

The Mental Game - Switching Off

Recently I read an article about the leading golfer Rory McIlroy. In it he described the circumstances around his implosion in the US Masters Golf tournament when he was well in the lead and poised to win his first major. He described how his thoughts on the night before were all about the round the next day and what might happen - what could go right & what could go wrong. He effectively said he couldn't relax & he was overly anxious. Being relaxed in sport and allowing the natural technique learnt through hours of practice to occur naturally is important for successful performance. There is a huge difference between planning during practice sessions what you will do when something goes wrong, and thinking about what can go wrong on the night before your match.

Whilst leading an event brings its own set of challenges for players, this article also brought to mind comments made to me by many bridge players regarding their continued thoughts about hands played, or perhaps misplayed during the day or evening of bridge, and the difficulty they have in switching off the mind. Constantly regurgitating the events of the day where things went wrong can be detrimental to a relaxed night. Similarly, checking out who you are playing the next day can also be a negative. For example, if you are an average player and are drawn to play the top seeded pair, or a pair you dislike playing against, in the next day's draw, how helpful is it for you to know that? Will you be more or less relaxed if you know the night before? Will you be better prepared knowing this? It could prey on your mind if you know about it the night before, and it might be better to just look up your draw an hour before play and give the matter some thought at that time. Each pair is different and whilst some will be unaffected by this type of information, others should give careful consideration to what they need to know the night before a match.

We have all heard comments like "Be Positive" or "Think Positively". The reason for this is that the sub-conscious mind will move performance to whatever the conscious mind is thinking about. In shooting I always pictured the target & sight image in my mind that I wanted to have. I didn't picture missing. A high jumper pictures themselves clearing the bar. A tennis player pictures hitting the shot to the corner. Having an image of the desired outcome is an important factor in success.

In bridge the hand reviews often focus on the area where the pair lost the most points. Whilst the importance of review of hands with your partner where mistakes were made cannot be underestimated, consider how often you review and discuss the hands where things went right with your partner. How much better will you feel going into your next match when you know you got lots of things right in the last match. I suggest you try to make sure that you complete your match reviews with at least two hands where your results were great - whether it was a perfectly bid slam, or a good part score result or a nice piece of defence doesn't matter. Finish your review on that note & enjoy your evening. Taking this positive thought with you to bed is more likely to give you a better mindset for the next day of bridge, and a better night's sleep, than if you spent the evening worrying about a hand you messed up on. You cannot change the result of that hand, but compounding the error you made by dwelling on it is unlikely to lead to an improved performance the next day. As in sport, having a picture of a good result, a good hand play or a good bidding sequence is more likely to lead to a good performance in your next day's matches than the converse.