

Getting Their Heads In The Game

In August, during the final round of the PGA Championship, Keegan Bradley had a triple bogey on the 260-yard par-3 15th hole at the Atlanta Athletic Club. After a disaster like that, many players might have given up hope of winning the tournament. But Bradley, who was then five shots back of leader Jason Dufner, was determined to keep fighting.

The 25-year-old rookie made back-to-back birdies at the 16th and 17th holes, while Dufner played his last four holes at three over par. In the three-hole playoff, Bradley beat Dufner by one shot.

"I just kept telling myself, 'Don't let the 15th hole define this whole tournament,'" Bradley said.

In his post-round interviews, the new PGA champion thanked his sports psychologist, Bob Rotella, for preparing him for the intense pressure of competing in his first major championship. All week, Rotella, who has been a mental coach to PGA Tour players since 1980, had been preaching to Bradley the necessity of underreacting to anything and everything that can happen on the golf course.

Sports psychologist Bob Rotella has helped golfers get through their bad times. Scott Halleran/Getty Images

"I don't care if you three-putt. I don't care if you hit the ball out of bounds," the 62-year old Rotella told his golfer. "I don't care what kind of mistakes you make. Nothing is going to bother you.

"You're going to be in a great mood and in a great state of mind, and nothing is going to change that."

Seconds after missing his putt for double bogey at the 15th hole, Bradley said he was able to put it behind him and think about hitting the best drive of his life at the next tee.

"A lot of my job is getting players to accept that mistakes are just a part of the story," said Rotella, who is the author of numerous golf psychology books, including "Golf is Not a Game of Perfect." "If you think that you're going to be the first person in history to perfect the game, then what you're really saying is that I don't really like the game of golf."

Julie Elion, a petite mother of two and the founder of the D.C.-based Center for Athletic Performance and Enhancement, had been summoned to Atlanta that week by Phil Mickelson, who needed her help in revitalizing his mental approach to the game. Mickelson had nearly won the British Open in July, but he wasn't feeling like himself on the golf course, and he would soon begin tinkering with a belly putter.

For Elion, Bradley's response to the triple bogey at the 15th hole was one of the most energizing and transformative moments of her nearly 20 years of working with pro golfers.

At the Tour Championship, Keegan Bradley showed a strong ability to focus even after suffering a setback. Sam Greenwood/Getty Images

"How many sports psychologist say 'put it behind you'?" Elion said. "Keegan said that he got energy after he made that triple. That's such a positive statement about what we're trying to accomplish out here as mental coaches.

"That moment was so brilliant and amazing and such an example of how we need to let go of the mistakes. It's certainly made my life easier."

Since the early '80s, mental coaches have been a fixture on the PGA Tour. They have a ubiquitous but quiet presence amongst a brigade of handlers who tend to everything from a player's golf swing to his dry cleaning. Not all of the players employ these coaches, but few contemporary tour players will finish their careers without stopping to chat with one of these gurus on the driving range or in the dining room.

These mind fixers employ different strategies, based on their academic training and the individual needs of the players. But the common element they all share is an overwhelming desire to help their players overcome their fears and anxieties on the golf course, allowing them to play tension free and win tournaments at a world-class level.

On the morning before he teed off for his final round at the PGA, Bradley wanted to talk about his previous week's tournament, the WGC-Bridgestone Invitational, where he had fallen out of contention by shooting six over par over his last nine holes. He told Rotella that he was determined to not let that happen at the PGA.

"I felt really good before he teed off that nothing was going to bother him or upset him," said Rotella, who also works with Darren Clarke, the winner of July's British Open. "Through the ups and downs of his round, he never stopped having fun."

Every mental coach works to tell his or her own story of how the mind worked over matter on the biggest stages of the game.

In the 1998 U.S. Open at the Olympic Club in San Francisco, the late Payne Stewart was in a battle down the stretch with Lee Janzen. At the 12th hole, Stewart's tee shot settled in a sand-filled divot in the middle of the fairway. He finished the hole with a bogey and lost the championship by a stroke to Janzen.

"Payne was convinced that it wasn't fair to have sand-filled divots on the golf course," said Dr. Richard Coop, Payne's former mental coach and a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of North Carolina. "He always thought that he was going to have more of those than anybody else. So I told him that instead of worrying about it so much that he should try to become the best sand-filled divot player in the world."

By the time Stewart arrived at the '99 U.S. Open at Pinehurst, he was an excellent player out of sand-filled divots, making par or better from that lie four times on his way to his second U.S. Open.

"The more prepared you are for something," Coop said, "the less you fear it."

Like Stewart, Keegan Bradley had, with the help of his mental coach, prepared for the bad breaks and mistakes that come often in any round of golf. The Woodstock, Vt., native had made a very sensitive, philosophical choice about his attitude to maximize his performance. But perhaps most importantly, he showed an acceptance of the imperfections of the game.

At the PGA Championship, Tiger Woods was playing just his second event after a three-month absence from the PGA Tour due to recurring knee problems. When he was asked about the mental state of his game, he answered the question with a self-analysis of his golf swing and physical condition. The reporter wanted to know if he still had the same mental toughness to finish off a golf tournament.

Tiger Woods tends to take imperfections during a round too hard. Robert Laberge/Getty Images

"I was frustrated early in the year because -- especially at the Masters ... because I just wasn't feeling well," Tiger said. "But now that I'm healthy, it's so much easier to be more patient because I feel good. I have way more energy because I'm not trying to block out pain and trying to ignore that. I can just go out there and just play golf."

But once the tournament started, he looked impatient and lost -- an angry and frustrated player searching for perfection in his game in places where it never really existed. He was never the straightest driver off the tee, but now he had forgotten how to scramble and get around the golf course with the most basic common sense. Probably the greatest player to ever play the game spent the first five minutes of his interview after a first-round 77 talking about how he could no longer shape the ball! Then he went on about his golf swing and how he misjudged the condition of his game.

"I was three under early, and I said, 'You know what, every shot I hit up to that point were all mechanical thoughts,'" said Tiger, who went on to miss the cut. "I put the club in a certain position, and I was doing that and I said, 'You know what, I'm feeling good. Let's just let it go.' And it cost me the whole round."

No one outside of his small inner circle knows if the intensely private Woods is seeing a mental coach, but judging by some of his comments and the rough way he's handled himself on the golf course in the last two years -- the anger and profanity-laced outbursts -- he's in desperate need of help.

When Tiger was an amateur, Jay Brunza, a clinical psychologist and a good friend of Earl Woods, worked with Tiger on concentrating on the golf course, and he also caddied for him during his run of six straight USGA Championships (three U.S. Junior Amateurs and three U.S. Amateurs). Brunza would use subliminal tapes and hypnosis to help Tiger enter into a "zone" on the golf course.

Over the years, Rotella has often been asked if Tiger is the most mentally tough golfer that he had ever seen.

"I would say that he was the most confident golfer that I had maybe ever seen," he said. "But I also said that we're not going to find out how mentally tough he is until he goes through some really tough times."

Rotella is one of many tour insiders who have, in the last few years, found Tiger to be too obsessed with his golf swing.

"For most of the last 15 years Tiger absolutely did not care whether or not he missed a fairway or missed a green," Rotella said. "He would find a way to make birdie from anywhere on the golf course."

"But at the moment he seems preoccupied with driving the ball straight. That's become more important to him than getting the ball in the hole and winning golf tournaments."

Gio Valiante, a Rollins College psychology professor and a popular mental coach on the PGA Tour, believes that Tiger could have developed a sense of entitlement over the years.

"You have 71 wins and 14 majors and make hundreds of millions of dollars, and perhaps you start thinking that you are entitled to win tournaments," he said.

Valiante, who counts Matt Kuchar, Bryce Molder and Chris DiMarco as students, says the best way to curb feelings of entitlement is by developing a sense of gratitude and humility around the good fortune of playing the game for a living.

Elion shares that feeling with Valiante. Before she sends her players out to play, she likes to tell them "Just feel grateful that this is your life." Elion, who had a psychotherapy practice in D.C. before she started working with professional athletes, believes that Tiger has to forgive himself for the people that he's hurt.

"I think there is still a lot of shame," she says.

But what if Tiger has decided that his problem isn't mental? Maybe it's just his golf swing or maybe his knees. Or some combination of the three.

"There are a lot of players that think that attitude and belief don't have anything to do with it," Rotella said. "They think it's all about their golf swing or putting stroke."

There's a good chance Tiger doesn't believe this. His father, who had a psychology degree from Kansas State and was a Special Forces officer in Vietnam, taught him mental toughness from the time he was a toddler. While that military-inspired training may have helped Tiger earn his nickname as a tenacious competitor, it didn't prepare him fully for life and the adversity that he's faced over these past few years.

It's most likely that in some very fundamental way, Tiger hasn't fully accepted that he's not perfect and entitled. At future tournaments, instead of giving tutorials on the virtues of the belly

putter to Mickelson, Bradley might share some advice with Tiger about accepting imperfection and mistakes, and about the energizing and radiant feeling of being truly happy and having fun on the golf course.

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