

# A good walk worth watching

Marc Jones and David Lavalley on the psychology of the Ryder Cup

**Mark Twain once defined playing golf as a 'good walk spoiled', yet for psychologists the Ryder Cup between the USA and Europe is worth watching because of the many different elements of psychology at play.**

**From the idea of home advantage through to the stress of competition, psychological factors play an obvious and important role. How might group processes affect team performance? When and how does stress impact particularly on golfers? And what about the fans who will follow the tournament, especially supporters of either team – what emotional and psychological experiences might be in store for them?**

## question

If most (and likely all) of the golfers in the Ryder Cup are anxious, why does the anxiety have a negative effect on the performance of only some of the golfers?

## resources

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The Ryder Cup is a biennial golf tournament in which two teams of male golfers from Europe and the United States compete over three days for the 17-inch high solid gold Ryder Trophy. (The Solheim Cup is the equivalent tournament for women and will be held in September 2011). In the Ryder Cup 24 golfers, each of them wealthy individuals, will compete without payment over three days in golf's most prestigious team event. What psychological factors will be at play both for players and supporters when the 38th Ryder Cup begins on 1 October?

## Home advantage?

From walking into the ground on the first day the atmosphere was something I had only imagined ever experiencing. The hostility I felt as a member of the European team surprised me.' – Paul Lawrie on the 1999 Ryder Cup held in Brookline, USA (www.paullawriegolf.com)

Although all team prizes in golf at the time of writing are held by the United States, the European team will likely feel confident of victory as the Ryder Cup is being held in Newport, Wales. Sports teams typically perform better at home and a glance at the Ryder Cup results since 1979 when the competition took its present form of Europe (rather than GB and Ireland) against the USA shows that the home team has won nine of the 15 competitions (60 per cent), with the away team winning five and one draw. This is in line with percentages in other sports.

Teams perform better at home for a number of reasons (see Carron et al., 2005, for a review), but of particular relevance to golf may be familiarity with the playing conditions, increased confidence and expectations of success by the players, and a perceived benefit from a supportive and vociferous audience. There is emphasis on the *perceived* benefit because, while performers perceive that a supportive audience helps performance, in laboratory-based studies it either has no effect (Law et al., 2003) or performance is actually worse (Butler & Baumeister, 1998). Thus, while the data from the Ryder Cup supports a home advantage this may not be as a result of a supportive audience. Indeed, performers may even feel more pressure to avoid disappointing a supportive, rather than hostile, audience. An illustration of this is provided by Wallace et al. (2005) from another team golf event, the Presidents Cup. After three days of play in the 2003 competition the teams were level and two of the world's best golfers, Tiger

**Woods and Nicklaus show the pressure during the Presidents Cup in 2003**

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Woods from the USA and Ernie Els from South Africa, played in a sudden-death play-off to decide the match. After three play-off holes the team captains, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, felt there was too much pressure on any one individual player and declared the tournament a draw. This was supported by the players' post-match comments (Wallace et al., 2005, p.434). Els admitted that the playoff was 'probably the first I've ever felt my legs shaking'. He explained, 'You look over and see your team. You're like, "I've got to look away". It's unbelievable pressure.' Woods called the playoff 'one of the most nerve-racking moments I've ever had in golf'. He described how he prepared to putt with his redshirted team-mates in the background by saying, 'I saw all this red and I was just trying to block that out.'

### A coactive team game

Although the pressure induced by team-mates can be onerous, golfers in team events often cite functioning effectively as a team to be one reason why they succeeded.

'We played as a team, we dined as team, we talked as a team, and we won as a team... The team spirit this week was the best that I have experienced in this my third Ryder Cup.' – European golfer Darren Clarke on the 2002 Ryder Cup (O'Sullivan, 2002)

The Ryder Cup is an example of a coactive team sport where players perform the skills individually but it is the collective performance of the team that determines success. In this regard the cohesion of a team is important. There is a positive relationship between cohesion and performance, even for coactive teams. Both task cohesion and social cohesion are positively associated with performance, so in sport it is as beneficial to have a commitment to develop and maintain social relationships within the group as it is to be committed to the various task objectives of the group

(Carron et al., 2002). Because of the importance of cohesion for success, sport psychologists utilise a number of interventions to enhance cohesion. Some are focused on enhancing social cohesion (e.g. a mutual-sharing session) while others are focused on enhancing task cohesion (e.g. team goal-setting session). In individual sports like golf, team building interventions are particularly effective in enhancing cohesion as players rarely compete as a team (Martin et al., 2009).

'On tour, you are an individual. You play only for yourself and you lose it doesn't bother anybody else. Now, all of a sudden, you are representing the United States of America. When I stand out there and they raise the flag and play the National Anthem, I get goose bumps.' – American Golfer Raymond Floyd (golftoday.co.uk)

The structure of the Ryder Cup means a range of psychological demands on the players. On the first two days of competition the golfers compete in pairs, and in each match two players from the USA take on two players from Europe, whereas players compete individually against an opponent on the final day. In the first two days of competing in pairs players compete in 'four-ball' matches, where all four golfers play their own ball and each hole is won by the team whose individual golfer has the lowest score, and 'foursomes' in which each pair of golfers plays one ball and each hole is won by the pair with the lowest score. In both team events players will have to work together effectively. For example in the 'four-ball' one golfer may play conservatively to allow his team-mate to play more risky shots, while in the 'foursomes' format players will take alternate shots and the golfers will have to interact to agree on the best tactics for each hole.

In both these types of match, and the final-day singles, the way in which team-mates and opponents interact may influence performance. Emotions can be

contagious among team-mates (Totterdell, 2000), and emotions that help or hinder performance could be transmitted between players. In addition, maintaining positive body language (e.g. erect posture, plenty of eye contact) has been shown to reduce how confident an opponent feels about doing well in a sport setting (Greenlees et al., 2005). The colour of clothing may also be important, and red in particular appears to be associated with success in sport. Red is proposed to have evolutionary significance as a sign of dominance and threat, and wearers of red in competitive sport are more likely to be successful than wearers of other colours (Hill & Barton, 2005) and to be perceived by opponents (Greenlees et al., 2008) and officials (Hagemann et al., 2008) as more likely to succeed. Interestingly, Tiger Woods is famous for wearing red in the final round of every major tournament.

Although golf, particularly outside team events, is typically considered an individual sport, this is a misconception. Golfers, at a professional level, do not compete alone. Although the golfer is the one who executes each golf shot, a caddie will be with the player throughout the tournament carrying the golf bag and working with the golfer on the course, often discussing strategy and technique. Many caddies also spend time with their players before and after a competition during warm-up and post-round practice sessions, often playing a role of monitoring and controlling the golfer's psychological state during competition. The golfer and caddie work together more effectively with increasing familiarity, although this can sometimes lead to an over-reliance by the golfer on the caddie such that the golfer does not take an active role in decision making (Lavallee et al. 2004).

### Thinking time

'When you go to hit your first shot, you can't see the ball even though you are standing over it. You have to tell yourself to hit it, though you're looking down and it's gone all blurred.

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The funny thing about the Ryder Cup is that a certain level of pressure stays throughout the whole week. Normally, that sort of pressure comes and goes in tournaments and you really only feel it on the last nine holes. But at the Ryder Cup, it's there all week, even in the practice rounds. That's why it's so intense.' – European golfer Pádraig Harrington on playing in the Ryder Cup (MacGinty, 2002)

Golf is an interesting sport from a psychological perspective, given the amount of time that golfers have to think about the competition. It can take less than a second to swing a golf club and usually no more than one minute to plan and execute a shot. A golfer will be directly involved in planning shots for about 25 per cent of the time and will be physically playing shots for usually no more than 2 per cent of the time on the course (Bruce, 1998). This 'thinking time' can contribute to high levels of anxiety among the players. However, anxiety need not necessarily have a detrimental impact on performance; as Sam Torrance has said: 'If you are not nervous then there is something wrong with you. Nerves create adrenaline and I told them to use that... to make you feel better, get pumped up, just get psyched up.'

When anxious, athletes' cognitive resources available for a task may be reduced, because of worry (Janelle, 2002) and attention directed to task-irrelevant stimuli (Eysenck et al., 2007). However, if an individual is at least moderately confident of success, performance can be maintained even under high anxiety because an individual allocates extra mental resources to the task (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992).

Understanding how anxiety may impact cognitive functioning is important, but in the context of golf the key issue is how anxiety ultimately influences motor-skill performance. For skilled golfers performance is better if they do not try to consciously control the movements when executing a shot. However, anxiety makes

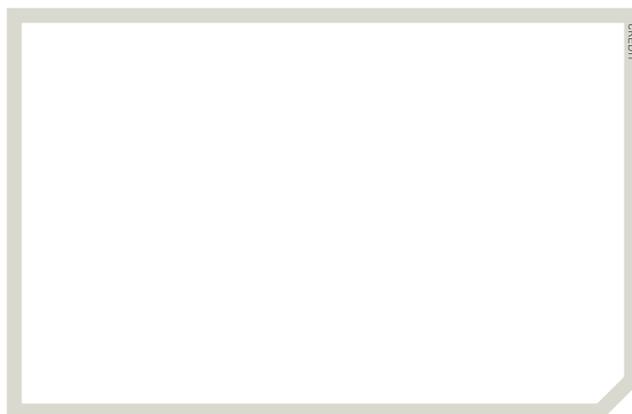
it more likely a performer will try to control movements, which in turn results in poorer performance (Beilock & Carr, 2001; Masters & Maxwell, 2008). Golfers are advised to develop an external focus of attention, such as focusing on the anticipated trajectory of the ball, when executing the shot (Marchant, 2008). Paul McGinley, on holing a six-foot putt to win the 2002 Ryder Cup, illustrates how a golfer can focus attention appropriately during a high pressure situation:

'At no time did I even consider the mechanics of the stroke. Of course, I knew what the putt meant and what it was for, but I became absorbed in the line of the putt... My only job at the moment in time was to set the ball off on the line that I had chosen. That was the only thing I could control.' (Morris, 2005)

There are many aspects to maintaining a helpful psychological state during competition, including controlling anxiety, dealing with anger and maintaining confidence. A number of strategies can be used such as self-talk, breathing techniques, and as American golfer Jack Nicklaus illustrates, imagery:

'I never hit a shot, not even in practice, without having a very sharp, in focus picture of it in my head. It's like a colour movie.' (Nicklaus, 2005)

These techniques are not only used before competition and during breaks in play but are frequently combined, along with behaviours (e.g. wagging the club head a set number of times) into pre-performance routines to be used as the golfer prepares to strike the ball (see



Darren Clarke (right) celebrates with Henrik Stenson on the 16th green on the third day of the 2006 Ryder Cup

Cotterill, 2008, for a review). The aim of a pre-performance routine is to prepare the golfer psychologically and physically for the shot and ensure a consistent (and excellent) standard of performance.

While utilising psychological techniques during competition to maintain performance is on the face of it a worthy endeavour, it may be costly to the performer. Nick Faldo illustrates how regulating thoughts can be an active process, recalling what he was saying out loud during the final round of the 1996 Masters:

'The wheels are going to come off every minute... No, no, no. Don't you believe it. Just focus on what you have to do... What shot do you want to hit here?... I want to hit a solid drive, a touch of fade... Fine good that's more like it... Now, where, exactly, do you want to land it?... left side of the fairway.' (Syed, 2008)

Regulating psychological responses draws on, and depletes, a limited pool of resources that is available for controlling all emotions, thoughts and behaviours (Baumeister et al., 1994). Depletion of this self-regulation strength in one area affects performance in another area. For example, the effect of depletion from a cognitive task (Stroop task), negatively affected performance on a muscular

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Law, J., Masters, R.S.W., Bray, S.R. et al. (2003). Motor performance as a function of audience affability and

strength task (Bray et al., 2008). So being able to regulate psychological responses with as few resources as possible (i.e. by perceiving the situation as a challenge) is helpful because it leaves sufficient self-regulatory resources for other demands (psychological or physical) that may subsequently arise in the competition.

One framework for understanding how athletes may respond and perform in an important competition is the 'theory of challenge and threat states in athletes' (Jones et al., 2009). According to the theory a golfer will experience a challenge state with high self-efficacy, a perception of control and a focus on approach goals. By perceiving the competition as a challenge rather than a threat, the golfer will have less cause to regulate their responses to competition. In short, prevention, in terms of perceiving the event positively so there is less cause to regulate unwanted psychological responses, may be better than cure.

### On the putting green

One area where psychological factors may play a particularly important role is on the green. The old adage 'drive for show, putt for dough' illustrates the importance of putting to successful golf performance. Indeed putting is one of the strongest predictors of golfers' overall score (Hellstrom, 2009). Not only does putting test a golfer's ability to cope with pressure, it is also reflects a cognitively demanding task. Because golf greens are rarely flat, a golfer is required to 'read' the green to determine the 'break' (the change in speed and direction of the ball) as it rolls towards the hole. This is a crucial skill and expert–novice differences in visual search patterns have been detected when reading a virtual (3-D) green. Expert golfers display longer visual fixation duration on the ball just before and as the stroke is performed (i.e. the quiet-eye phenomenon: Vickers, 2007), suggesting they display distinctively different periods of visual cognitive activity during the planning of a putt

(Campbell & Moran, 2006). Expert golfers also benefit more than novice golfers from imaging a successful putt as quickly as possible before striking the ball (Beilock & Gonso, 2008). Taking longer to imagine the putt does not help expert golfers as it allows the golfer greater opportunity to focus on the mechanics of the putt.

The challenge of putting, and doing so under pressure, is recognised by golfers and illustrated in United States golfer Jack Nicklaus' display of sportsmanship in the 1969 Ryder Cup. With the outcome of the entire tournament resting on this match his opponent Tony Jacklin had a very simple 2½-foot putt to tie the match and the tournament. Rather than let Tony Jacklin make the putt Jack Nicklaus conceded the putt. Jack Nicklaus reportedly said: 'I don't believe you would've missed that, but I'd never give you the opportunity under these circumstances.'

### Just a game?

Sporting events like the Ryder Cup are clearly important for those taking part but they are also important for those watching who identify with the teams involved. People derive part of their self-concept from the social groups and categories to which they belong (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This social identity is part of 'who we are' and contributes, along with our individual attributes to how we see ourselves. We are motivated to maintain a positive social identity and do so by ensuring a favourable comparison with other groups. In the case of the Ryder Cup we have a continent and a

superpower competing in a sporting arena. For those supporters who identify strongly with the teams involved, the event will not only be an emotional experience but may also have a substantial influence on well-being. While no data has been collected on golf team events there is a large body of research from other sports. Supporters of losing football teams typically report higher levels of negative emotions and lower levels of positive emotions than fans of successful teams (Kerr et al., 2005), and testosterone levels increased in the fans of winning basketball and soccer teams and decreased in the fans of losing teams similar to that which would be expected in the actual competitors (Bernhardt et al., 1998). More seriously, football game outcome has been shown to influence myocardial health negatively in losing fans (Carroll et al., 2002), and positively in winning fans (Berthier & Boulay, 2003). Clinically significant levels of distress have been observed in fans of teams who have been relegated from the English Premier League (Banyard & Shevlin, 2001). While we do not know whether supporters will identify with the Ryder Cup teams in the same way they would local or national teams that compete frequently, it is possible that those watching and supporting will experience similar emotional and physiological changes to those taking part, and the outcome of the competition may influence the well-being of many people in Europe and the United States. Your authors at least, as a European and American respectively, will experience the full range of responses by the evening of 3 October.



**Marc Jones**  
is Reader in Sport Exercise Psychology in the Faculty of Health, Staffordshire University  
marc.jones@staffs.ac.uk



**David Lavallee**  
is Professor and Head of Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Aberystwyth University  
david.lavallee@aber.ac.uk

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