

# SIX SECONDS TO SUCCESS

## Emotional Intelligence: the path to better golf

By Dr. Gary Wiren and Minx Boren, PCC

*The Scots take great pride in having brought the world "the game of golf" and, of course, it is a game. But it is also a test. It is a test of patience, character, skill, mind, good sense, physical prowess and stamina but, most of all, it is a test of emotions. The impact our golf performance has on our spirit is extraordinary. When things are going well, we can feel as though we are standing atop Mount Everest. When they're not it's as if we're trudging through Death Valley.*

*This article is intended to assist PGA Professionals as they teach players of all levels to address that challenge. We will be providing you with information about Emotional Intelligence, a learnable set of skills that allows your students to "manage" emotions on the course. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a cutting edge mental technology that has become popular through the works of Dr. Robert Cooper and Dr. Daniel Goleman, among others. Many people are using it to create more success, satisfaction and joy in their lives. My co-author, Minx Boren, and I will be applying its principles, including the use of the "six second pause," to help your students achieve success and find pleasure on the course.*

**T**he magic of coaching is that it shines a light on options and possibilities that may have never been considered as a choice. When it comes to choice, Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a particularly powerful tool. It is like having a couple of extra clubs in your golf bag. EI teaches you to name, know, and choose your emotions in order to make more positive and beneficial decisions in any situation. Instead of reacting to a poor shot or bad break in an ineffective way – such as slamming clubs, berating the golf gods, mumbling self-deprecating remarks or holding anger inside until you are ready to explode – competence in EI allows your students to act sensibly and productively. Emotional Intelligence is about a student choosing, and focusing on happiness, joy, enjoyment and effective, even admirable, behavior in golf and in his or her life.

Don't miss this point: A response is always a choice.

The good news is that by your students understanding and applying EI, they will add more joy to their game and play better.

If you don't believe that emotional calmness and a sensible approach to circumstance are important,

look back at the performance of 2001 U.S. Open Champion, Retief Goosen of South Africa. His emotional control was so evident, that the sports announcers labeled him the "New Easy," as in totally unflustered and easygoing. Are you aware that Goosen was struck by lightning at 17 years of age? His clothes were blown off his body, his glasses thrown 30 feet away and his club shafts welded together. So it may be less of a wonder that, after missing a two-foot putt in the final round that would have won him the U.S. Open, he calmly replied to the press, "It's a game, not a life and death situation." He chose an emotionally intelligent response to put things in perspective.

When our students recognize that they also have a choice, they cease to

### Encourage students to call timeout

After hitting a bad shot, a helpful response would be to choose not to act upon anger. Have your students call a six-second timeout, using a few deep breaths, to allow them to calm down. Then have them seek an effective alternative. Here are three emotionally intelligent steps your students can take in an attempt to recover.

- 1. Strategize:** If you have just hit a ball into a hazard, decide on the best place to drop in order to salvage a bogey. Your student might just wind up with a miracle par. It all starts with quickly focusing on the appropriate strategy.
- 2. Visualize:** Have your students go into the rewind mode. Have them

pretend the ball is there again, make their best swing, and watch the imaginary shot land close to the flagstick for a sure birdie putt. Encourage them to store that picture and feeling rather than the actual one. Then have them visualize themselves successfully executing the next shot – the one that matters now.

- 3. Recognize:** If your student pulls his approach shot into the greenside bunker, then have him or her recognize this as a "creative opportunity." Sometimes poor shots give us a chance to showcase our recovery skills and dazzle our friends with a great "next one." It is all in how you look at it.



be victims reacting less than favorably when confronted with a challenging situation. The following blueprint is a guide to the principal steps in your students managing their emotions and creating more positive outcomes.

### **Name it! Know it! Choose it!**

**Step 1: Name it** – Have your students identify how they are feeling, especially after a poorly executed shot or a bad break, like an unlucky bounce. Are they angry? Do they feel embarrassed or foolish? Are they frustrated or discouraged? By paying attention, they can feel the emotion and its potential for impacting their frame of mind. They needn't deny it, but they do need to recognize it. Have them notice whether they are angry, frustrated, fearful, or discouraged because negative emotions can sabotage their next shot, and the next, and the next - maybe even the rest of the day. How does that happen?

The physiological reactions to emotion are well documented. Every experience is first processed through our amygdala or "reptilian" brain before

traveling further along the brain path to our more logical cerebral cortex. It is our built-in caveman "fight or flight" instinct that first hits us when facing danger and it is geared to elicit an immediate rather than a carefully thought-out response. In life-threatening situations that may be fine, but in golf – and in many of life's other moments – it can be destructive. Our ancient brain doesn't discern between a threat to our ego and a physiological danger.

So what to do? Have your students begin by taking a six-second pause to start the process of making a more emotionally intelligent response. Why six seconds? Because by avoiding a negative reaction long enough and remaining composed, they can stop the primitive brain from opening their biochemical and neurological floodgates which impact their heart, mind, and muscle. What do they do during that pause? Proceed to Step 2.

**Step 2: Know it** – Your students must realize the impact of emotion upon their performance. When they fall into the grip of a powerful negative reaction, their muscles tense, heart rate increases, blood vessels constrict, and the ability to think clearly is impaired – not the best condition in which to hit the next shot or any after that. It should be obvious to anyone who plays golf that negative emotions do not enhance our game. Additionally, negative emotions can also dull our enthusiasm and our resilience, making it more difficult to recover from a bad swing, a bad shot,

or a bad outcome. What is needed is to forestall the reactive process long enough to allow the information to continue along the brain path to include a more logical response. This is not about ignoring or bypassing our emotions but, rather, about marrying them to our logical and analytical thought processes.

Okay, so, after a great drive, your student has just dumped his or her approach shot into the water. To make matters worse, it is the 18th hole and, before the shot, he or she looked like a certain winner. What now? The most emotionally impactful thing your student can do immediately is to take a deep breath, acknowledge his or her anger, frustration and disappointment and know that those emotions are not going to empower your

student to make an effective next choice – one that just might lead to a sensational recovery.

For example, Fred Couples once hit his second shot on a par-5 over the green and out of bounds. He calmly dropped another ball, played a miraculous 4-wood to three feet from the cup and walked off with his par, rather than a double bogey. His response

to the errant shot was a positive and focused choice. Couples' behavior was the kind you witness in competition time and time again from the world-class players.

**Step 3: Choose it** – Have your students determine the response/action they want under the circumstances. The problem is not being able to tell oneself to think differently. It takes a focused awareness of their thoughts and behavior before they can choose to act differently. The bottom line is that they have six seconds to regain self-control and make a choice as to how to respond. Otherwise, that accelerated heart rate and a flood of hormones trigger the ingrained emotional patterns that cause us to react in habitual and often harmful ways. By forestalling potentially negative reaction long enough – not calling yourself a "stupid blankety-blank" or pounding the club into the ground – your student will be able to think more clearly, weigh options, and respond effectively in the moment.

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