a more relaxed state. This is also sometimes called ratio breathing and a player may complete several cycles of this to remain composed.

If practised, a player will soon become proficient at using the technique in pressure situations or when frustrated after errors. I find that many players like this technique as it is very subtle, and will go unnoticed by playing partners. Coach your players this technique and I am confident they will benefit hugely.

This technique is one of many covered in the online Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate course that is approved by the PGA of GB&I (100 CPD points) and PGAs of Europe, and has been completed with great reviews by PGA professionals. Go to www.golfpsychologycoaching.com for full details.

The course is full of information and practical activities for the PGA Professional to guide players through improving their mental game, and is endorsed by some of England's best coaches. You can complete the course at home so you will have no travel costs or time away from your work.

All you need is a player to work with and the time to complete the course activities. For a price reduction type in the promotional code PGA to reduce the price from £295



Dr. Brian Hemmings has been psychologist to England mens and boys golf since 1997. During this time he has helped develop the mental skills of the best emerging English golfers including the likes of Ross Fisher, Richard Finch, Danny Willett, Tom Lewis, David Horsey and Chris Wood. Brian is author of the book 'Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners' www.golfmind.co.uk