



# Get yourself a game plan



BY CLIVE AGRAN

**Have you ever stood over a four-foot putt and wondered to yourself: "Will I miss it to the left or the right?" If you have, then the chances are your mental attitude is not all that it ought to be**

AS we know, golf is played in the head as much as it is on grass. That's because the ball sits there and does nothing unless we do something. The golfer has to make the first move. In sports where the players essentially react and respond, there is a lot less thinking time and therefore, in my belief, less scope for worry.

Take football for example. The ball is crossed over from the wing and you, the striker, dash in to try to thump it into the back of the net. Your reaction is primarily instinctive and the speed of your reflexes will largely determine whether or not you score. Now, stick the ball down on the penalty spot and there you have the footballing equivalent of a putt to win the Open Championship. Whether or not you succeed will, in part at least, be determined by what is popularly known as your mental strength.

Although football and other sports undoubtedly have a mental component, in very few is it as pronounced as it is in golf. And yet we pay so little attention to it. Whereas we feel virtuous for hitting half-a-dozen practice putts and the same number of chips before we go out and play a match, how many of us bother to prepare mentally? Tour players do, of course, and there is a burgeoning army of people happy to help them and

take a fat fee at the same time. Some are good, some are very good, while others, one suspects, are simply first-class salesmen, expert at telling players what they want to hear.

The problem for the handicap player is where to go for help. There are a few good books on the subject: *Golf is Not a Game of Perfect* by Bob Rotella is probably the best. But where do you go for some personalised advice specifically tailored to your peculiar needs?

Until recently, the only option was to go to a sports psychologist, assuming you could both find and afford one. Now the internet has ridden to the rescue with [www.mindfocusforgolf.com](http://www.mindfocusforgolf.com). The brainchild of qualified sports' psychologist Simon Houghton, who has spent the last two years and substantial sums of money putting it all together, it offers expert advice to players of all abilities.

In a rare display of determination and commitment that would have silenced my critics, who regard me as equivocal at the best of times, I invested a modest £49.99 and signed up for 12 months (there's a 30-day, full money-back guarantee if you're not completely satisfied) and was immediately confronted with some awkward questions. "How

mentally tough are you? For example, when you're four down with five to play?" Personally, I'm inclined to quit when I'm one down and five to play.

Completing the online assessment's 62 pertinent questions was both fun and revealing. There are six categories that range from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. I scored badly on 'mental preparation' but respectably on 'relaxation' and 'imagery'. A compromiser by nature, I elected for the middle road when it asked how dedicated I would be and positioned myself somewhere between curious and totally committed.

Unlike a lot of websites, this one was extremely easy to negotiate and metaphorically held my hand as we navigated around. It asked me to choose a title for my game plan and I opted for the rather gritty 'Toughen Up'. It also wanted to know how long I wanted this part of the programme to last and I chose two months. I also selected 'mental preparation' as the area I most wanted to work on.

The site patiently explained the importance of setting goals as a way of helping focus time and energy. To be a better player, it explained, was a poor goal. Being more specific, like

deciding to take three shots off my handicap, was much better. It allowed me to set my own Game Plan goal. Although, rather like the psychologist's couch, this really is confidential between me and [mindfocusgolf.com](http://mindfocusgolf.com). In the interest of 'the truth', I am prepared to reveal that my stated goal was "to be relaxed and confident on every shot".

I was offered three mental skills to work on:

- 1) A pre-shot routine to help develop consistency.
- 2) A pre-competition plan so that I am better prepared both mentally and physically.
- 3) Using smart goals to plan my preparation for an important match or competition.

It's only a minor point, but one of the things I like about the programme is that it keeps calling me "Clive." It's a nice, user-friendly touch and typifies the care and thought that has gone into devising what is clearly a very ambitious product. Another nice touch is the e-mails it sends me, which politely check on my progress, stop me slacking and even ask how I played at the weekend!

More seriously, it also supplies a steady stream of articles, videoclips, downloadable templates and various stuff that promises to make me a better player, er, I mean, an even better player.

WANT TO TALK TO CLIVE AGRAN ABOUT HIS COLUMN OR ANY OF HIS PREVIOUS ARTICLES? DROP HIM A LINE AT: [CLIVEAGRAN@AOL.COM](mailto:CLIVEAGRAN@AOL.COM)