The Mental Game

by Kim Frazer

Comfort Zones

In sport we hear people talk about "comfort zones". Everyone has one for pretty much everything they do. It is part of your self-image. In sporting terms, a comfort zone is created from one's experiences, skill level and prior performances.

If we consider a golfer who always scores between 70 - 75 for a round of golf, we would say that is their comfort zone. They are happy scoring in that range. If they are having a particularly good round and are likely to score below 70, there is a high probability they will have a disaster on one hole towards the end of the round. This is due largely to the increased anxiety brought about by being outside their comfort zone. This anxiety will stop them scoring better than their "usual" result.

Similarly if they have a poor start, they will finish strongly to allow them to finish within their comfort zone.

This is often less about the individual's skill, and more about their self-image and their comfort zone. Their self-talk (the little voice inside their head) will say something like "It's not like me to score 40 on the opening nine holes", and the competitor will focus properly and pull their score back in the latter half of the round to finish with 75 - right on their comfort zone.

Breaking out of your comfort zone is one of the most difficult aspects any competitor contends with, and it is a significant factor in preventing competitors from improving and achieving their goals, assuming skill and technical ability are sufficient.

Many times we see players in all kinds of competitive events falter when in a winning position. It is commonly called "choking". Whilst there may be many factors at play, including the player's prior performances, often this collapse is all about the player's comfort zone. The anxiety of being outside that zone causes the athlete to fail, rather than the comparative technical ability of the players.

If we are used to running mid-field and all of a sudden we find ourselves in the lead, or playing the top team or pair, our anxiety level may increase, and this may cause errors to occur that we would not make when playing against players at our "usual" level. If we are playing a duplicate session at our club, we are more likely to be relaxed than if we are playing in a major tournament.

How can we lift our "comfort zone" to increase the likelihood of success?

Unfortunately there is no magic fix. Lifting your comfort zone requires hard work and development over time. A number of elements are involved and each must be addressed:

1. Work on improving your technical ability in cardplay. For example, learn how to play basic card combinations, practise counting out the hand, and so on.

2. Have simple system agreements and general principles that can be easily remembered and applied in many auctions, to reduce the likelihood of errors when under pressure.

3. Increase your exposure to being outside your comfort zone. It's fair to say that the more frequently a player reaches the finals, or plays in more difficult or competitive situations, the more likely they are to "break through" and win. However, putting oneself in pressure situations by playing against stronger players, playing in a more competitive field, moving from the "weak" side to the "strong" side at your club, playing in Open rather than Restricted events and so on can also assist.

4. Learn to maintain focus on the current hand and don't be distracted by thoughts of winning or allow other factors to distract you from the task at hand (see May 2014 Newsletter on *Maintaining Focus*).

5. Learn to relax at the table. Whilst relaxation will be a topic for a future article, in the meantime a few deep breaths go a long way to helping you to relax at the table.

6. Imagining yourself in situations outside your comfort zone is also helpful. For example, picturing yourself playing on Vugraph or behind screens before you have to do it will help you be prepared for the real thing. This is commonly known as visualisation in the sporting world, and a future article in this series will focus on visualisation and how it can assist your performance.

The most important thing of all however, is believing you are good enough to win.

My thanks to Sartaj Hans and David Morgan for their assistance with the articles in this series.