

The Mental Side of Golf

By [Patrick Cohn, Ph.D.](#)

Playing your best when you're outmatched

How often have you become intimidated by playing a superior opponent in match play? As you stand on the first tee, you think about how you are going to beat someone who you know is a better player than you. You start to imagine how awful it would be if you embarrassed yourself by not playing the 15th hole because the match is already over. Your palms start to sweat, you feel an uncomfortable feeling in your stomach, you begin to get dry mouth, and you worry about topping your first shot of the day.

Intimidation and fear of playing a superior opponent can cause you to tighten up on your club and not make a free swing. During the [1996 U.S. Amateur championship](#) when Steve Scott played [Tiger Woods](#), he certainly could not have played his best if he felt intimidated or did not believe he could beat Woods. In this article I will discuss some mental strategies for playing a superior opponent.

- **Believe in your ability to win**

Confidence is the best antidote to pressure and intimidation. When you are confident, you are not as likely to become scared or fearful. If Steve Scott felt he couldn't win the match against Woods, he should have just packed his bag and went home before the match. He knew he had a good chance of winning. Anything can happen in golf as evidence of the first 18 holes of the 36 hole match when Scott built a nice lead going to the final 18 holes. Always believe that you can win and that you have the ability to win holes. Don't talk yourself into losing



Scott had a lead against Woods, but eventually lost in a memorable finals match.

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before you tee it up.

- **Don't focus on your opponent**

The more you watch your opponent's game, the more you get caught up in "how am I going to beat this player? His or her game looks so solid." This is where intimidation starts -- focusing on your opponent's reputation or superior abilities. This only hurts your confidence. Do what you need to do to prepare your best and play well. Don't focus on what your opponent does well. Focus on what you do well and your preparation.



Nick Faldo and Tiger Woods: two players most wouldn't want to face in match play.

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- **Play your game, not your opponent's**

Steve Scott got to the finals by playing his own game and his own style of golf. He didn't change his strategy because he was playing a superior player. Decide how you are going to attack the course and stick to your game plan. For example, if your opponent pulls out a driver on a hole and you have already decided to hit a three wood, don't let your opponent change you mind about how to play the hole.

- **Play conservative, but aggressive**

Keeping your ball in play and in the fairway is a good start. When you have a short iron into the green take dead aim and be aggressive with the shot. But if you have a long iron into the green, fire at the middle of the green and rely on you putter to do the work. You always want to give yourself a chance -- a chance of making par or birdie. You don't have a chance if you are in the water or deep in the woods.

- **Don't think results**

Don't let your mind wander about the results. Thinking about losing the match or losing a hole only creates tension and indecision. If you want to get good results, focus on the process of execution. Your preshot routine should help you focus your mind by giving you specific cues to follow as you prepare for a shot. You must assess the conditions, select a shot and a club, and narrow your focus on the task. Your mind should be locked into the cues that help you execute a good shot such as taking a practice swing, setting-up, aiming, and focusing on the target.

- **Choose a positive attitude**

A key to a great attitude is choosing to be positive. Many players start with a positive attitude, but as the round progresses their attitudes become negative when they make mistakes. And that only causes more mistakes. In sport psychology, we call this "psyching yourself out." It's a challenge to stay positive and keep a good attitude, but these are choices you make. You are never out of the match until the last hole. Choose a healthy attitude. You will play better and have more fun.

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