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## What is the zone and how do you get into it?

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Nothing is more exciting in golf than shooting a career-low round or witnessing a golfer going low.



**Tiger Woods is the epitome of focus week in and week out.** (Allsport)

When playing golf in the zone and scoring well, golf is fun, immensely satisfying and feels second nature. To shoot a low round, it takes a hot putter and a short game that is more precise than usual, plus a modicum of luck. In addition, it takes smart course management, complete focus on the task and total self-composure.

David Duval found the zone at the 1999 Bob Hope Chrysler Classic when he carded the third 59 in PGA TOUR history. If you saw his round, you are well aware he didn't scramble his way to that magic number.

Duval's ball-striking was impeccable, setting up close-range birdie putts on almost every hole. All but two of his birdies came from 5 feet or less -- and none were longer than 8. He also made a 6-footer for eagle. The damage report: One eagle, 11 birdies and six pars. He found the zone that day.

Even though you may not play as consistently as David Duval, you can still learn a great deal from him and from other pros who have played in the zone and shot low rounds. Grant Waite and Tiger Woods put on a great show during the final round of the Bell Canadian Open when they matched each other shot for shot. Waite finished the week at 20 under and Tiger bettered that total by one. You could say that both were in the zone for most of the week.

How do great players such as Woods and Duval reach such a high level of concentration during tournaments? How do these pros get into the zone and stay there? Let me share with you some of my observations as a sports psychologist.

To get into the zone -- a highly focused state of mind -- a golfer must focus on the task, feel confident in his or her skills, and play the course smartly. I emphasize "state of mind" here because peak performance is based on a golfer's state of mind and level of focus.

A player must be keenly focused in the present moment. He must not be afraid to make mistakes. He has to quickly brush off distractions and be able to deal with the antics of his playing partners. He needs to be able to cope with the emotions and excitement of shooting a low round -- all while trying to win a golf tournament. To achieve this, he would naturally need to prepare his mind for the round, play strategic golf and have the discipline, focus and patience to keep a good round going.

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My experience working with golfers, along with my research on career low rounds, indicates that a certain mindset is necessary to help you get into the zone and score your best. For the last two years, I have been researching the psychology of going low. Here's some of what I have found:

- Great golfers are not limited by so called comfort zones. When Woods gets to 6 under for the day, he doesn't slam on the breaks and try to get it into the clubhouse like many amateurs do. Instead, his mission is to get to 7 under and then 8 under, etc. The lesson: Don't carry any expectations about what you are supposed to shoot on any given day and don't be so score-conscious that you know you are playing better than you expect.
- Players in the zone are able to ride a wave of momentum all the way to the clubhouse. Momentum in golf is confidence squared. It's the belief that you are playing well and you will continue to play well in the near future. When Waite shot 60 in the 1996 Phoenix Open, he said: "Momentum is a feeling of knowing things are going your way; today is my day, let's go. It's that feeling that I am going to do this; be confident that it is your day." Waite again found the momentum last week at the Bell Canadian Open. The lesson: Look for signs that you are on a roll and be confident you will stay there.
- Great players immerse themselves into the process of execution. One of the characteristics of the zone is the ability to become immersed in the present moment on the shot at hand. Woods is a master at this. Did you see the shot he hit out of the bunker on the 18th hole during the final round of the Bell Canadian Open? He could only execute that shot if he did not think ahead about what it was worth in the end if he successfully pulled it off. The lesson: Woods' goal every week is to play shot-for-shot and in the present moment. Results will take care of themselves with this approach.
- Great golfers don't get sidetracked or distracted by the excitement of "the moment." Whether you're shooting a career-low round or trying to win a golf tournament, emotions and excitement must be contained. Players such as Woods, Els and Duval are able to go deeper in a zone and focus when the pressure is on. Nicklaus was the best at this. He was able to channel the pressure of winning a tournament so it would help him go into a bubble of concentration. The lesson: When the heat is on, use it to help you focus more intensely on the task.
- Once in the zone, great players do not back down or jerk themselves out of the zone. Playing in the zone is characterized by momentum, confidence, focus and emotional control. When Woods gets into the zone, he rides it as far as he can go. The thought is "I can't wait to get on the next tee to try to make another birdie." He doesn't get derailed if he hits a bad shot, makes a bogey or hits a drive in the rough. He stays calm, focused on the task and tries to keep the momentum he has built up during the round. The lesson: Don't let one or two mistakes ruin your momentum or confidence when you have a good round in progress.

Email your mental game questions to Dr. Cohn at [pcohn@peaksports.com](mailto:pcohn@peaksports.com)

**Editor's note:** This article is based on Dr. Cohn's next book, *Going Low*.

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