

The TNTD on the Mental Game of Disc Golf

(it's a good read if you stick with it)

I have had the privilege of enjoying this game we all love for decades. Nearly forty years of enjoyment, disappointment, elation, sadness, anger, embarrassment, surprise, anticipation, excitement, frustration, disbelief, outrage, basically the entire spectrum of emotions. How can something so fun elicit this maze of emotions?

Simply put, it's **GOLF**. To some a good walk spoiled, to others a life changing sport, to some a happy hobby, but to all a game of highs and lows that is addictive to its core.

During my career, controlling the mental game has been a challenge. I have absolutely learned how to **NOT** act on the course, to my detriment. Only in my recent past has the importance of the mental game really taken hold of my thoughts.

Why?

I think it's because I am seeing the declination of my physical skills and the only way for me to continue to be relevant as a player is to make less mistakes by controlling my mental game. Being in control of your emotions during play is of the utmost importance in terms of the only real thing that matters to tournament disc golfers, ***your score at the end of the round***.

I was looking for keywords to help me during play to remember to stay in control of my emotions. It was not easy but for now I have settled on these five words – **Happy, Focused, Smart, Confident, and Composed** (not decomposed, lol).

Hopefully, some of my thoughts on these words and their potential benefits to your final score will help.

Happy – Solid play begins with the word “happy.”

Before the round begins, you should set your mind on being happy during play, no matter what happens. This takes a lot of mental discipline. We all know how crazy, disc golf related, occurrences can de-rail our best efforts. All too often, unexpected bad shots or bad breaks can push a normally happy person into a place of anger. Once that happens, your brain disengages.

At that point, you have lost focus and only a quick reversal of fortune will remedy the situation, such as making a long putt or throwing an amazing drive. Typically, you play the next few holes in a funk before you eventually regain your focus. During that sometimes-extended period of trying to regain focus, shots are left on the ground. Strokes are added to your score and that feeling of being in free-fall can sometimes result in a complete shutdown. This is when a player checks out mentally and DNF's. This can be avoided with proper, pre-round, mental preparation.

Stretching and warming up are important to being physically ready to play but taking the time to mentally prepare is more important. Ask yourself, “Why do I play tournament disc golf?” Most, if they

are honest will answer, "To win." We all know that winning is fun but let's be realistic. Winning is hard and disc golf is hard but having fun playing disc golf is easy!! Keep the FUN factor in disc golf, it makes staying happy much easier.

But what is FUN about throwing bad shots?

Nothing.

However, a properly prepared mental game will help you realize that bad shots happen. Everyone throws bad shots, how they react moving forward speaks volumes to their final score. Do they get mad, curse, kick their bags, blame everything in the world except themselves? We all know how well that works out. Bad shots are ALWAYS to be categorized as "**user error.**" It wasn't the disc's fault or the wind or the tree or the limb you didn't see, it was your fault. If you mis-read the wind, it's your mistake, not the wind. You threw the shot, no one threw it for you. Mistakes are a big part of the game that affects ALL players. No one is perfect, although sometimes the pros make it look like they are. You have to be cool with the results, no matter the outcome.

Being mentally prepared to sluff off bad shots or bad breaks will help you hang on to happy. Striving to maintain a happy demeanor during play will reap amazing rewards. Not only will your scores improve but other players will enjoy their time with you as well.

"Don't worry, be happy!!"

Focused – Solid play continues when you are focused.

Bringing your "**A**" game, being in the "**zone,**" and many other such phrases have been used to describe a player who seems to be infallible on a particular day. The key to finding these much-desired zones begin with focus.

Focus can be hard to find and even harder to keep. So many things during a tournament can distract a player and cause them to lose focus. Friendly conversation, outside interference (casual park users, etc.), long delays, slow play, and a plethora of other things can cause a loss of focus.

Good focus starts in the brain. Set your mind to create positive energy in each pre-shot routine. As you approach your lie, think about the shot shape, disc selection, arm speed, and angle of release. These are the main keys to any throw. Once at your lie, place the mini and begin the review of your keys. Visualize the shot shape as a tracer line. As you are moving through your run-up and release, repeat the keys to yourself, "solid hyzer, not too fast, smooth release" or whatever keys the shot demands. See that tracer line and let 'er rip! Keeping the positive mental image as you throw will help beat down any negative thoughts that try to creep in, such as "don't hit that tree, don't miss right, don't miss left, etc."

As the round progresses, there will be inevitable ups and downs. Enjoy the ups and forget about the downs. Sulking over a missed putt or bad shot will linger in your mind. Nothing can change the past, it is past, so leave it behind. The next shot demands your complete focus and attention, so give it the attention it deserves. Proper focus ignores distractions.

But distractions are a **MAJOR** part of tournaments!

Yes, they are.

Being mentally prepared for distractions is huge key to maintaining focus. Here are some helpful ways to deal with distractions.

- 1) Slow play – This is inevitable in a tournament, so you must be cool with it. Use the extra time to consider your next shot. Obviously, if a player is taking an inordinate amount of time, the group needs to make the call. Typical tournament pace is slow, so do not let it bother you, it is an integral part of the game and you must find a way to adjust.
- 2) Friendly conversation – Try not to get caught up in too much conversation, don't be aloof, just try to avoid lengthy chats prior to your next shot. The time for talking is when you are walking.
- 3) Casual park users – This one can be frustrating to tournament players. So many times, at public parks, other park users or casual golfers will wander on to the course. Try to understand their point of view and be respectful, even if it does not seem like they deserve it. If you allow them to irritate you, your focus will leave. Always take the high road when dealing with casual park users.
- 4) Long delays – Depending on the course or specific hole, long delays can take up to 30 minutes. How do you maintain focus with such a long break between shots? A good start is to help with the backup. Volunteer to spot, direct traffic, stay active. Do not sit on a bench and chat, this will cause you to stiffen up physically. Keep moving, this will help when the time comes to finally throw again. Go back to your mental pre-round preparation and try to re-focus.

Obviously, dealing with distractions is difficult, as evidenced by the meltdowns you have witnessed by other players in past when things went south. Proper focus ignores everything except the task at hand.

Smart – Playing smart is possibly the most important factor to solid play.

Playing smart or “playing golf” is becoming more critical, especially as course designers are looking for new ways to challenge the next generation of disc golfers. The days of par 3 disc golf are waning as a new age of par 4 and 5 disc golf is emerging. Regardless of what type of course you are playing, smart is always going to benefit you, despite what you might think.

Sometimes playing a round, or on a video version of a recent round played by others, the words “playing golf” will be uttered. Well of course, we are playing disc golf, aren't we? Yes, we are, but sometimes the words “playing golf” can have different inferences.

“Playing golf” from a disc golf perspective is sometimes seen as a cautious way of playing. All too often, players disregard safety off the tee in hopes of the “drive-of-a-lifetime,” that rarely occurs. Consider this wise council - **Be smart off the tee and be aggressive once your drive is safely in the fairway**. Unless you are elite level, which most of us are not, smart golf will provide many rewards. Elite level players routinely make difficult shots look so effortless, that it's easy to fall victim to over aggression off the tee.

Most aggressive drives land in the rough and this was starkly pointed out to me in a recent ball golf outing. I was playing a 4 man scramble, which is basically 4 man best shot. We had a former college ball

golfer, a fellow coach (who can really smack one), a local businessman (also an avid golfer with plenty of skill), and me (a duffer who can't hit it very far but typically controls it fairly well).

I was very excited at our prospects having 3 guys on the team that could crush, odds are one of them would land in the fairway, right?

Wrong.

We ended up using my drive on way too many holes. If any of them had backed off just a little, they would still have outdriven me by a considerable amount. Then, instead hitting 175 yard approach shots, we could have been at 135 yards and in much better scoring position. The reality of things I had been considering about disc golf prior to playing in the ball golf tournament suddenly became very obvious. Staying in the fairway, whether its disc golf or ball golf, pays huge rewards.

If you **play smart off the tee and land in the fairway**, even if it's shorter than you wanted, you can then be aggressive on your next shot. If your drive lands in the rough, aggressive play will inevitably add strokes to your score. Rarely will you pull off the amazing escape shot. What generally happens is you end up hitting something you don't even see and taking a bogey instead of a par or worse.

Fairways and putts, people. **Fairways and putts.**

Smart play isn't just from the tee. Smart play around the basket is very important as well. This was also recently borne out to me by experience. I was playing in a very windy event and laid up on a 25 ft par putt.

Chicken.

Perhaps, but what would have happened had I chased that stroke? In my opinion, I would have missed. It was a difficult, downhill, crosswind putt that most likely would have cost me another stroke by rolling away or being carried too far past by the wind. It was tough to convince myself to do that. So why did I lay up, knowing that my main competitor had already scored a 3 and by laying up I was consigning myself to a 5?

Focus.

Had I missed and taken a 6 (which was highly likely, given my history with putting and the 20+ mph crosswind), my focus would have turned to anger.

Please refer to the "**Happy**" and "**Focused**" sections above

I chose to **play smart** and **stay focused**, realizing that strokes can be made up. Keeping a good mental attitude and focus will have longer reaching benefits. This turned out to be true as I ended up winning the event.

I fully believe that the decision to lay up made a huge difference in the outcome, especially considering this happened on the first hole of round 2. I went from 3 in the lead to only leading by one but had I missed that putt and paid for it like I felt would happen, my lead would have been gone, my focus lost, and the funk would have been in full effect. I have no doubt my competitor would have eventually bested me.

Obviously, things could have been different. I might have made the putt and won anyway. Or made the putt and eventually lost. Regardless, I felt the **smart** play was the layup. Playing smart can be a hard call to make but the rewards are there for those brave enough to back off.

Confident – Playing with confidence creates confidence

So many good players seem to exude confidence, on and off the course. Being confident in your ability to throw a good shot on demand is a huge advantage. Natural ability can create a confident player and proper practice can as well.

I have a little experience with confidence, mostly the lack thereof.

My putting has always been sub-par, and not in the good way. I've always said I'm the worst putter to ever call themselves a pro.

Let's dive into that statement, shall we?

Obviously, I have no confidence in my ability to make a putt when needed. Oh, the blind squirrel adage comes to mind and I have learned over the years to use the old magician's trick of smoke and mirrors (how does he do that?). While I have been very successful as player, I know for a fact I could have been even more successful if I was confident, especially where putting is concerned.

Confidence is a tricky thing to master. Success breed confidence. Failure obviously hampers it. So how do we create and sustain confidence in our disc golf game?

- 1) **Practice.** Practice can take many forms, skill work in a field, playing an STR (Simulated Tournament Round) or by simply playing a fun round with friends. Putting practice will pay huge benefits as well.
 - a) **Skill work** – This is a good way to become better at getting up-and-down. Set up random distances from 100 to 300 ft and work on doing just that. Getting comfortable with these distances will be beneficial, regardless of what course you are playing.
 - b) **STR** – STR's are my main way of playing a practice round. I try to simulate the feel of an actual tournament experience. Being comfortable with the tournament experience, indeed, being **excited** about the prospect of getting to play in a tournament, will help you overcome any negative aspects of tournament play. I love playing in tournaments and would play in one every day if possible. I try to play all my practice rounds like I am in an event, giving each shot my best effort. After I throw a bad shot, Donna will sometimes say "throw another one, it's just a practice round." In my opinion, what better way to gauge the current state of my game than to play each round for score. If bettering your results in a tournament is the reason you are reading this, then consider an STR every now and then. No extra shots, play 'em from where they lie, all tournament rules and procedures in place.
 - c) **Putting.** There really is no better way to improve your score. The game is played around the basket. Get better at putting and you will get better at scoring, **AND** building confidence! A good way to practice putting is to, again, simulate actual game play. Use as many putters as you like from whatever distances you like. The key is to take your tournament pre-putt

routine into each putt. Then, putt out your misses. Count the makes as birdies, the made comeback putts as pars, etc. **Practice like you play.** You don't get 5 straight putts during a round, so why do it in practice? Practicing your form can be done at other times, as necessary. But be sure to take time to practice putting, it is critical. Being able to heap a little self-imposed, fake tournament pressure on yourself during putting practice will make you a better putter!

- d) Fun with friends** – Nothing can take the place of fun! We all have fun when we play or we probably wouldn't be playing. Finding time to simply enjoy the game with friends helps to enhance all aspects of the game. Throw 'em and laugh whether they are good shots or bad shots!

Building confidence comes from throwing good shots. The better you play, the more confident you become. I know that in the era (or error) of ratings, bad rounds can haunt you for a year, until they drop off your ratings detail list. Gone are the days when a bad round is forgotten and can't be viewed online ad nauseum (over and over again until it makes you sick). Regardless of your rating, which I advise you to take with a grain of salt (an old term for not taking it too seriously), focus instead on getting better at each aspect of the game. At age 55, I see aspects of my game that are actually improving, even as I see other things declining (mostly distance). My focus on the mental game has taken on a much more important space in my game day preparation.

So how do I consistently throw good shots?

For starters, each shot has what I call "**Job 1**". There was an old Ford automotive commercial that used the tag line, "At Ford, Quality is Job 1". Those older than 50 may remember it. It occurred to me that every shot in disc golf also has a job 1. For a putt, job 1 is making sure your putt is higher than the rim, or it can't go in. On a drive, hitting the fairway should be job 1. Regardless of the shot, it has a job 1. Your task is figure out what each shot's job 1 is, and do your best to make it happen.

Next, a small amount of visualization helps. Look at the shot provided you. No matter how small, there is always an area I like to call "**usable airspace.**" Determine where that space is and then decide where you want your disc to penetrate that usable airspace. Next, determine the correct disc, type of throw, arm speed, and angle of release. Sounds like a lot to figure out in 30 seconds but you can do it.

Giving each shot the thought it deserves typically results in a good shot. Don't fall prey to risky shots, they rarely work out. Remember, play **smart**.

Playing with confidence begins with you.

Have confidence in your own abilities.

Be confident when you throw, putt, or even lay-up.

Composed - Being composed during play not only helps you, it helps others.

At this point, we delve into the darker aspects of our beloved game, the melt down.

Melt downs are easy to summon and hard to avoid. Playing with composure is a great benefit to any player and I doubt I need to bring up any examples. Remaining composed during play, regardless of how unfair the breaks are coming or how bad you are playing, will absolutely reap benefits. I guarantee your score will improve as well as your relationships with your card mates. Everyone has played in a group with a crabby patty who is complaining and griping and brings down the energy of the entire card. I was that person for a long time, to the **detriment of my game** and reputation. 30 years later, I'm still trying to reel in the negative emotions I feel during play. I can say with **CONFIDENCE**, that I am getting better at controlling those negative feelings. Hopefully, you can learn from my mistakes.

Being composed during play was something I noticed watching ball golf on TV. Before playing disc golf, I was a ball golfer. I watched golf on Sunday evenings whenever possible. There is one particular golfer, Retief Goosen, whose demeanor during play never changed. If he got a birdie, no change in facial expression. Bogey, same face. Hole-in-one, perhaps a slight grin. The point is, you couldn't tell by looking at him if he was having the best round of his career or the worst. He remained composed no matter what. I'm sure he was potentially upset on the inside but he never let it show.

A consummate **PROFESSIONAL**.

Just because we don't all play in a professional division does not mean we can't strive to act like a professional during play.

So, am I to be a robot during play? No, unless your name is Chris Dickerson, lol

Don't get me wrong, emotion has a place in the game but it needs to be tempered by proper thought and self-discipline.

I hope something in this helps you in some way. I can't stress enough the importance of the mental game in golf of any kind, in fact, in **anything** you want to succeed in!!

Play Happy, Play Focused, Play Smart, Play Confident, Play Composed!!

Physician, heal thyself!!

I'm trying folks, I'm trying...

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