

First Tee Nerves

Many view first tee nerves as an area of Performance Anxiety that mostly affects the golfer who doubts his own ability to get off the tee - and I do accept that the player who is stressed about getting through to the final of the Club Championship is displaying different Performance Anxiety from the player who is worried about getting off the first tee without topping the ball. However, even low handicap players can doubt their own ability (unless their mentally tough enough) should circumstances change. i.e. should he find himself out with his comfort zone teeing it up with Professionals at a Pro-Am rather than in the monthly medal.

So first tee nerves can and does affect all golfers at some time or another.

It's just not good enough to suggest that the first drive of the day is simply just one stroke out of 80 or 90 that will happen during the round and so you should not worry about it. We all know that's not the case. It's the first swing of the day, people are normally around watching you, and the first tee does seem to possess different characteristics than the 17 others that you will face.

And yet - once again - it's all in your head:

- **You** are the one focussing on your nerves and letting them get the better of you - nobody else is making this happen.
- **You** are the one that's building the tee shot up to become something larger than it is.
- **You** are the one that's noticing the people around you, you are being distracted by negative thoughts and images rather than controlling what you want to see and feel.

Whatever way you look at it, how you deal with first tee nerves is down to you - it's under your control. So you must take charge.

Getting successfully off the first tee is all about controlling your thoughts, your breathing and getting focussed on the process of playing the shot rather than focusing on or worrying about the outcome.

Let me repeat what is said in the main Performance Anxiety article:

As you go to the tee:

- Understand that your pre-round nerves are normal and accept them, especially during important events.
- Don't fight the adrenalin or nervous energy you feel, this is not fear, it's anticipation. Acknowledge it but don't focus on it. Once you begin playing the feeling will subside.
- Take out a couple of irons and swing gently to loosen up. The additional weight will help stretch those muscles, preparing them for play.
- Eventually take out the club you will use on the first tee (Driver, 3 Wood, whatever) and swing it freely, getting into the groove, the tempo that suits you.
- Allow yourself a few minutes to visualize* yourself doing everything right. From a dissociated* point of view, see your playing partners teeing off and their balls hitting the fairway. Then see yourself standing on the tee, performing your pre-shot routine* and sweeping the ball away, successfully down the fairway.
- Breathe deeply and easily, close your eyes and now visualise yourself on the tee from an associated point of view. Feel your stance, the club in your hands, the position of the ball. Feel yourself swinging the club freely, rhythmically and with ease and watch the ball split the fairway.

When you are on the tee

- As you tee the ball up, breath deeply and easily. Take a smooth practice swing as you pick out your target line.
- Address the ball and once more see yourself in the mental movie hitting the perfect shot.
- When you are ready, relax, let the tension go and swing.

It's all about the process* of playing your shot.

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Now if you are anxious because you haven't played for a couple of years and haven't practiced or swung a club in all that time - then I'm sorry - you need Harry Houdini not myself to get you out of that one. Having a strong mental game compliments your technical ability - not replace it. Sure you may not be as nervous because you are strong willed and self confident naturally but don't be surprised if your tee shot goes awry due to lack of practice in the intervening years since your last game.

This information is aimed at those players who do play regularly and who do know they can hit a ball but still let persistent negative feelings and images enter their mind during a round and especially on the first tee.

To those of you who fall into this category:

Use the routine outlined above. Practice it at the range. Make it part of your game. It's no use trying to "pull it on" during a round if you don't rehearse and practice it before hand. So next time you are on the range hit as many balls going through this routine as you do focussing on mechanical aspects of your swing. If you don't - it won't be there for you when you need it.

Also do mental rehearsals* away from the course and range as well. When you use your mind you are limited only by your imagination - not your present location or situation.

If you do find doubts creeping in just before you tee it up, use the following exercise to help you reframe* and refocus:

Turn your doubts (reframe them) into statements of positive action and confidence by using what I call the ARC process.

Acknowledge the anxiety: be aware when you're not thinking confidently.
Reframe the anxiety: challenge the thought.
Correct the anxiety: with a productive thought.

The process for reframing your anxiety and concerns works like this:

Acknowledge the anxiety: "I hope I don't top my drive this time. There's lots of people watching and I don't want to look stupid"

Reframe the anxiety: "There's no reason why I should top this ball. I've practiced long and hard and know my routine to ensure success"

Correct the anxiety with a productive thought: "Let's get going. Relax and focus on the process. See the ball splitting the fairway"

Then go through the routine you have practiced for on the tee.

Adopting Mental Game techniques involves practice; just like any new skill your learning needs practice. But the one thing it has in its favour is that you can practice it anytime, anywhere, anyplace. Not just when you have a club in your hand.

Learn how to recognise anxiety and how to reframe it should it creep up on you any time during a round. Pay attention to how negative thoughts and doubts enter your mind. If need be write them down and then come up with reframes and alternative, positive statements to quickly negate them should they arise during a round in the future.

* These phrases and concepts are fully explained in the Inner Golf Coach Audio Program.