



John Franks talks us through the pressure of trying to avoid Q-School and offers tips on how to cope with your nerves

THE INSIDE LINE

TIPS FROM THE TOUR

Money, money, money...

Picture this scenario. You're standing over a 6ft putt with hundreds of people peering down at you. If you hole it, you'll receive a £50,000 bonus and be guaranteed the chance of earning huge sums of money next year. But if you miss it, you'll end up with nothing, asking yourself the question: "How on earth am I going to pay the mortgage?" These are the dreaded thoughts that pass through the minds of professionals when their tour card is on the line.

Being at the 2007 season-ending Mallorca Classic was a very "interesting" experience as it provided the last chance for players to rack up enough money to finish in the top 117 on the European Tour Order of Merit to keep their playing rights for the 2008 season.

"Ian finished bogey, bogey, par in the last round to finish one shot shy of making enough money"

I've never heard so much talk about a single subject. Except for when the likes of Paul Lawrie and Andrew Coltart start grilling each other about recent footy results. Oh, and by the way, we're not talking about Man Utd versus Chelsea here, we're talking about Queen of the South (now you all know who Andrew Coltart supports – ha ha).

Players and caddies alike were discussing all possible scenarios for the guys right on the mark. I remember seeing Lee Slattery and Ian Garbutt (who were right in the thick of things) practising long into the darkness on the Wednesday night before the tournament started. As it turned out, Lee and Ian finished 118th and 119th on the final Order of Merit, separated by just €112. It was to prove a heartbreaking finish. Lee missed the tournament cut and Ian finished bogey, bogey, par in the final round to finish one shot shy of making enough money. The end result was Lee failed to keep his card by a paltry €77 and both men were forced to trudge back to Q-School to try and win back their cards, with 180 others for company.

Small comfort

There are thousands of doctors and psychologists out there who will give opinions on why we feel pressure or nervous tension in certain circumstances. Simply put, it's down to your comfort zone – which is a state of feeling you experience while you are performing an activity.

A great example that stands out is often uttered by footballers; that they would rather play a big game in front of 80,000 fans than have five people watch them hit a golf ball. Why, you ask? Because they've built up experience of playing football in front of big crowds and are confident in their ability to perform. But stick a golf club in their hands and their legs will go to jelly. Fear of failure, adrenaline, apprehension, – it's all based on being pushed out of our comfort zone.

Nerve cures

We at StrokeAverage.com have had many dealings with psychologists, each with their own slant on dealing with concentration and pressure.

From performing your practice swing a certain way to picturing shots in your mind's eye. With such a vast array of player personalities, we've found that everyone works differently. However, there are two things which we believe help golfers of all abilities to deal with pressure.

1 Breathing techniques help you control your heart rate and anxiety levels. I'm not qualified to highlight a specific method of doing it but I assure you it helps enormously. Psychologists (some listed below) will promote different methods, either personally or through DVDs and books. Just find one that suits you and practise it.

European Tour psychologists (in alphabetical order): Zoe Chamberline, Alan Fine, Stuart Fomes, Nick Hastings, Karl Morris, John Pates, Jamil Qureshi, Jos Vanstiphout.

2 Perfect the timing of your pre-shot routine so that you perform exactly the same way no matter what environment you're playing in. This will reduce the chance of anxiety levels rising and negative thoughts creeping in. You won't believe how much your routine changes when you're feeling under pressure (either by speeding up or by slowing down).

Have your coach (or a friend) time your routine out on the course under differing conditions and see how much it fluctuates. You'll be amazed. If you fancy watching a player with a pretty solid routine, look no further than Tiger Woods. When you're next watching him on TV, time his tee-shot routine at differing points in the round. Again, you'll be amazed.

Working on breathing and your pre-shot routine will really help you get ahead of your peers. But remember, you must implement them exactly the same at all times, including during practice, playing for fun and competing.

StrokeAverage.com success

I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate StrokeAverage.com clients Nick Dougherty, Ross Fisher and Lee Westwood on their European Tour victories for the 2007 season.

Next time

How good do I have to be to become a tour player? How important is accuracy off the tee really? Should I be averaging less than 30 putts per round? How many greens should I be hitting on a good day? In my next column I'll address these issues – the stats never lie!