

# Pressure drop

*Dr Brian Hemmings explains how to approach key shots and moments on the golf course*

**G**olfers who stand up best to the pressures of the game face the same fear and doubt as you and me - the difference is they have learned mechanisms to deal with it. Here are seven ways to help coach your players in anticipation of when the pressure starts to mount.

### 1. Comfortable Being Uncomfortable

There is a phrase in psychology called the 'ironic' process: it means we think about the things we fear most at the times when we *least* want to think about them. It is important to realise this process is a natural one.

Golfers often think thoughts and feelings of doubt in pressure moments represent frailty in them; that they are not mentally tough enough. That is not the case. These processes are natural. Accepting this is the first step to dealing with being out of a comfort zone. Start to feel *comfortable being uncomfortable*.

### 2. Embrace The Challenge

Courses are often demanding in length and set up. Accordingly, with sometimes adverse weather to deal with, too, courses are mentally challenging and pressure is an integral part of the game.

In fact, these so-called 'pressure' shots and moments are what draws players to the game and are the focus of the post-round debrief.

Golf would be very dull if it were played across flat, open fields. So instead of trying to play without fear, embrace it as an aspect of *golf's challenge*, and one to enjoy trying to meet.

### 3. Refocus On The Process

Players who deal well with pressure experience the same doubts as those who do not; the difference is their focus then shifts to what the shot demands. Even a tour professional may think about how poor they would look if they missed a short putt - but they will then go through the process of what they need to do to hole it. *Refocusing on the process* can lead you from feelings of discomfort. So to cope with fear, stay with the shot at hand and not the consequences of what may go wrong.

### 4. Choose Realistic Shots

Pressure builds when players develop unrealistic expectations about what they might be able to achieve. Get players to make shots as simple as they can when in 'pressure' situations by *choosing a realistic shot* they know is within their grasp.

If Annika Sorenstam could not play a shot 60 per cent of the time in practice, she would not even consider it on the course when under pressure. Get your players to not try to play perfect golf.

### 5. Short Shots: Keep Eyes Still

On tough shots where the target is near, anxiety can cause golfers to 'peek' early at the target. But early shifting of vision towards the target generally causes head movement, which contributes to shoulder movement, which generally causes technical problems and a poor strike/inaccuracy.

In pressure situations where players may be anxious about the shot outcome, get them to *keep their eyes still*. In which case, the head will take care of itself and also stay still. Focusing on one point on the ball - a dimple or part of the logo - is a great way to practise steadying the eyes. Steady eyes mean a calm mind.

### 6. Take The Gun From Their Head

Many golfers think the first tee shot sets the tone for the round. This cranks up the pressure on them. Others do it by saying such things as 'I need to be no worse than four-over after six' to themselves. This is very rigid thinking and is counter-productive. Players need to be more flexible in their thinking and shift from 'this must happen' to 'I'd prefer it to happen'.

Tell them they can deal with a range of outcomes and situations. This thinking will improve their performance, their emotional state and also helps them recognise situations where they are getting on top of themselves and to *take the gun away from their head*.

### 7. Slow Down

Most people who do not handle pressure have an image of failure. Because of this they rush to get the shot over with to get out of the situation as soon as they can. The rushing is what typically causes problems.

Get them to think in advance of pressure shots and situations, and help them come to terms with these situations by staying with those images.

Get them to imagine looking around, developing a sense of the situation they are in, and gradually seeing themselves as more calm. Tell them to see that even though they might feel uncomfortable, they are okay with it and they can *slow down* their thoughts and actions.



Dr. Brian Hemmings has been lead psychologist to England golf for more than a decade and helped develop the mental skills of the likes of Ross Fisher, Danny Willett, Tom Lewis, David Horsey and Chris Wood.

He is also the author of *Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners* and a regular presenter on the PGA's CPD programme. To that end he has devised a highly-regarded online Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate course that carries 100 CPD points. Because it is online, the course can be completed at home - all that is needed is a player to work with.

For full details log on to [www.golfpsychologycoaching.co.uk](http://www.golfpsychologycoaching.co.uk) To reduce the price from £295 to £249 type in the promotional code 2011.