

HOW GREAT GOLFERS THINK
PERFECTING YOUR MENTAL GAME

by Bob Skura

Chapter 1

Golf's Mentally Illiterate

“Where’s the scorecard?” grumbled Andy.

“Frank’s got it, and he’s in the shower,” Kip said, trying to hold back a smile.

“I hope he’s washing away his bad shots,” Andy wisecracked. “I think we lost all the bets to you and Jason today.”

Every Saturday morning for the past two seasons, Kip, Jason, Andy and Frank have played 18 holes together at the River Bend Golf Club in Aurora, Ohio, a beautiful university town on the outskirts of Cincinnati. Afterward

there are usually a few bets to settle over a light meal. However, this Saturday was different; it was the Saturday of Master's Weekend, the official start of the season for most golfers, bringing with it hope for rebirth on the golf course. Frank appeared from the locker room, his graying hair still wet, and joined the others. He flicked the foursome's scorecard onto the table and with an audible sigh slumped into a chair. "Good grief. That was a rough day."

Kip took the card and started tallying it up, while Jason angled his lanky body so that he could see over his friend's shoulder. "According to this," said Kip, "we won the front, the back and the overall. Plus you pressed us once. Dig deep, guys. That makes it four ways."

"Big deal. We'll get most of it back," replied Andy. "The winners have to buy the drinks."

“Yeah, one of these days we should change that tradition,”
Kip chuckled. “I can’t win for losing.”

A natural talent and determined to achieve, Kip Raston is the glue that holds this group together, for the simple reason that he’s the best golfer of the four. At 24 years old, he’s a successful sales rep for an industrial parts manufacturer, a job he’s held since graduating from a Big Ten college, where he captained the golf team. Yet even though he had an impressive college record, Kip has never won a national competition or even one outside his own state. With an athletic, 175-pound body enhanced by a faithful exercise routine, he has all the physical attributes to succeed. But Kip feels his full potential is held back by some elusive mental skill he can’t quite put his finger on. Nevertheless, Kip’s game is a treat to behold. On the days he really gets it going, his friends just watch his shots and shake their heads in awe.

Frank was staring at the table now with the frustrated look that a bogey, bogey, bogey finish tends to cause. “I guess it’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks,” he said, shaking his head. “You know, I’ve played golf for 45 years. I know more about the game than I ever did, and my scores still go up. What does it take to get better at this stupid game?”

A 58-year-old recently retired teacher, Frank is a walking golf encyclopedia. Given that his parents impressed the value of schooling on him, that’s no surprise. He’s tried almost every swing technique ever taught, and carries an eight handicap, though at one time it was considerably lower. Over the past few years, the frustrations of the game have eroded his enthusiasm, just at a time in life when he has the opportunity to enjoy golf most. He tries to put on a brave face, but for him the sport just isn’t what it once was. In fact, if weren’t for the energy he absorbs from playing with these friends on Saturdays, he probably would be playing very little golf.

Jason saw an opportunity to egg Frank on. “I thought you said you had it all figured out on the range this morning. To hear you tell it, you were striping it like Fred Funk, but you ended up playing like Freddy Flop.”

“Very funny, hotshot, but as I recall, you had it under par for a while, then turned a 71 into a 75. You can’t be happy with that score.”

Frank’s comment hit a nerve. “Yeah, I think maybe I need another lesson,” Jason conceded, becoming a bit quieter.

Jason is a typical 17-year-old. He’s excited about his future and naturally confident that he can do almost anything, yet occasionally anxious, wondering if his dreams really will come true. All the same, he’s talented. Jason’s rapidly improving game over the past year has brought his handicap down to zero – two behind Kip’s plus two.¹ Since he’s nearing the end of his junior career, his talent, plus his above-average size, makes him a big fish in a small pond.

So he's trying to win everything he can in his age group before moving on to the next level.

"#@%! the lessons. Just go out there and have a good time. That's the way I play," Andy proclaimed, raising his glass. "By the way, boys, thanks for the drink!"

Andy is one of a kind. Thirty-nine years old and nurturing a solid spare tire around his middle ("a low center of gravity," in his words,) he's the owner of a roofing company. Golf-wise, he's a 14 handicap and claims to be very serious about the game, but really only shows it for the split second it takes him to swing a club. The rest of the time, Andy's usually looking for some way to keep the mood of the group light-hearted, and he generally succeeds.

"Hah!" Frank responded. "You play for the fun of it, do you, Mr. Volcano? Just how many clubs has fun-loving Andy broken so far this year? According to my calculations, you snapped your driver over your knee on

your winter vacation. Then, in your first game back home, you threw your five-iron into never-never land, and just last week you mortally wounded your putter. Some fun, huh?”

“Sounds like our Andy all right,” Kip chuckled. “But you know, besides the lessons we’ve invested in, I bet we could start a pretty good retail outlet with all the clubs, books, videos and swing aids we’ve bought over the years. And tell me: Have any of them actually helped?”

“How come you’re trashing swing aids and instruction magazines? I think they’re awesome.” Jason countered. “Isn’t that why all the players are so good these days?”

“Okay, so they help out some people,” conceded Kip. “But why aren’t guys like us improving more? Like Frank said, we learn more about the game and swing mechanics every day, yet after the age of about 21 or 25, the average player doesn’t seem to get *that* much better. I wouldn’t say I’m slipping, but I’ve sure started to notice that my

improvement has started to level off in the past year or two. The swing aids are helping you now, but probably anything would help at your age. I think we need something more, and I think there's something extra to help you too. You could use a better mental approach. You've even told me so!"

"Forget about it," Andy persisted. "You guys are going about it all wrong. Just ante up for a new driver every spring and buy yourself a game. I wouldn't go in for any of that brainy stuff."

"Brainy stuff? No kidding, partner!" Frank smirked. "Your 95 today certainly wasn't too brainy for a 14 handicap. It's a good thing I'm not your partner every week. I'd go broke."

"Who's worried? I've got lots of room to improve," Andy grinned. "Kipster here beat me by 25 shots today. He's so good he doesn't have anything to look forward to."

Kip dismissed Andy's comment with a wave of his hand. "Huh! You think we're that good, do you? Jason and I won the bets today, but my game wasn't anything to write home about, considering how easy the course played. We're just fortunate that the way you guys slapped it around, we could've beaten you with a couple of brooms, an apple and an orange."

"I don't know what you're complaining about, Kip," Jason said with surprise. "With the scores you shoot and the tournaments you've won, what else do you want?"

Kip looked off into the distance, as if trying to bring some internal image into focus. "You know what I really want, Jason? I really want to play in the Masters!"

With his drink stopped halfway to his open mouth, Frank slowly turned toward Kip. "*You* want to play in the Masters? *You*?"

Andy had a less subtle response. “Buddy, there’s more chance of me being elected president of the United States than you playing in the Masters, and my chances are zero. Although, in my case, it’s not lack of ability. People just aren’t ready for my razor-sharp mind.”

“That would be awesome, Kip,” said a wide-eyed Jason. “But how would you ever get into a tournament like that?”

“A lot of people forget,” explained Kip, “that a non-professional can earn a spot in the Masters through the U.S. Amateur. The winner and runner-up traditionally get an invitation to play the Masters the following spring.”

Kip smiled and turned toward the group’s jester. “That gives me two chances every year to do what I want to do, Andy, while you could only be elected president once every four years. You know, I could win the Amateur, do the talk-show circuit, and be back in time to organize your presidential campaign. How would you like that?”

Without waiting for an answer Kip turned back to the others. “Let’s face it, every amateur dreams of playing at Augusta one way or another. Every professional wants to get there, too, and win, to be immortalized in the history of the game. Can you just imagine what it would feel like driving up Magnolia Lane toward the clubhouse? They’d put you up in the Crow’s Nest,² where Palmer, Nicklaus and Woods stayed as amateurs. Then you’d get to tee it up in the tournament. Man, I’m telling you, that would be like dying and going to heaven.”

Frank and Andy were noticeably less skeptical than before, while Jason, awed at the possibility, kept pressing for how such a dream could come true. “It would be fantastic just to know someone who played in it. What do you think you’d have to do to finish first or second in the Amateur and get invited?”

“Obviously, I’d have to play better than I do now – a lot better! My approach to the game has to be different too.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately, and I've decided I need some out-of-the-box thinking. After all, that's how breakthroughs seem to come about in the business world."

Kip leaned forward in his chair. "From what I understand, Nylon stockings weren't invented by the hosiery industry. They were invented by DuPont, which was an explosives company until it got into chemical research."

"You've lost me," said Frank, pausing to put his glass down. "What does that approach have to do with golf?"

"Lots," Kip replied. "The best golfers of all time thought outside the box too. Hogan practiced when everyone else just warmed up. Nicklaus was pacing off yardages when everyone was guessing at distances. These days we have Tiger proving that physical conditioning isn't only for football players."

Then, speaking very deliberately to make a key point Kip said, "Someone should take ideas from psychology,

teaching, business, self-improvement, plus who knows what other disciplines, apply them to the mental side of golf instruction and take it to a whole new level. That would be thinking outside the box. If I ever find a person who does that, I'm going to sit on his doorstep until he teaches me everything he knows."

"What's caused this sudden burst of thinking, Kip?" asked Frank. "Like Jason said, I thought you were pretty happy with your game."

"Oh, I've thought about it before, but what got me thinking about a higher level lately was something I came across in a magazine the other day. The article was called "How Mentally Literate Is Your Golf Game?" It had a quiz in it. I don't remember the name of the guy who wrote it, except that he had a short nickname, like someone you'd expect had been at the books for a while. Anyway, I can't resist a challenge, so I picked up a pen and started trying to answer questions like: How can you improve your self-talk? How

do you build a strong self-image? What do top ranked athletes do to get into the zone?

“I tell you, not only was I unhappy with the answers I came up with, but I also realized I don’t even think along those lines. After going through the questions, I was really frustrated. It’s not that I really expect to beat Tiger Woods, although, come to think of it, I wouldn’t object if his body inhabited mine for a tournament or two. It’s just that if I could answer those questions better, I know I could make a real breakthrough.” The others were listening intently now, and nodding their heads as Kip’s ideas began to take shape. “I think every golfer feels the same way. We all hope to discover the magic secret that’ll propel us to another level, but how’s that ever going to happen if we keep doing the same things today that we did yesterday? **We need a two-pronged approach of both physical *and* mental improvement if we want to get better.** The best swing lessons in the world won’t do it on their own.”

Andy became more serious than usual, exposing a hint of vulnerability in front of his friends. “Not a bad point, Kip. I might buy into this mental stuff if it could get rid of my slice. Can you guarantee me that?”

Leaning close, Kip replied in a near whisper. “I’m not sure about helping it, but I can guarantee you this...”

“What?” Andy said, also leaning in.

“...nothing could hurt it!” Kip boomed, slapping Andy on the back.

Andy recoiled and frowned at his sparring partner. “You know, you should show me more respect. I’m older than you are.”

”Aye, aye, Sir. From now on I will,” Kip promised unconvincingly. “Seriously, though, playing in the Masters might be a stretch, but what if? Even if there’s only an

outside chance to get there, it has to be worth a try. There's nothing to lose."

"You know, Kip, you're smarter than you look," Frank teased. "If I think back, I used to tell my students something along those same lines. I'd say to them that there was something special in all of us. I could have just as well said, there's a 'Masters' in every one of us. Who knows what the key is for each individual, but there's probably a personal goal that can give each of us the fresh approach to the game we had when we were just starting to play. We just have to find it. Even our good buddy Andy here, with all his kidding around, knows it too."

"Hey, I appreciate that professor," replied Kip. "So how about some advice? If you were in my shoes what would you do? Where would you start?"

"Well, what none of us have probably ever done is gone to our pro and asked him for help with our mental game. Sure,

we've tried to steal ideas from him from time to time, but we've never had a serious talk about it. Let's get Robbie Owen in here and see what he has to say. Maybe he can help us out."

Frank's idea seemed to make sense. After hearing his suggestion, Kip stood up. "That sounds like a great idea. I'm pretty sure Robbie's in the pro shop now. I'm going to tell him what we've been talking about, and see if he has time for a little chat."
