



Swing Thoughts

by Theo Bezuidenhout

The ABC of MAC

In the last edition of Swing Thoughts we looked at how different frames of mind affect your golf. This month it's time to change our focus from problem orientated to solution focused.

Two well-known US sport psychologists, Frank Gardner and Zella Moore, have developed a system they have christened MAC (Mindfulness, Acceptance and Commitment) to deal with the performance inhibiting implications of the different frames of mind golfer's undergo.

However, before we discuss these concepts and how to apply them to your golf, we need to define the concept of experiential avoidance.

Golfers often develop very specific fears for very specific situations. Such as: "I cannot hit a good tee-shot on the first hole". The golfer then starts to see this as an irrefutable truth even though realistically it cannot possibly be true in all situations. The person then starts to develop experiential avoidance or the belief that he will always top the ball off the first tee and then starts to do everything in his or her power to avoid a similar experience.

This may entail teeing off very early or very late to avoid a full clubhouse. It may also take the form of speeding up the pre-shot routine to such an extent that as little time as possible is spent on the tee

box to avoid the possible negative consequences. Lastly, it may even mean that the person gives up the game altogether to avoid the possible negative experiences.

How does keeping the MAC principle in mind then help with combating experiential avoidance? The first thing not to do is to start to believe that your misguided beliefs are the truth that your game is built on. In this regard, mindfulness is the first step in overcoming avoidance.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be defined as "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994)". This may not sound particularly mind-blowing but let's use mindfulness in relation to our example. For this golfer to be able to hit the ball down the middle of the fairway he or she needs to pay attention to what they would like to do with the shot, not the crowd behind them. Secondly, by directing this focus the golfer can purposefully pose questions as to what is most important for a good shot and how only concentrating on the crowd will affect a good swing.

Lastly, by not judging their own response of nervousness and worry as signs of a "bad mind" the golfer avoids the spiral of experiential avoidance and sees the anxiety provoking responses for what they are, namely the mind's feeble attempts to avoid short-term discomfort and uncertainty at the expense of exposing oneself to potentially positive stressors. Think of it as short-term losses versus long-term gains and your mind's misguided attempts to avoid uncertainty at all costs.

Acceptance

To understand acceptance one needs to understand the links between thoughts, feelings and behavioural choices. If our golfer has had a bad experience on the tee the negative emotions and his perceived judgement of not being able to cope with the situation set a schema (mindset) in place of:

"When I tee-off I cannot deal with a big gallery". This may be contrary to some previous experiences but the negative emotion of failure has now been linked to a thought of teeing off and, even worse, it has been linked to a judgment of inadequacy.

In the acceptance phase of the MAC protocol we need to disconnect thoughts from feelings and judgements. The mindfulness phase should help the person move away from judgement at least for the moment. Acceptance in this regard means that the golfer will step away from the shot and internally acknowledge the existence of the negative emotions of fear and anxiety and what the reason is, namely a full and noisy clubhouse.

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He or she will then also acknowledge that it will be a challenge to hit the tee-shot down the middle but that they do have the capability to hit the shot because they have done so many times before.

Lastly, once one can be mindful of the situation and accept the factors that may lead to bad performance it is time to commit to the actions at hand.

Commitment

In this strategy commitment does not mean gripping the club tighter and committing to hitting it as hard as you can. Rather the C in the MAC process refers to the commitment to some form of value or action that makes good performance more likely. In our example this may mean that the player commits to doing their pre-shot routine exactly like in practise or to select the target very diligently because they know that this is a way for them to move away from the distracter (full clubhouse) to the process that needs to be completed (drive down the fairway).

By trying to commit to a simple step or process one frees up mental capacity which you may not have in the heat of battle, in a non-judging and almost care-free way.

So next time you are faced with a difficult shot or wrongful beliefs about your ability try the MAC protocol. I believe you will be excited and surprised at the results. 




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