

10 WAYS TO AID THE TRANSITION FROM AMATEUR TO PROFESSIONAL PLAYER

By Dr Brian Hemmings

A look at the world rankings at the end of 2000 showed there was only 1 English player in the Top 100 of the World Rankings (Lee Westwood), whereas at the end of 2010 this had increased dramatically to 12 English players. Similarly, the European Order of Merit at the end of 2000 showed 20 English players in the Top 115, whereas at the end of 2013 the Race to Dubai rankings showed that number had increased 50% to 30. Having worked with many of the players involved in this successful period in my role as England team psychologist for over 15 years, I observed many successful transitions, and unfortunately, many unsuccessful ones.

The transition from amateur to professional can be one of the biggest challenges for any aspiring player. A transition is defined as *'the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another'*, which suggests it is a process that takes unstated amount of time. In my work with elite players over the years I have stressed that this process starts *whilst* they are an amateur, in that the preparation, work ethic, lifestyle and skills of the professional player can be actively worked upon before the decision to turn professional is made.

In combination with my observations and experience, I recently asked a number of England national coaches and professional English European Tour players to reflect on the transition process. What emerged were very similar views and accounts.

1. Get invites

Playing in professional events as an amateur before the decision to turn professional is made is vital. A player must be able to *see and feel* that they can compete strongly in professional tournaments as soon as they turn professional.

2. Invest in yourself

Players need to invest in themselves to develop their skills. Investment can be in time and money. A player should start to carefully develop a support team around themselves that can elevate their performances.

3. Become a 'student' of golf

In order to invest wisely players need to understand their game, their equipment, their statistics – what they need to work on and how

to get better. If golf is to be their career, players need to take an active interest in all things about themselves and their golf.

4. Take on a professional lifestyle and work ethic

Ross Fisher, when in the England team in 2003, personalised the cover of his training diary to say 'I must think and act more like a professional.' Being a professional is not just about the opportunity to earn money through playing, it is also about possessing the character, attitude, competencies and work ethic to make the most of the skills a player possesses. What Ross was referring to was that he needed to pay more attention to some of these behaviours whilst he was still an amateur. He was amateur in name, but professional in his approach.

5. Travel and play

One of the main adaptations in professional life on tour is learning to travel abroad and play. This means coping

with travel, fatigue and the challenge of getting sufficient rest. There is also the challenge of learning to play in different climates and on different types of grass and courses. In recent years through lottery funding in England, national squad players have had a huge advantage in this regard. Any aspiring player would be wise to start this process in their amateur career.

6. Are they ready?

Players take advice about turning professional from coaches, players, parents, friends, and often, management companies. The message



Brian has worked with European Tour players such as Chris Wood

from successful players was to take advice but to make the decision to turn professional and start that journey when the player *themselves* feel ready. Frequently a player may feel they get plenty of sound advice, but fail to remember that advice may not be impartial.

7. Work with a coach who knows

As well as talking to players who are already professional about the lifestyle and challenges of tour life, working with a coach who has knowledge of the skills necessary to compete at the highest level is desirable. Coaches who have experience through their work with other professionals can often spot when players are chasing rankings in tournaments and over-playing, rather than developing the necessary skills to compete.

8. Learn time-management and self-management skills

Closely linked to lifestyle and work ethic, is the need to develop a greater awareness of planning ahead for practice opportunities, of minimising distractions off the course, fitting in physical conditioning work, and to work with a coach who may often also have a busy diary. Establishing disciplined patterns of playing, practising, going to the gym, eating and particularly rest are vital to maintain freshness and desire.

9. Can they shoot low regularly?

Too often players make the decision to turn professional based on their best golf rather than their typical golf. Players that I spoke to expressed there was a need to be able to regularly shoot under par in consecutive rounds in tournaments as this was the likely scoring needed for success in tour life. If you are unable to do this at the start of your professional life, it is not the place to learn.

Ray Floyd remarked that he was fortunate to have enough talent to succeed early in his career and then was able to keep learning and improving. Many players turn professional without the skills to have enough initial success.

10. A lonely life

Players would be wise to decide if the life of a playing professional is really what they want, as it requires immense resilience, financial risk, loneliness and ceaseless travel and airports. Players I have spoken to talk of a tough, demanding, ruthless world where no one is particularly interested in you or your game. As an amateur you may start travelling and rooming alone to acclimatise to these demands.

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Dr. Brian Hemmings was lead psychologist to England golf during 1997 to 2013. During this time he helped develop the mental skills of the best emerging English



golfers including the likes of Ross Fisher, Danny Willett, Tom Lewis, Tommy Fleetwood and Chris Wood. Brian is author of the book ‘Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners’ and also runs Masterclasses for sport psychologists and golf coaches (www.golfmind.co.uk).