

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A RYDER CUP CHAMPION

By Trudi Bannister

As the world's top golfers from Europe and the US strive to gain a coveted place in the Ryder Cup 2008 in September, some questions are raised. What is the attraction of competing in the Ryder Cup? Traditionally, professional golf is an individual sport – how does the emphasis on the team spirit impact the players and their games? What are the secrets to the players' preparation for the Ryder Cup?

The format of the Ryder Cup competition provides four fourball and four foursomes matches during the first two days, and 12 singles matches on the third day. The top ten players from the US and Europe automatically receive a place on their respective team, based on a points system. The remaining two players on each team are selected at the discretion of the team Captain.

Over the past 30 years, 15 Ryder Cup events have been contested. During that time, Europe has won seven times, the United States has won seven times and the two teams have tied once. The Ryder Cup has produced some of the most exciting drama in the game of golf, with two points or less separating the winning team from the losing team in eight of these matches. It has been said by the best players in the world that making a four-foot putt to win a Ryder Cup Match is more difficult than making a 10-foot putt to win a Major Championship.

People today believe that the attraction to the Ryder Cup is so high because it is the only team event in the game of golf with a significant history. And a significant history it certainly has, it is one of the last great sporting events founded on prestige rather than prize money, and spans 34 competitions over



77 years. Sports purists love it for the camaraderie, the pride the players have for representing their regions and the fact that the only prize is the Ryder Cup Trophy.

The Ryder Cup stands apart as it is a team event and players strive to earn a place on the team. The team environment of the Ryder Cup gives a feeling of playing for something bigger than the players individually or their pockets. It is highly evident the players thrive on the team aspect of the event, sharing and enjoying the team spirit and feeling the bond of the team. Earlier this year, Nick Faldo, Ryder Cup 2008 Captain for the European team made comment, "Above all, the European team understands the importance of camaraderie and that is a tradition that I hope to continue into 2008," he said. "We have always succeeded in pulling together as a group of nations that

realise the shared importance of an event like the Ryder Cup."

So, what is it that players do to prepare to compete in the Ryder Cup? If there's one thing that stands out in sports the world over, it's that top performers are skilled at using their minds to sustain a degree of intense focus which separates them from the field. When playing well, a golfer possesses the unshakeable ability to remain in the moment. Their mental game allows them to maintain a balanced perspective on their round and stay committed until their very last putt of the round, with the belief that "it's not over 'til it's over". They demonstrate that they trust the process implicitly.

Without exception, the world's top golfers understand the importance of the mental aspect of their golf game. Polls indicate that expert golfers believe half to 80% of the game is mental. Most touring

professionals dedicate time to their mental game, with the knowledge that it is an absolute necessity to develop this component of their skill base to ensure they are highly competitive.

A vast majority of the world's top players employ the services of a mental coach to work with them on the mental aspect of their game. They utilise well tuned mental game techniques, such as mental imagery and other forms of visualization, to improve their performance, to remain calm, confident, in control and focused and to achieve patience, tenacity, and self-reliance.

These techniques are available to all of us to learn and utilize in our sporting endeavours and lives. The mind plays an extraordinary role in performance in a variety of domains. Your mental approach to performance in sport, and life in general, dictates your habits, character and thus destiny. Working on developing your thoughts and actions can be both liberating and enormously beneficial to your performance and your success. Your thoughts and actions are skills which can be learned, practiced, changed, trained and maintained. Following are some very useful mental game techniques to play your mental game like a professional.

MENTAL REHEARSAL

Mentally rehearsing allows you to visualize and rehearse an event in your mind before it actually occurs. See or imagine yourself playing at your own peak level of performance. Rehearse what you would like to happen. Imagine yourself hitting each shot well. See and feel yourself relaxed, confident and in control. The best time to do this is while you are in the 'alpha state,' as you are going to sleep or waking up. Research indicates that this is the ideal state for learning; when the brain is in a relaxed, but aware state. By training your mind to stay in the present you will be able to focus and concentrate easily to make all the necessary decisions automatically and confidently.

Scientists have found that this method can also improve your swing, because your mind is actually programming your muscles as you

visualize yourself hitting the perfect shots. Because brain activity during the alpha state is the same as during a real life event, what you "learn" or "practice" in your alpha state can be seen as training and preparation for the real thing in the waking world. Your neuronal patterns are already being conditioned.

POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Peak performance = your potential - interference. Notice any negative thoughts/doubts that come up regarding your game or an impending competition. Write down the negative self-talk on one side of a piece of paper. On the other side, write down the opposite positive thought several times. Write and repeat verbally the positive affirmation during the day and visualize yourself achieving it easily and effortlessly.

World number one, Tiger Woods, who will not be competing in the Ryder Cup 2008 due to recovering from surgery, provides an outstanding example of steely mental strength and absolute single mindedness. Tiger's mother taught him Buddhist values to calm and direct his mind. Tiger is extremely adept at the use of mental imagery and changing negative thoughts into positive self-talk.

The Ryder Cup 2008 will be contested in September at Valhalla GC, Louisville, Kentucky, USA. We can be assured it will provide three days of awesome golf viewing. Watch this space for a follow up article on the Ryder Cup later in the year.

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Trudi Bannister spent a great deal of time travelling on the European Tour and the Australian PGA Tour during 2000-2003. Her first hand experience with some of the best players in the world of golf gave her an invaluable understanding of the mental strength of the winning players.

Witnessing the players focus, commitment and ability has motivated her to create programs for both adults and children, to assist others to attain the level of mental toughness experienced by professional athletes. Her work with Mental Notes Consulting

involves teaching at Singapore Sports School and Raffles Institution, along with seeing clients of all age groups privately and working within the corporate sector to deliver programs applying the principles of sport to business.

The team at Mental Notes Consulting (MNC) is passionate about maximizing the ability of individuals to use their mind to its maximum capacity in order to fulfill their potential. We believe that if we can physically train our bodies to become fitter, more skilled, and tougher...mental training can do the same for your mind.

In addition to holding private sessions with clients of all ages and sporting abilities, MNC delivers a number of courses to clients Asia-wide. For example, Mental Toughness for Sport – a practical program to teach mental skills to apply to your sport and life. Mentally tough athletes have a high sense of self-belief, an unshakeable faith that they can control their own destiny and are able to remain relatively unaffected by competition or adversity.

ABOUT TRUDI BANNISTER



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