

# WHY GOOD GOLFERS ARE FOOLS

BY BOB CARNEY

The happiest golfer I ever knew was Peggsy. "Isn't this the greatest?" was his mantra from the parking lot to the last putt, no matter the weather or what he shot. Peggsy was not only the best player on our high school team, he was also the luckiest. Twice we saw him bounce balls off power lines and back into the field of play. Who does that? We'd roll our eyes, yet we sensed his 6-handicap wasn't all magic. There was something about his indefatigable mood that made him hard to beat. Turns out, there's scientific proof this "happiness edge" exists.

First off, if you're waiting for good golf to deliver happiness, know that it works the other way around.

"We need to reverse the formula for happiness and success," says Shawn Achor, Harvard researcher and author of *The Happiness Advantage*. "Your brain at positive performs significantly better than it does at negative, neutral or stressed."

Some golfers have always known this. Like five-time Open Championship winner Peter Thomson, who said, "You can think best when you're happiest."

Of course, most golfers (most people, really) tend to focus on imperfection, an action often encouraged by teachers, bosses and coaches.

"We have identified 19 flaws in your swing," one high-tech analysis service recently told my friend before suggesting a series of lessons to fix them.

We laugh when we hear Tour players say, "I was just trying to have fun out there," but that mind-set is yet another reason they're on TV, and you're not.

"When the brain is negative, you split its resources between processing the action at hand and processing the negative thoughts," Achor says. "When you're positive, your brain can use all of its power to focus on learning and looking for opportunities."

Happiness has been a booming book business since Norman Vincent Peale published *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952.

Nevertheless, the recent studies Achor and others cite to support their conclusions are startling: Nuns with more joyful entries in their diaries lived longer; happier doctors made the right diagnosis twice as fast as other doctors; cleaning crews told they were getting lots of exercise by simply doing their jobs lost weight, but co-workers who were told nothing lost nothing; four-year-olds told to think of something happy completed tasks faster and with fewer errors; thinking positively increases peripheral vision. And on and on.

So why do golfers think they need to be tough on themselves to get better? It starts with how we "model" experience, says Dr Srikumar S. Rao, author of *Happiness at Work*.

Our constructs about how things should work send us down the path of what's missing rather than what's working.

"We have notions of how to get a job, how to marry, bring up children, choose a restaurant, etc.," Rao says. "These constructs are wonderful time-saving devices. The problem is, we don't recognise them as such. We think, This is the way the world really works."



(For the record, my friend Peggsy, now Dr James Peggs of the University of Michigan Medical School faculty, was rejected by that school when he applied as a student. Who else but Peggs would cheerfully apply again as the logical next step?)

Our concept of how to play good golf – how tee shots ought to look, how pars are to be made – is just a construct, too.

"We have a negativity bias. We store negative experiences in a way that is more lasting than positive ones," says Lynn Marriott of Vision54, who with Pia Nilsson has coached players such as Annika Sorenstam, Suzann Pettersen and Kevin Streelman.

Ask a friend about his round, and listen if his lead anecdote isn't about a missed putt or some other blunder. In *The Happiness Advantage*, Achor describes the Tetris Effect after an experiment in which video gamers reported viewing the whole world as Tetris, or as an endless onslaught of puzzle pieces.

Achor says that professionals who spend their lives searching for mistakes – accountants, lawyers, teachers – tend to do the same when engaged in leisure activities.

With golf it can work in reverse. Get good at finding flaws in your swing, and you become like the lawyer who comes home and deposes his kids.

Turning it around, say the experts, begins by identifying the kind of golf that combines success and enjoyment for you.

Marriott and Nilsson ask students to "inventory" elements for each round. How did you warm up? Who were your playing partners? Was your decision-making aggressive or conservative?

"It's not that every good round will look the same," Marriott says. "But so many golfers never stop and ask what is it that they do when they play well."

In corporate consultations, Achor promotes the Zorro Circle of improvement. (Your office is a mess? Clear a corner of your desk.)

"Try to fix your whole swing and you'll lose it," Achor says. "But if you're able to defend just one area of success, like correct grip pressure or breathing right, your brain starts being able to expand to other areas. Small victories for the brain give it the belief that our behaviour matters."

That's what Scott Barry Kaufman, scientific director of the Imagination Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, calls "having a learning goal versus a performance goal. When you focus on the learning goal, you tend to be happier."

This is the wisdom behind Tour-pro platitudes like "I'm just staying with the process" and "not worrying about the result."

The last piece of the golf-happiness formula might be the simplest: Exercise being grateful. "This is not 'happy-ology,'" Kaufman says. "It's not all about niceness and smiles."

Indeed, the deepest sense of contentment, he says, derives from acting for a larger purpose.

For Bill Gates, that might mean eradicating malaria. For you, it might be as unassuming as improving your health. Or teaching a child a great game. Or exploring an element of your personality (patience, perhaps) you'd like to be stronger.

"Look, you have a choice," Rao tells me. "Maybe you played a round where you fozzled every shot. You

want to break every club. You can stew in it. Or you can say, 'Well, I did my best. I'll come back and do better next time.'"

That's so artificial, I protest. Aren't you just fooling yourself?

"Of course you're fooling yourself!" Rao shouts. "You're always fooling yourself! Why not fool yourself in the right direction?"

Isn't this the greatest?



Zach Johnson – New Pro V1x  
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