

Mastering Golf Demons

Copyright Don Greif, Ph.D., 2009 © Not for distribution or quotation without permission of the author

Demons run amok on the golf course. Most of them populate the six inch space between a golfer's ears, the area Bobby Jones referred to as the "course" where competitive golf is played. These demons typically emerge when one feels pressure. Controlling demons and not succumbing to them is the central psychological challenge most golfers face. Those who master their demons can fully display their talents, while those who fall prey to them cannot play their best. Who or what are these demons that often prevent golfers from reaching their goals? Simply put, they are the mental obstacles that plague even the most accomplished golfers in the world.

While golfers battle many demons, some of the least recognized and most pervasive ones are the fears of excelling and winning. This may seem like a strange thing to say, since it's at odds with the conscious experience of most golfers, who believe and feel they want to play their best and beat their opponents. If they do feel fear on the course, it's usually the fear of playing badly, losing, or humiliating themselves, for which golf provides unparalleled opportunities. The demons that emerge under the pressure of competition, however, often spring from unconscious sources--fears rooted in old expectations, beliefs, and self-concepts.

These demons exist not just between the ears, but several inches down--in the deep rough of our minds. As with getting out of the rough, ridding oneself of demons sometimes requires a special club--a psychological rescue club, if you will. The "club" best suited to get out of deep mental rough is a golfer's ability to know and overcome his or her fears. This club is essential to play one's best golf and, I might add, to fully enjoy the game. And this club, unlike one's woods and irons, does not count towards the 14 club limit.

Evidence of the power of demons to sabotage performance is abundant. Mental demons undermine achievement at every level of play, from the weekend golfer about to shoot his personal best, to the young professional trying to get his tour card, to the touring pro trying to win his first major tournament. In each case the personal stakes are high. As pressure mounts and there is more on the line, one's vulnerability to demonic interference increases.

The immense challenge of staying cool under pressure is regularly visible on the professional tours. Collapses during tense situations are especially common in players trying to win their first major tournament. Those of us who have followed the professional golf tours over the past two decades link certain names with such collapses: Thomas Bjorn (2003 British Open), Scott Hoch (1989 Masters), and Jean Van de Velde

(1999 British Open) come to mind, as their “A” games deserted them at crucial times, namely, over the last few holes of major tournaments. All were elite golfers who achieved success at every level until they were in the home stretch with their first major victories close at hand. All had sufficient talent to win. Mental obstacles were the chief culprits which caused them to perform poorly under intense pressure.

Phil Mickelson, Colin Montgomerie and Greg Norman are other notable examples of immensely talented golfers who struggled during major tournament pressure and failed to play their best. Until last year's U.S. Open (which I'll discuss later), Mickelson had never suffered a collapse of “major” proportions. Yet he did not win his first major until three years ago at age 33, though he was in the hunt a number of times. Montgomerie has been the best golfer in Europe for many years, having won the European Order of Merit eight times and 37 tournaments worldwide. Yet at age 43, he has yet to win his first major, although he has finished second five times, most recently in the 2006 U.S. Open, where, from the middle of the 18th fairway on Sunday, with an excellent chance to win or make a playoff (depending on how Mickelson would play the 18th), he hit an extremely errant approach shot, wound up with double-bogey and finished tied with Mickelson for 2nd place. Montgomerie has also not won a single tournament on golf's biggest stage, the P.G.A. tour. Norman, who won two British Opens and many tournaments worldwide, suffered a painful collapse in the final round of the 1996 Masters, when he lost a six-stroke lead and shot 78, marked by two tee shots that found water on the par 3 12th and 16th holes, and lost to Nick Faldo.

Many great golfers have struggled to perform their best under the trying conditions of major tournament pressure. Sam Snead and Arnold Palmer, two of the game's all-time greats, played poorly down the stretch on several occasions (most notably in the 1939 and 1966 U.S. Opens, respectively), arguably costing them the chance to win several more majors apiece. Tom Watson lost tournaments and folded in a major early in his career (1974 U.S. Open) before he learned to win and then go on to triumph in 8 majors. Though not often discussed, golfers are keenly aware of the times when they did not handle the pressure of competition successfully and failed to play their best. In modern times, only Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods have displayed the ability to cope with pressure and win majors whenever they had the chance. Woods has won 12 of 12 majors when he held the 54 hole lead, and Nicklaus only lost majors when others played spectacularly well to beat him, for e.g., the 1977 British Open at Turnberry, where Watson shot 65 in the final round, and the 1982 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach, where he famously holed his chip shot from the greenside rough on the 17th hole.

When golfers fall short of achieving the results of which they are capable, their explanations usually consist of bromides. They cite mechanical flaws, such as getting a bit quick on their swings or misjudging the distance to the green on a critical approach shot. They sometimes acknowledge getting “jacked up,” or even admit to trouble controlling their emotions or nerves. In most cases, golfers who underperform do not

know why they played poorly nor do they understand what really happened to them. They may be aware they felt pressure or anxiety, or that self-doubt or indecisiveness crept in. Players who win occasionally reveal their hands were shaking on a crucial putt--because it is acceptable to admit having felt nervous when you've succeeded in the end. It is also not uncommon for professionals who win for the first time, after having struggled down the stretch and come up just short, to acknowledge they had to learn to win before they actually did win.

What often thwarts golfers are personal demons. Yet most golfers do not know why they suffered collapses or letdowns--because demons largely operate outside of conscious awareness. While some demons can be controlled by applying well-known mental skills --positive self-talk and visualization, or maintaining a consistent pre-shot routine--other demons overwhelm even the most rigorous attempts at applying mental strategies to rein them in. For the power of demons lies in their invisible, stealth-like nature. They infiltrate the psyche without being recognized: they travel under the radar. Some lay dormant for years and only emerge during the most trying conditions; for example, when a professional golfer is trying to win a major tournament for the first time, or when an amateur has a first chance to break 100, 90, or 80.

What mental and emotional states typically lead to demonic interference? Why do golfers regularly beat themselves by performing poorly or underperforming under pressure? Consider professional golfers, virtually all of whom achieved considerable success as amateurs. Why do they have trouble breaking through to the next level, which is initially achieved by winning a tour event, then by winning a major, and finally by winning multiple majors?

The most common barrier preventing pros from breaking through, and elevating their games and professional status, is the fear of winning. In speaking of his fellow professionals, Jack Nicklaus once observed that a lot of golfers are afraid to win. This blunt but keen observation suggests Nicklaus knows himself well and recognizes that his success was helped by his intrepid attitude towards winning. This attitude is essential to his storied mental strength on the golf course, arguably unrivaled except by 3 other golfers in history (Jones, Hogan and Woods).

You may wonder why any golfer, professional or amateur, would fear winning. It makes no intuitive sense. Nevertheless, winning can be scary for many reasons. Winners attract lots of attention, and not everyone is comfortable in the spotlight. Winning creates expectations that you will win again, and not everyone wants that pressure. Winning elevates you above your peers and thereby distinguishes you from most golfers. This can threaten your sense of belonging to the group, of being one of the guys, and make you feel isolated. Especially at more elite amateur and professional levels, winning brings special treatment--recognition, rewards, and the admiration of peers and the public. Some people feel jealous or envious of winners, perhaps even inadequate, resentful, or

bitter. Winning, then, may arouse anxiety or guilt about making others feel bad or mad. Simply anticipating this can be uncomfortable, even intolerable. Winning can be anxiety-provoking if it means thinking of yourself in a way you never have before, especially if it is discrepant with a long-standing and familiar identity. In this case envisioning oneself as a winner may feel a bit like wearing a coat that doesn't fit.

Ironically, while not winning may feel safer and less of a burden than winning, playing it safe by staying in your comfort zone can be even more problematic. For unless you feel confident you are doing the best you can, you will not be entirely comfortable staying there. Part of you knows you can do better, and wants to achieve more, excel, and make the most of your talent and ability. Knowing you are not realizing your potential and achieving all you can is distressing--and may make you feel frustrated, hopeless or depressed—not exactly a recipe for inner peace and joy.

Overcoming fears about winning--and achieving all you can--requires that you first recognize you're feeling anxious or scared. This is not easy. If asked, most golfers hampered by fears or conflicts about winning or excelling would insist they want to do their best. The part that's afraid or anxious is usually underground, and therefore less accessible to awareness.

This double-layered truth was captured towards the end of the 2009 Buick Invitational, when every golfer on the leader board had played sloppily during the final round. During its television broadcast CBS illustrated each players' number of strokes over par for Sunday's last round, accompanied by the caption "Who wants to win?," following which the commentator, Jim Nantz, remarked, "I'm sure they all want to win." Nantz, of course, was right and wrong.

Many golfers, as well as other athletes, would be irritated by the suggestion that they are not comfortable winning or excelling. Even if they were aware of it, it's hard to imagine a professional athlete publicly acknowledging he or she has fears or conflicts around winning, or revealing they were overwhelmed by anxiety and couldn't handle the pressure of being in contention in a tournament. Such a confession would undoubtedly lead others to stigmatize a male athlete as weak or unmanly. Professional athletes rarely admit anything that could make others perceive them as vulnerable, unless they have overcome their fears and become successful.

Although in many people's eyes it is shameful, if not contemptible, to fear winning, it has more insidious consequences not to address one's fears. To keep fears underground is to remain prone to self-sabotage and risk chronic failure to reach one's potential. Moreover unexamined fears readily emerge elsewhere in disguised forms. The strategy I recommend--identifying and confronting one's anxiety--seems to contradict the popular wisdom that says one must focus on the positive and eliminate any negative thoughts. Staying positive, however, does not mean you have to deny your fears.

Knowing your fears can liberate you from its crippling effects. Discovering what you are afraid of--contrary to popular belief--does not mean dwelling on it and getting stuck in a morass of self-doubt, self-blame, or self-pity. Ironically, then, the admonition to “stay positive”--if it pushes anxieties further underground--can hinder a golfer from successfully mastering his demons.

How can a golfer recognize he is afraid to excel or win, if these fears are hidden? The clues are contained in patterns of behavior--characteristic ways of responding to pressure and success. Golfers can learn to identify their own patterns through observation and self-reflection. Think of times--in golf or any other competitive endeavor--in which you were successful and received praise, recognition, or rewards, and ask yourself: How did you feel and act afterwards? Were you proud, fulfilled, celebratory, on cloud nine--or did you feel nervous, self-conscious, embarrassed, undeserving, apathetic, or down? Did you enjoy your success--or devalue and dismiss it as not a big deal--or perhaps attribute it to something besides your skill, talent and hard work, such as luck or others' help? Did you feel compelled to present yourself as modest? Were you comfortable with the attention, heightened expectations and pressure that came with excelling? Did you repeat or sustain your success--or have a letdown? If you cannot think of past successes, envision yourself as a winner in the future. Does this evoke excitement and pride, or nervousness and self-consciousness? How would you feel if a friend envied or resented the attention, accolades or money you received from winning? Would you hold yourself back if you thought your success might make a friend, parent, sibling or spouse feel lousy about him or herself?

If you have fallen short of meeting expectations, questions such as these can clarify whether you feel fully entitled to excel or win--and want the responsibility that comes with it--or are unsure if you belong in the same company as established winners. If you are unsure you belong in the winner's circle, is this based on a realistic assessment of your abilities and limitations, or does it reflect self-doubt based on long-standing, self-defeating, and uninspired ways of thinking and feeling about yourself?

It may be useful to think of times when you did not perform your best under pressure, and identify the type of mistakes you made, and what you felt and thought at the time. This can shed light on internal barriers that prevent you from achieving greater success. Let me cite an example.

A former collegiate golfer fell short of achieving her potential because of demons that arose in the context of an ostensibly innocent and jocular comment her father made. An accomplished golfer himself, her father taught her the game. When, as a teenager, she became a very good golfer, her father quipped, “Now don't beat me – I'll give up the game.” He repeated this comment on several other occasions. A fairly innocent remark on the surface, yet it planted--or fed--a fear that her father indeed could not tolerate it if

she surpassed him. Several years later, after her father had a major heart attack, she found herself worrying--while competing in college tournaments – that her father would collapse while he followed her around the course. She later realized, years after her father died (not on the golf course), that she had held a subconscious thought that her success as a golfer was responsible for her father’s heart attack. The fear and guilt associated with this thought led her to underachieve as a golfer. Unfortunately her insight came too late to make a difference in her college golf career.

Female athletes face unique psychological challenges. Women are socialized – even in our supposedly enlightened, post-feminist, Title IX era--to inhibit their aggression. Nice girls are supposed to, well, be nice – which translates into curbing competitive urges. Since playing one’s best requires a golfer be very comfortable with her or his competitive aggression, women often have a significant hurdle to overcome. If you doubt that competing involves aggression, think of the ways we refer to winning. We talk of athletes “destroying” or “vanquishing” their “opponents” or “adversaries,” and have “sudden death” playoffs to determine the winner in case of a tie.

Female athletes have other gender-specific issues as well. Several female collegiate golfers with whom I have spoken reported they felt pressure to talk to their opponents while competing in tournaments--even if they did not feel like it. This may come as a shock, but male golfers generally do not worry about this; for most men muteness is a natural state. Many wives wish their husbands worried--just a little bit--about talking, at least to them. Imagine this scene: “Honey, when we play golf together, I feel distracted over my shots because I really want to discuss some decorating ideas.”

Several months ago I noticed that when I played golf with my older brother, I often played well for the first nine holes and then my game, inexplicably, went south on the back nine. It occurred to me I was worried about outplaying my brother. I realized I had always looked up to him--his successes in life had somehow given me permission to be successful. We wanted to beat each other when we competed in golf; yet without being aware of it, I had feared that my success would hurt him by making him jealous or annoyed. I screwed up on the back nine to avoid what I had unconsciously feared would happen if I surpassed him. In realizing this, I saw that my fears were probably overblown, magnified beyond proportion, and I felt relieved. I have outplayed my brother more often since having this insight; yet, I still struggle to sustain a high level of play for the entire round. In order to overcome whatever angst I still have about being the better golfer, I’ll have to allow myself to play my best and know--even if my fears turn out to be valid--that I cannot hurt him--or anyone else, for that matter--by beating him in golf, because winning is not destructive or dangerous. Hopefully my brother will enjoy my success and compete harder, but even if he were to feel bad if I dominate him on the golf course, I won’t let his reactions stop me, since it would not be my job to protect his ego.

The best counter-example to my brand of neurosis is the attitude of Tiger Woods. As much as any athlete competing today, there is no indication he has any conflicts around winning, dominating, or "destroying" his competitors. On the contrary, when he is ahead in a tournament, his goal is to increase his lead as much as possible--to lap the field--as he did in the '97 Masters and '00 U.S. Open, when he won by 12 and 15 strokes, respectively. For Woods, as he said, this is simply fun.

Good golf requires freedom from fear. When poorly managed, fear produces excess tension, which is a death knell for the golfer. The golf swing, though not the only victim, is often the ultimate casualty. The highly coordinated movements that make up the golf swing depend upon an emotional state that is relatively free from anxiety and tension, and easily goes awry because of changes in mental states. Excess tension alters rhythm, timing, and grip pressure. As a result, the swing path and solidness of contact with the ball suffers, which leads to miss-hits and errant shots--hooks, slices, shanks, chili dips, or the yips.

The pre-shot routine can also be thrown off because of excess tension. It is common to see pros in high pressure situations play more quickly, or, at times, more slowly than they ordinarily do under less stressful conditions. One of the most dramatic examples of a rushed pre-shot routine, which resulted in self-destruction, occurred in the 2006 Bay Hill Invitational. A three-time winner on the European Tour, the Englishman Greg Owen was going for his first PGA Tour title. He led by two strokes as he stood over a 40-inch putt for par on the 17th green on Sunday in the final round. He missed the putt and needed to make the two-footer coming back to maintain a one-shot lead heading into the final hole. Taking no more time than he would have for a 2-inch tap-in, Owen missed again, and then lost the tournament on the 72nd hole when he bogeyed and Rod Pampling parred.

When he was later asked to explain what happened on the 17th green, Owen said "I don't know. I was feeling good, relaxed." Admitting that he had a lapse of concentration, Owen remarked, "Stupid. The golfing Gods were not with me this week." If we take him at his word, it appears that Owen did not feel sufficiently worried or concerned when facing the two-footer; nonchalance, or being too relaxed, seemed to be the culprit. Had he been mindful of how critical this putt was, and recognized it was missable, it is likely he would have taken more time and won the tournament. In saying the golfing Gods were not on his side, Owen apparently wanted to believe fate caused him to miss the critical putts and lose. Invoking forces beyond his control to explain his failure is understandable, for he had to be mortified at letting the title slip away. Nonetheless, it is vital--if Owen is to develop the ability to maintain his focus and concentration under pressure--that he understands the mental factors that led to the lapse in his concentration and breakdown of his normal pre-shot routine. Mental lapses, such as the one that afflicted Owen at the most inopportune moment, are rooted in identifiable emotional factors, usually conflicted or poorly regulated internal states. The better these

states are understood, the more power one has to control them.

Looking at the flip side of excessive fear and anxiety, it can be just as problematic, as was the case with Owen, when a golfer does not feel sufficiently worried. For example, the golfer who tries a very risky shot, when a conservative one is more prudent and strategic, may be insufficiently concerned about the risk. He may be a victim of his own bravado, that is, if he wrongly believes he can pull off the same shot under pressure that he could readily execute under benign conditions. In some situations, it might be sensible to attempt the risky shot; for instance, if he is trailing the leader, and going for broke is the best or only chance to win. In each case a golfer must carefully consider the benefit of executing the risky shot versus the cost if he fails. Calculating risk and reward requires clarity, forbearance, and, at times, reining in one's grandiosity. Phil Mickelson's ill-fated decisions and stunning collapse at the 2006 U.S. Open readily come to mind as painful proof of what can happen when one fails to exercise these traits.

Fear and anxiety can impact virtually every aspect of the game of golf. The more directly mental parts of the game—judgment, decision-making, and strategizing, known as course management—are as vulnerable to emotional states as are the golf swing and the pre-shot routine.

When facing a tricky lie, or dangerous pin position, it is much harder to choose the right club or the most sensible shot when feeling anxious. A fearful golfer may incorrectly assess his capabilities and limitations, and attempt a very risky shot, or less commonly, play more conservatively than he should. During the final round of the 1993 Masters, while in contention for the championship, Chip Beck was heavily criticized (perhaps unfairly), when he decided to lay up on the par 5 15th hole instead of going for the green on his second shot.

In my view Phil Mickelson has won 3 majors since turning 33, and not earlier in his career, as he was widely expected to do, in large part because he did not play himself out of those tournaments, the way he sometimes did in the past, by attempting go-for-broke shots. Three years ago, at the 2004 Masters, Mickelson finally shed that unflattering label—best player never to have won a major. He learned to harness his incredible talent and rein in his aggressive go-for-broke style. Mickelson's victories at the 2005 PGA and 2006 Masters reflected, one thought, his increased maturity as a golfer. His stunning collapse at the 2006 U.S. Open, then, was puzzling, since it seemed he had conquered his demons.

Mickelson failed to win his 4th major at the 2006 U.S. Open precisely because he reverted to old form, where his gambling instincts prevailed over prudence, restraint, and calculated risk-taking. In striking contrast to the studious, meticulous, and analytical approach Mickelson took to preparing for the tournament at Winged Foot (he spent a day walking the course without hitting a shot), his decision-making and shot selection during

the last round of the Open, especially on the 72nd hole, were emotionally driven, rooted, I believe, in Mickelson's penchant for heroic shot-making.(?) The problem was that heroic golf was not necessary nor called for under the circumstances. As Johnny Miller colorfully stated in his NBC commentary during Mickelson's final hole fiasco, "You don't have to ride in on a white stallion--you can limp in there and say 'see you later'."

On the tee of the 72nd hole, with a one stroke lead over Geoff Ogilvy, needing par to win and bogey to tie, Mickelson's objectives ought to have been to try to make par but accept bogey--and avoid double-bogey at all costs, thereby insuring himself, at worst, an 18 hole playoff the next day with Ogilvy. By choosing to hit driver off the tee, leaving little margin for error on his 2nd shot from the rough (which hit a tree and stayed in the rough), and going over the trees on his 3rd shot (which landed in a "fried egg" lie in the greenside bunker), Mickelson committed the cardinal sin--he brought double-bogey into the picture. These three shots were all high risk, imprudent shots under the circumstances. Had Mickelson been tied for the lead at the time, they would have made sense, since his objective in that case would have been to make birdie but accept par. Mickelson had saved pars all day from unlikely places (he hit only 2 fairways in the last round), which probably reinforced his belief that he could once again pull off a magical shot on the 18th hole and save par. Mickelson's problem, however, was not that he hit poor shots down the stretch; rather, he was unable to pull in the reins and play percentage golf--make believe he was Fred Funk--when it was demanded by the situation.

Mickelson is a tremendously imaginative shot-maker. He thrives on his ability to create shots that most golfers would not even try, let alone seriously consider. Given his history of attempting high-risk shots when conservative ones are called for, one has the impression Mickelson is compelled to display his magical abilities, which leads him to take unnecessary risks. Tiger Woods, too, has an uncanny ability to pull off remarkable shots, but he doesn't attempt them unless he has to do so in order to win, or has a very comfortable lead and can afford a mistake. When he has held the lead in the final round of majors, he has often played more conservatively, the most impressive example of which was the 2006 British Open, where he realized that avoiding the pot bunkers in the fairway and putting his approach shots somewhere on the green were vital in order to win; consequently, he used 2-irons and 3-woods off the tee throughout the tournament.

Mickelson's self-destruction at the 2006 U.S. Open can be understood within the context of what he was on the verge of accomplishing. If he had won at Winged Foot, Mickelson would have elevated his status in golf to a very elite level, placing himself along side the game's all-time greats. Had he parred the 18th hole, Mickelson would have had 4 career majors; 3rd consecutive major, achieved in the modern era only by Hogan (1953), Nicklaus (1971-72), and Woods (2000); and been 3/4 of the way to a lifetime Grand Slam, needing the British Open title to accomplish what only Sarazen, Hogan, Nicklaus, Player and Woods did. In contemporary terms, he would have established himself as the best golfer in the world at the time. As Alan Shipnuck of Sports Illustrated

put it, Mickelson was “tiptoeing to the precipice of so much history,” and he “shrank from the immensity of the opportunity.”

We cannot know that Mickelson was daunted by the magnitude of the moment, uncomfortable ascending to the next level of golfing greatness--if, in short, he succumbed to inner demons. Indeed he may not know. One thing we can be sure of is this: Mickelson recognized (at least subconsciously) that he made bad decisions down the stretch, when he said, in the aftermath of shock at losing the Open, “I can’t believe I did that. I am such an idiot.” If Mickelson is to win more majors, it is crucial that he understand why he made the choices he did in last year’s Open—in effect, he must know himself better--and make different choices next time he is in contention in a major. This will require self-examination, maybe even soul-searching. All the on-course preparation in the world will not be enough to earn him another major unless it is accompanied by self-scrutiny and a shift in his attitude, philosophy, and self-concept.

While mental miscues under pressure are rampant, some golfers have established their dominance through mastering the mental game. Jack Nicklaus was without equal when it came to knowing his limitations--when to play conservatively and let his competitors make mistakes, and when to play more risky shots. Yes, even Nicklaus had limitations. He was not the best chipper, pitcher and bunker player of his day. Whether intentional or not, in hitting his approach shots to the safe parts of greens, Nicklaus protected against his relative short game weakness, and played to his strength, which was putting. The fact that Nicklaus was the best pressure putter of all time (before Woods made this debatable) also enabled him to play more conservative approach shots than if he were an average putter. The touring pro Joey Sindelar once observed, in the pre-Woodsian era, that Jack Nicklaus did not have the greatest golf swing of all time, but he did have the greatest mind. Now that Woods has established himself as the most mentally fit golfer on the planet, this has become debatable too.

Tiger Woods’ mental prowess clearly rivals that of Nicklaus. The writer David Owen noted, in an article chronicling his physical and mental strengths (*Men’s Vogue*, Spring, 2006), that Woods “seems to be able, in pressure situations, to switch off the conscious parts of his brain, and execute the shot without interference from his anxieties.” What’s this--Tiger Woods gets anxious? Just like humans do. Watching the way he responds to pressure, it is easy to mistake him for an android or a golfing machine. Zen master is probably closer to the truth. Nevertheless, proof that he is fallible – and probably/most likely human – (at least until scientific tests - or autopsy - can confirm this) has been evident on a number of occasions. He has put himself behind the eight ball with errant shots, lousy rounds, even missed putts. In fact Woods admitted to Owen that he was shaky on the last two holes of the 2005 Masters, both of which he bogeyed, allowing Chris DiMarco to catch him and vie for the championship in a sudden-death playoff. As expected, Woods won the tournament when he holed a 15-foot birdie putt on the first playoff hole. Like Nicklaus, Woods’s mental abilities match his physical skills and

talents. Combined with his unerring commitment to winning, and his relentless pursuit of being the best golfer he can, it is no wonder that he is on his way to breaking Nicklaus' record of 18 major championships. If I were a betting man I'd wager that Woods will win 25 majors or more--which would be a Beamon-esque achievement.*

As I have emphasized, identifying those demons that create fear, anxiety and tension is a crucial step towards overcoming them and playing one's best. This is complicated, however, for two reasons. First, as I stated earlier, many golfers are reluctant to admit they feel anxious or scared. Secondly, golfers--like normal human beings--are not always aware of what they feel, and disguise their anxiety--even to themselves. While some golfers express anxiety overtly; for example, by worrying about the hazards on the course--water, sand traps, and rough--others disguise their fears by feigning indifference about their performance, and refuse to acknowledge how much they care about playing their best. They do not prepare adequately for a round or tournament, or they stay out late the night before an important round, which then provides an excuse for playing poorly. For these golfers, the thought of committing to play their best and achieving all they can seems to make them anxious.

Some golfers over-prepare and do not take the time to relax and gain a healthy perspective about an upcoming tournament or competitive round--to realize their performance on the golf course, no matter how big the tournament, is not a matter of life or death. This perspective can provide relief and enable them to play with less tension. Of course, many golfers—even sane ones—would argue that performance on the golf course is far more important than life or death.

Unresolved fears and conflicts--inner, personal demons--are not the only reason golfers experience anxiety. The nature of the game and the challenges it poses to the ego also arouse anxiety. Golf is an individual sport and performance depends solely on one's own efforts. There is no one to blame for poor performance besides oneself. Golfers are especially susceptible, therefore, to feeling exposed and scrutinized by others. "Gowf is a

*Bob Beamon won the Gold Medal in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City when he broke the world long jump record by almost 2 feet, a record which stood for 23 years. way o' makin' a man naked," Peter McNaughton remarked in "Golf in the Kingdom," the classic golf tale by Michael Murphy. In addition, since most of the time on the course is between shots, golfers have plenty of time to think, imagine and worry about all the bad things that can happen if they screw up. For all these reasons golfers are highly vulnerable to feeling humiliated. What a great game! Of course, the fact that they can only blame themselves for performing poorly does not prevent them from trying mightily to rationalize bad play. On the contrary, excuses on the course, or at the 19th hole, are commonplace. Protecting oneself from humiliation is an art unto itself. Some golfers put more time and energy into creating excuses for poor play—or coming up with original ways to keep score--than they do on their short games. It is arguable, of course,

which strategy eliminates more strokes.

While demons operate covertly, they are usually dimly felt or sensed. One's emotional and mental states provide clues to their presence. Fortunately, these internal states are accessible and comprehensible. Demons can be detected by paying close attention to one's thoughts and feelings. Though they are not always easy to make sense of, one can decipher and decode their meanings, especially with professional help.

When one's fears and anxieties become accessible, and are expressed in words—preferably to an empathetic and knowledgeable listener—this establishes distance from one's demons and enables one to observe, examine and speak about them. This can feel like lifting a veil on a long-held, often shameful secret. Engaging in this process neutralizes demons, rids them of their insidious power, and frees one from their debilitating impact. When held up to the light of day, one realizes that one's fears, while they may have served a useful purpose in the past, are more a hindrance than a help in the present. As a result demons can be transformed from inchoate but annoying presences into recognizable and manageable anxieties. To play one's best golf—indeed, to live one's best life—these anxieties must be given their proper place.

It may be apparent by now that demons do not restrict themselves to the golf course--which is kind of annoying. If only they paid attention to the little white stakes that mark out-of-bounds on the golf course! Demons are prevalent in sports. Consider the 2006 winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, where several highly touted U.S. stars—including the skier Bode Miller and snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis-- found creative ways to self-destruct and fail to perform their best. It did not require a psychologist to see that demons were infiltrating their psyches. After his abysmal performance, and failure to win a single gold medal, Miller claimed he was not disappointed and, in fact, was enjoying the Olympic experience. His apparent indifference to results and preoccupation with having a good time had all the earmarks of a defensive attempt to cope with the pressure brought on by exceedingly high expectations, fostered by the magnitude of the event as well as by the hunger of the media and American public to anoint him the next big sports hero. The twenty year old Jacobellis had a huge lead in the snowboard cross event, and was on the verge of winning the gold medal, when she inexplicably tried a hot dog stunt moments before the finish line, fell down, and was lucky to win the silver medal. The breakdown in her judgment seconds before victory was not a random event--or one that can simply be attributed to her youth. Demonic interference is implicated.

Demons pervade the athletic universe, where winning and losing are easily measured, but they also exist in every other arena in which competition, performance and pressure come into play—in other words, pretty much everywhere. One possible exception is Tibetan monasteries, though I have heard that it is not unusual for monks to compete over who can be mute the longest. Nuns, on the other hand, do not even attempt this.

Human beings are highly adept at creating internal barriers to success when they are anxious or afraid. Consider this example: Many men and some woman who achieve financial success buy luxury automobiles. Aside from the pleasure of driving a great car, they want to show other people how successful they are. Displaying one's success makes some people feel envious and resentful, and others deferential and worshipful. Some people want to knock a visibly successful man or woman down a peg or two-- especially if they do not feel too good about themselves--while others want to prop them up and elevate them--and lower themselves. Since one can't know how others will react, it takes nerve to show people you are more successful than they are. Unless you're pretty confident, it might feel as if the safest course is to not buy the car and advertise your success--or not achieve it in the first place--so you don't have to worry about how you'll be perceived or treated. For similar reasons, it takes guts to go for – and get – a better job with a higher salary and more responsibility, authority and status. People often hold back, inhibit their ambition, because they're worried – often unconsciously – of what others will think and feel. They remain in their comfort zones – though their comfort zones are not so comfortable – because it feels safer not to risk the consequences and be faced with the responsibility that comes with greater success and recognition.

If fears of performing one's best are treated as something to deny, avoid, or simply control, failure to achieve all one can is the likely outcome. If, instead, overcoming fear is viewed as a challenge that all winners must face, golf can become a superb opportunity to master one's personal demons.

By recognizing that mental demons are widespread, golfers can master their personal demons by examining (in the off season, of course) any realm in which they want to excel. In the process they can also improve their golf games, demons and all. Viewing demons as your allies provides the opportunity to face challenges in every area of your life. Where there is pressure to use your talents, there is also the opportunity to face your demons and prevail.