

Play to your Potential in 2006!

My last article, "Seeds of Change", suggested using the cold winter months to take stock of where your game is and offered you ideas to help lay the foundation for a truly great year of golf in 2006. Now that the season is here, it's time to continue to build on that foundation to play the best golf of your life.

The most important requirement for change is setting goals. Where are you now and where would you like to be at the end of this year? Maybe you are a beginner and would like to take one of our popular Novice Clinics. Your goals might include playing the course by the end of the year and making new friends and acquaintances along the way.

If you're an experienced player, your goal might be to transition from a low handicap to become a scratch golfer by the end of the season. Still others may have aspirations to go to Q-School or even play on the Senior Tour. Whatever your ultimate goal is, the key is to put it in writing. It has been statistically proven that written goals are 17% more likely to be achieved. In fact, in each of my weekend schools, one of the first tasks students are asked to complete is to review goal-setting and to create a realistic plan that will take them to their ultimate goal. So before we get into the season, why not take the time to write down what your goals are for 2006? You may just surprise yourself and achieve them!

After setting your goals, I recommend asking yourself what help you need to stay on track. This may include expert golf instruction. If it does, finding an instructor with whom you are comfortable and who also presents ideas in a manner consistent with your learning style is important. We find that students usually favor one of three learning styles: verbal, kinesthetic, or visual. Of these three, the least effective way to learn is through verbal cues. Imagine if you had learned to ride a bike by being given verbal instruction! Good golf instruction will incorporate both visual learning using pictures, demonstrations, and video, and kinesthetic learning using drills and teaching aids.

Assistant Professional Aaron King incorporates both visual and kinesthetic learning by using video technology. An important aspect of setting goals and making change is to establish a reference point before you begin working on your swing. By using video, Aaron helps students see swing changes and visually reinforce drills that they have worked on. To achieve your long-term goals, it is important to break them down into smaller, more manageable goals along the way. Having the ability to visually monitor your swing changes throughout the year guides your progress and keeps you on track.

Head Golf Professional David Sykes also likes to teach using feel and visual cues. David's philosophy of teaching is based on ball flight. By letting ball flight be the guide, he has helped many players to feel the swing changes that best suit them. David says: "I want to help the player understand why the golf ball goes where it does and coach them to take the necessary steps to improve the quality of their shots." Over his 18 years in the golf business, David has taught players of every skill level. Simple, easy to understand golf instruction that allows students to make permanent changes in their game has been his trademark.

Another important aspect of golf instruction that receives less attention is mental game coaching. If you would like to reach your potential in golf, combining traditional

instruction with mental game coaching may pay huge dividends. The ability to transition from the driving range to the golf course is important for golfers of all skill levels. Often a player will spend time on the driving range grooving their swing only to find that it does not show up on the first tee! Aaron recommends choosing your favorite 9 holes from various courses and to play them on the driving range. This prevents you from hitting the same club twice, creates real playing conditions, and promotes good use of visualization skills.

So how else can you work on mental game? A good place to start is by asking yourself, “When do I hit my best shots?” Typical answers may include, “when I’m relaxed”, “when I stop trying so hard”, and “when I don’t care”. Rarely do I hear, “when I focus on my takeaway” or “when I think about my mechanics”. When I coach players who want to be more consistent and play to their potential, I introduce what I call a mental pre-shot routine. A good mental routine helps transition you from thinking about how to hit the shot to actually hitting it. We have found that reducing anxiety or tension, expecting good outcomes, and playing in a relaxed, mentally “quiet” state is crucial when it comes to playing your best golf. Next time you play, try this simple exercise: before each shot stand behind the ball and decide what you want to do and how you are going to do it. Once you have decided, commit to the shot, take your stance, and hit the shot without another thought. After each shot, ask yourself whether you hit better shots thinking about the swing or when you were mentally quiet and only focused on target. You may be surprised by the results!

For those who are not ready for one on one instruction on this aspect of the game, I would recommend the book *Every Shot Must Have a Purpose* by Pia Nilsson. For those of you not familiar with her, Pia coached Annika Sorenstam when she was on the Swedish National Team early in her career. Annika credits Pia for helping her establish a solid mental game.

Why wait any longer to take the first step toward playing to your potential in 2006? Expert golf instruction along with some good old fashioned goal setting may be just what you need to reach your potential.

Doug Hodges is an Advanced GolfPsych instructor and founder of Creative Golf, an organization specializing in unique corporate teambuilding events that use golf as a vehicle to emphasize creativity in the workplace. Teambuilding events and weekend GolfPsych schools are conducted at the Heritage Golf Club. For more information, contact Doug at (919) 453-2020, ext. 11, or visit www.creativegolfonline.com.