

From Driving Range to the Course: How to Create a Reliable Golf Game

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By far the most common struggle for the recreational golfer is the increasingly frustrating challenge of producing the same results on the course that they experience on the driving range. I have worked with enough golfers to know their story well – hours of lessons and practice getting their swing to a manageable place, improving specific problem areas in their game, only to go out on the course and find that their problems still remain (or have even somehow gotten worse!).

This struggle is not unique to golf. In any sport you will find this same challenge of performing in competition the way you do in practice. However, golf has some unique mental requirements that increase the degree of difficulty:

- A competition field (i.e., the course) that is significantly different than the practice venue AND always changing due to weather, who you're playing with, and the format you're playing that day
- 5-10 minutes (or more) of waiting between each one of your shots during a round – ever do that on the range?
- The temptation to become your own personal swing coach a few dozen times a round

Given these challenging elements particular to golf, it is crucial to build certain elements into your game to help you with the transition from the practice range to the course. Although the following list is far from exhaustive, it is a great start toward developing a “course-ready” game:

1. Change the way you practice

As noted above, there are some very important differences between the range and the course. This highlights the importance of your approach to your practice time, whether that involves a couple buckets of balls after work or 20 minutes of getting loose before your tee time.

- *Spend time practicing the way you play:* incorporate your pre-shot routine into your shots on the range. Hit some shots while waiting 5 minutes in between to simulate what happens on the course.
- *“Play” the first few holes:* When warming up before you play, visualize the view from the first tee, go through your routine, and hit a drive. Follow this same drill for an approach shot, and then move on to the next tee. Focus on developing your ability to paint a picture with your mind, and you can stand on the actual first tee feeling like you’ve already birdied the hole 15 minutes before!
- *Introduce some competition into your practice:* Either with your friends or on your own, find ways to compete with something at stake. It doesn’t have to be anything elaborate – hitting to target greens with the loser buying drinks will do. If you’re on your own, try committing to not switching to another club until you’ve hit your target five times in a row. But feel free to get creative with this – the more pressure the better. Lee Trevino said it best: “You don’t know what pressure is until you’ve played for \$5 a hole with \$2 in your pocket.” (For a great read with a ton of options, check out [Trent Wearer’s book, *Golf Scrimmages: Realistic Practice Games Under Pressure*](#))

2. Strengthen your pre- and post-shot routines

Everyone has a list of things they do, consciously or subconsciously, in the 15-20 seconds before a shot. This is also true about what we do after the shot, which is not as common to analyze but just as important.

- *Write down your pre-shot routine and keep it handy during a round:* Some helpful elements include strategizing for the present shot, breathing deeply and slowly to reduce tension, visualizing the exact shot you want to execute, and saying an affirmation such as “I have a smooth, effortless swing.” While this may feel a bit cheesy at first, this is the mindset and attitude you want to build as a player, isn’t it? Or is “Just don’t shank this in the water this time” working for you?
- *Plan out your post-shot routine and stick to it:* Next time you hit a good shot, try savoring it for a few moments. Log it into your memory banks for use the next time you need a shot of confidence. If the shot is not one of your best, it is important to have a routine that leaves that one behind – try wiping off your club (in all likelihood, there’s some serious turf on there from the chunk you just executed) as a symbolic gesture of leaving that shot behind and moving on to the next one.

3. Build your ability to respond well to poor shots and holes

One of the most useful mental skills for any golfer to train is their ability to be resilient. It is no secret that golf is a game of failure, so those that prepare for some errant shots increase their chances of bouncing back.

- *Anticipate poor shots/holes, and have a PLAN:* As demonstrated with the post-shot routine above, simply having a plan in place can help you stay composed and respond well to mistakes. It may take some trial and error, but develop a plan that works for you. It could be a symbolic gesture, something you say to yourself, or simply walking to the next shot by yourself to compose yourself and hit the reset button.
- *Practice staying present:* If you listen carefully to PGA Tour players in interviews, you will often hear them allude to their ability to stay present and take it one shot at a time. As with most clichés, this sentiment is overused because it's true. This is one of the primary advantages of having a dialed-in pre-shot routine: it forces you to stay present and devote all of your attention to this current shot.

Never lose sight of why you're out there. When things start to derail on the course, try to remind yourself that unless you are playing for one of those oversized checks, golf is still a game and you're out there to enjoy it. And you most likely didn't take up the game because you enjoy stomping around in plaid pants, berating yourself for your athletic shortcomings, and jamming your clubs into your poor golf bag.

So, sometime in the next couple of days when you're jones to play is starting to peak – jot down the things you most love about the game: why you play it, the challenge, the walk in the park, the camaraderie amongst your friends...whatever it is that draws you to the links. Take that list and put it on a 3×5 card and keep it in your bag – for easy reference when you need it. Because anybody who plays the game seriously knows that they will need it.



About Matt Long, M.A., M.Ed.

Matt is a mental performance consultant with Health & Sport Performance Associates in Denver, CO. He works with athletes of all levels to help them perform to their potential, particularly when it matters most. A background as a collegiate athlete, high school coach, teacher, and mentor has shaped his consulting style and given him the versatility to work with athletes in any environment. Learn more at www.mattlongMPC.com.