

Modelling your Personal Best

Peter Knight, Golf Possibilities Pty Ltd

Introduction

Golf is an unpredictable sport, more so than most others. Who would dare bet against Usain Bolt in the 100m final of an event he had targetted to win? In 2007-2009 in the AFL, Geelong was the short-priced favourite to win the Premiership (which they did successfully in two of those three years).

Golf is quite different; sure there are favourites for every tournament, however they don't usually win. Even Tiger Woods who's winning ration is the highest in the history of the modern game, doesn't win anywhere near as often as athletes and teams in other sports.

The teams and individuals that do win, especially prevailing in close competition are able to do so because they "know how to win". The underdog, who is often pipped at the post presumably doesn't know how to win.

Comments from members and coaches of successful teams seem to confirm that they know how to win. Successful strategies can make a difference as can one team having a more talented group of athletes than their opponents, but this only goes part of the way in describing how the best teams can prevail in close competition.

Often an athlete (or team) appears to give off an aura of invincibility. They perform their skills with ease. It seems like magic. These moments of peak performance are described as flow experiences or of being in the zone.

We will use modelling principles from NLP to explore your own peak performance state.

Why is modelling important?

The origins of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) are in modelling. Modelling is determining the components of a behaviour or performance and being able to emulate that performance.

This is like following a recipe word for word to produce a dish just like it is shown in the recipe book. We can read the recipe to know the ingredients and how they are combined and then cooked, but can't understand the thought processes of the chef.

If kneading dough the chef will know when there has been sufficient kneading, not by the amount of time it has taken, but by the feel, look and texture of the dough. You won't find that information in a recipe book, but it is critical to getting the result that the chef does. To gain this information you need to ask for specific information from the chef.

Performing well at golf is similar; we may know how much a champion has practiced and copy that level of effort, however it doesn't guarantee we will have the same winning record as the champion. There is an understanding that is required at a much deeper level. To get to this understanding requires determining the specifics of the images we form, sounds involved, including self-talk and the qualities of the feelings we have.

Reproducing the form of a champion athlete exactly would require a certain level of talent, genetics, strength & speed (that have been gained from years of training). These things are not available to us. What we can do is determine our own peak performance state and reproduce it when we want to.

Cause and Effect

When we are performing in sport, some days we feel like we can conquer the world, at other times it seems nothing goes right. When these days of contrast occur, we will notice differences in our thinking, feeling and behaviour (our state). Question is: are the differences in our state the cause of our performance or are they affected by our performance?

Our 'state' is the way we 'are' at any given time. It is made up of how we feel the emotions we have, the things we say to ourselves at any point in time. There are numerous components that make up our state and once we have identified them, then we can establish a way to code (or remember) those things so they can be reproduced. In this way, we can enjoy peak performance experiences more often.

Most athletes allow their feelings to be dictated by their performance. Imagine if this was the case with the chef in the kitchen next time you go to a restaurant? You would be hoping the chef is in the zone or you might be very worried about what you would finish up eating.

Of course the chef knows how to produce a fine meal and will do so consistently because he follows a set recipe. What we need to do as golfers is to find the recipe which we have labelled our peak performance state and then reproduce this when we are in competition. This assumes we can control our state.

If our state is affected by our performance, then there are likely to be huge fluctuations in mood, feelings and behaviour from one round to the next and even within the same round. If, on the other hand, we are in control of our thinking and behaviour (our state) and this state affects our performance, then our times of being at peak performance are more controllable and therefore repeatable. This is very welcome news!

It is normal for most golfers to allow their state to be determined, not by how they prepare for a round, but by how that round progresses. As you can imagine, from the cooking analogy, this doesn't make much sense. So why do most golfers do this? Because they don't know of a better way.

The greatest influence on consistency is state change. When a golfer is playing extremely well and suddenly the wheels fall off their round, their state has shifted. When a player is struggling with their game and suddenly there is a change in performance, their state has shifted.

If we return to the cooking analogy for a moment; let's suppose you wanted to cook a roast for dinner and an apricot pie for dessert. You have a specific recipe for the roast and one quite different for the apricot pie. In the same way we have different states for performing our best in different contexts or situations. If you were meditating, your breathing, internal talk and muscle tension would be dramatically different than if you were confronted by an aggressive dog.

Another extremely interesting point is that for each player, their 'state' is quite specific. If an element of that state is altered, then the state itself is altered. What we will explore is the state which is optimal to you when you are looking to perform your best on the golf course in competition.

There are a range of criteria to take into account in determining the model of your unique peak performance state. I will describe the patterns of the structure of Peak Performance States (PPS), how a player or coach can map out their own or another player's PPS and how to look at ways to enhance that state.

The examples I will give are based on the results of a study with professional and national level amateur golfers to determine the components of their peak performance states. While the findings support the idea that these states are highly individual, there are also patterns that emerged which seem to be reasonably consistent among the golfers surveyed.

Exploring your Peak Performance State

The study that was completed with a group of professional and elite amateur golfers sought to explain Peak Performance State (PPS) elements based on whether they fell into a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic category. For those who may be familiar with the field of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) the line of questioning, explanation of results and suggestions for improvement will be familiar.

I will begin with an explanation of the results from the study and then have provided some worksheets for you to complete to detail your own PPS.

Auditory Components

Internal self-talk is occurring constantly in us all. The content of that self-talk and how it is delivered (volume, pitch, tone, pace, frequency and location) can have vastly differing effects on our emotional state.

While in their PPS 97% of players surveyed were listening to their own voice. The volume was normal or a quieter-than-normal speaking volume for 100% of players. The speed of speech was usual speaking pace or slightly slower for 90% and the pitch of the voice was normal or slightly lower for 97% of players. The players reported these conditions to be the opposite when they weren't performing well.

The content of the self-talk included, "stick to my process"; "trust yourself"; "slow down"; "where do you want to go?"; "focus on the process"; "stay in the present"; "come on you can do this"; "trust what you are doing and just let it happen"; "you swing well, stroke is fantastic".

Some sounds reported were; "sound of pure contact of full shots"; "ball in cup"; "ball fizzing off clubface"; "pure strike". The players were hearing these sounds as part of their preparation for the shots.

When listening to the internal voice, the players were asked to describe its specific location. Was it from inside or outside the head? If inside where specifically? Many players reported the voice inside the top central part of the head.

Exercise

To play with this concept yourself, notice where your self-talk is coming from. Even reading this, if you hear a voice inside your head as you read, and then move it to a different location in your head. Notice any differences between this voice and how it was before. If it wasn't coming from the listening points in your ears then shift it there and again notice if anything has changed. Finally, put it back where it originally was.

Play around also with the speed, volume, pitch, and tone of the voice. Change one thing at a time and bring it back to how it originally was before varying another component.

In their book *Rewrite your Life*, Eve Ash (a psychologist) and Rob Gerrard explain how we run dialogues (scripts) to ourselves. These scripts have a huge influence on beliefs, self image, emotions and how we respond to things that happen to us.

Because we are constantly bombarded with information from our environment we need to find a way to sort this information so as to avoid sensory overload. One way we do this is to ignore or delete some of the information that comes in. Another way is to make generalisations about what we see and hear. A third way is to distort the incoming information, perhaps to make it more easily understood. This generalisation, deletion and distortion of information also occurs in our self-talk.

Manipulating this information is not done consciously, however this unconscious manipulation of data helps to result in the formation of our beliefs. The scripts we run to ourselves are in line with these beliefs, even if they are not supportive or nurturing to us! Our interpretation of events – what someone says to us or when we witness something – is also influenced by our accumulated experiences, beliefs and scripts. This is why two people who report a car accident can give quite different accounts of what they saw.

Being aware that we are doing this and altering what we say to ourselves can have far reaching effects on our emotional state and response to events which occur.

The best first step in investigating any potential adverse effects from unproductive speech is to observe either your own internal dialogue or that of others and note the presence of any limiting phrases. If you notice a phrase with your own dialogue, consider an alternative phrase and say it to yourself as if the new statement were true (which it probably is anyway).

Let's consider some examples of commonly heard phrases and a possible response (challenge to that statement) and a more empowering alternative. The table below shows some phrases I have heard countless times from golfers of all abilities.

Phrase	Type	Response	Alternate phrase
I always play this hole badly	Generalisation as a statement of belief	Have you ever played it well?	This hole provides a challenge that I'm looking forward to meeting.
I never putt well. I'm a crappy putter	Generalisation as a belief Generalisation as statement of identity (this is who I am).	What if you were to putt well?	The ball missed the hole a few times today, but my stroke is starting to feel great.
They say this course is really tough		Who says?	
You shouldn't ever three-putt.		What if you did?	Even the best players in the world occasionally three-putt, but they are still world-class.
This course intimidates me.	Cause effect	Does the course intimidate you or are you allowing yourself to be intimidated?	I will build and stick to a solid game plan today.
Having six bogeys means I am a 'chopper'	Complex equivalence	Having the bogeys means nothing more than having bogeys. It is not a reflection of who you are.	I will identify the cause of the bogeys and improve those parts of my game.

Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism* describes the structure of self-talk among optimists and pessimists. He looks at statements according to the three P's.

Personalisation the optimist describes how he may have been responsible for a positive event "we won because of my efforts" or not totally responsible for a negative effect "we lost because our forwards didn't capitalise on the chances I gave them". The pessimist does the opposite and often accepts responsibility for unwanted outcomes even when he may not have been totally to blame "it was all my fault".

Permanency the pessimist thinks things that aren't going well probably won't improve. "I'll never be a good bunker player" or that good things won't last. "That was a fluke, a one-off good shot". The optimist again is the opposite; he expects good things to last and bad events to be fleeting. "That wasn't a good shot. That's not like me".

Pervasiveness this is a form of generalisation where an outcome is spread across differing contexts. The pessimist may think "I lost that final match so I can't do anything well when the pressure is on". "I'm no good at anything". The optimist has this outlook for good outcomes "I am a fast learner" and sees poor outcomes as isolated incidents, specific to a particular context "I might not hit a lot of greens but the rest of my game is great".

Seligman's intervention technique is to challenge the pessimistic statements by looking for exceptions and considering more empowering alternatives.

On the range

Listen to what you hear (or say to yourself) in regard to optimism/pessimism, generalisation, deletion and distortion. Rather than responding to what you hear, notice if there are recurring patterns. Once you notice a pattern in yourself it can be challenged.

Be careful! - Blatant or repeated challenges with other people are almost always resented.

Visual Components

The benefits of imagery training and its use in competition are well documented. How we represent these images to ourselves varies from person to person and can vary in differing contexts such as whether you are recalling something from the past or creating something for the future or whether you are imagining something pleasurable or saddening. The fact that the location of these pictures varies depending on time frame and context can be extremely useful depending on the purpose of the visualisation.

The information from the study showed (as a percentage) whether these images were moving or still pictures; whether they were framed or panoramic; black and white or colour; 2D or 3D; their size and location; clarity; brightness and the extent of peripheral vision as well of course as content (the actual images created in the PPS).

Almost all respondents placed these pictures at or above eye level with 80% having the images in the front part of their head or outside of their head in front of them. 86% of players viewed the images either as if through their own eyes or both as a participant and an observer. Only 14% felt they were viewing images as if they were a spectator viewing themselves performing.

NLP teaches that a greater sensory experience occurs when we are associated into an image (seeing through our own eyes) rather than being dissociated (seeing from the other's position).

Post-shot routine exercise

The ability to Associate and dissociate is an incredibly useful tool I use for golfers during pre and post shot routines. It is effective in avoiding the negative emotions which may occur as a result of a player hitting a poor shot.

An example of how I use this is to have a player hit a shot and literally take a step back from the ball. As they step back they are to shut down any internal dialogue regarding the shot, watch the ball as if someone else had hit it (non-caring) and place their attention into the environment (listen to the birds, wind, etc.). The objective is to avoid becoming emotionally attached to the shot. If the shot is especially good then the rules change; enjoy the shot and the feelings associated with producing the shot.

Once the player hits a few shots and detaches from any emotional involvement with the shot (especially a poor shot) they continue the drill without stepping away from the ball after hitting it.

The purpose of this dissociation exercise is to protect the state that was developed by going through the pre-shot routine, picturing the shot desired and developing a sense of certainty that the outcome will be successful.

When picturing their shots in their Peak Performance State they were in colour (97%), panoramic (80%) and three dimensional (73%) of the time.

While it wasn't a question on the survey, there were a number of players reporting their inability to visualise. However, even those who said they didn't really visualise or didn't visualise well were able to explain with great clarity the images they were either recalling or creating. It isn't necessary to see a ball in flight as it were 'really there'.

Exercise

To gain a sensation of how manipulating these images affects your emotional state recall a mildly enjoyable experience as if you are watching a movie of yourself. Place this movie in front of you slightly above eye level. Make the movie colour, 3D, crystal clear and with normal to slightly better than normal brightness. Edit the image so the outcome is precisely what you want.

When your edited movie is just as you want increase its size and bring it slightly closer to you. Notice any changes in how you feel. Now step into that experience as if you are living it exactly as in the edited version – seeing through your own eyes, hearing any sounds through your own ears and enjoying the physical sensations associated with that state. Feel free to do this for any experience. It can also be used to reduce the emotional influences of undesirable experiences.

You can guess what is likely to happen when undesirable experiences are visually processed the way you just did with the pleasurable experience. Unfortunately a lot of players do this. It is usually accompanied by feelings of permanence, pervasiveness and complete person responsibility. It is the “express bogey train” – no wonder it’s so hard to get off!

Descriptions of the content from the players in their Peak Performance State included: “seeing exact flight of the ball”; “seeing it roll into the hole”; “my swing/impact/flight and result (all in sequence)”; “former successes”; “seeing great players making great shots in majors”.

Many phrases can be summarised with the comment from one of the respondents – “seeing myself play the shot perfectly from the swing to in the air, where it lands and how I act afterwards”.

Most players reported a kind of visual kinaesthetic synaesthesia – a see/feel experience. This is to be expected based on experiments with athlete imagery where micro-muscular contractions occur when an athlete vividly imagines a performance. For this reason I would suggest that when you are going through your pre-shot routine and take a practice swing (putting and short shots) practice the motion so it conforms precisely to your see/feel representation of the shot.

As most players have this see/feel ability it stands to reason that the feelings and images will influence one another. Ensure your images and the physical sensations are both in harmony with each other and are of your desired outcome.

On the range

Consider how you visualise and if you are a coach, how your students visualise. Play with fine-tuning this. As you do so you will notice a greater quality in the visualisation.

Kinaesthetic Components

The questions in the survey weren't to seek swing thoughts or movement sensations associated with playing shots, but the physical sensations of the state.

Among the questions asked of the participants were the location and description of any physical sensations they experienced. These two questions were the ones which drew the most effusive responses.

Descriptions of the feeling and location of the sensations were

"Very sensitive hands and finger tips"; "feel muscles firing correctly before swinging"; "bigger and lighter all over body"; "strength in legs"; "calm and relaxed all over"; "heart"; "shoulders, neck and arms"; "warm stomach"; "tingle in stomach"; "heart rate increase"; "calm, body felt heavy".

Descriptions of the sensations included

"Meditative state"; "body relaxed yet I felt tall"; "at peace with competing under pressure"; "bigger, lighter and almost detached from myself"; "invincible"; "noticing breathing"; "stomach and forearms like electricity"; "more aware of everything"; "blissful, certain, authoritative"; "excited but under control".

The body-mind link has been explored probably for centuries with comprehensive and conclusive evidence that breathing, posture and how we move influences our mental state. Feldenkrais Method and Alexander Technique base their philosophies and methodologies on taking great care with the integrity of our postural control and movement. Chiropractic and physiotherapy have alignment and balance of the musculo-skeletal system as a constant goal.

If two players are walking down the fairway; one walking tall and looking forward with his head up and the other with head and eyes downcast and shoulders slumped we would guess easily who is likely to be in a better state to perform well. It is in fact very difficult, if not impossible for the slouched, eyes-downcast player to be in a Peak State and vice-versa for the other player.

The physical sensation of the Peak Performance State was felt by most players (80%) to be an entire body feeling or to extend even beyond their body.

One question was whether the physical sensation could be represented by a colour. Blue or shades of blue was named by 46% of players. Colour theory would say that blue represents calm, like water. This makes the colour representation also metaphoric.

Exercise

A four word/step mantra from NLP is breathing-posture-state-performance. It can be used to create instantaneous state change.

- 1. Breathe fully two or three times.*
- 2. Allow yourself to stand at full height as you are breathing, feeling as if your spine is extending upwards.*
- 3. Affirm your capabilities to yourself as you consider your objective.*
- 4. Go about your task as if success is guaranteed.*

Breathing fully can lead to good posture; you need good posture in order to breathe correctly. Altering both your breathing and posture will lead to a change in your emotional state. Once your emotional state changes that will create a way forward to performance changes.

What may be an important first step to enjoying the benefits of an improved Peak Performance State is to experiment with one element of the physical representation of your Peak Performance State at a time and see if you can fine tune the state you desire. For example imagine you represent your PPS with the colour yellow. Try representing it with a different colour (brown). You will either not be able to change the colour or you will change the state. Try a different shade of yellow – what do you notice?

As children we used to make believe we were different people – superheroes, sports stars or movie stars. We would act “as if” we really were our heroes. Acting “as if” is a vital step forward to achieving whatever goals you have for yourself. When in this “as if” mode, immerse yourself in it totally.

Pre-shot routines

The purpose of the pre-shot routine is to ensure you are as fully prepared to play a shot successfully as you can. This means correct alignment of body and club to the target as well as a sense of certainty that the shot will be executed as planned.

Use of the visualisation exercises in combination with the breathing-posture-state-performance drill and acting ‘as if’ will create that certainty. The more habitual this becomes, the more automatically you will sense that certainty.

Practice this as you would practice your golf swing; it is a skill that will serve you better with refinement and practice.

Summary

The important question is whether the set of cues that make up the Peak Performance State lead to optimal performance or whether playing well leads to the peak state.

If you believe that you need to be playing well to attain a Peak Performance State then you will be likely to be on a roller-coaster of emotional ups and downs which change on the whim of a birdie or bogey.

Knowing the components of your peak state and then developing and maintaining this state in competition is likely to lead to more consistent long-term performance. We are responsible for and can control our emotional state and responses to events that occur to us; if not totally, then definitely sufficiently to impact performance.

It empowers us to know also that we can fine-tune our state to make it even better so that our physical, technical and mental skills can positively enhance each other on our continuing path to improvement both on and off the course.

The next few pages contain a template to assist you in identifying the components of your own Peak Performance State. Follow the directions for using this template and you will enjoy more consistency and greater levels of performance in competition.

Directions for using the templates

1. Complete the questions in on the templates to determine the components of your own state.
2. Play with some of the components of your state, remembering to return them to their original state, unless you find something that serves you better.
3. Once you are familiar with the components, practice rehearsing the state until you can trigger the state quite quickly.
4. At the golf course, practice bringing on the state as part of your pre-shot routine. Doing this will further streamline the process.
5. Use the routine in competition and notice the benefits in concentration and confidence.

Template for your Peak Performance State

Take a minute to think about a time when you were playing really well; you struck the ball purely, putted like you knew you were going to hole putts – everything was going your way.

Can you remember a round like that? Where was that? Hold that thought because these questions refer to that great round....

During that great round did you hear

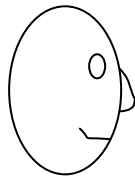
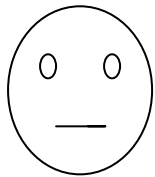
Self s talk/sounds

1 2 3 4 5
Minimal *Nothing different to normal* *Lots of self-talk*

Was the tone of internal voice/sounds

1 2 3 4 5
Soothing/nurturing *Normal tone of voice* *Harsh*

Where was the voice located?



If it was outside your head,
where was it?

Is it your voice?

Yes No

Volume of the voice

1 2 3 4 5
Quiet *Normal* *Loud*

Voice speed

1 2 3 4 5
Slow *Normal speaking voice* *Fast*

Pitch of the voice

1 2 3 4 5
Low (hypnotic) *Normal voice* *Like Mickey Mouse*

What types of things are you hearing/saying?

When you played that great round you may have had images in your head.

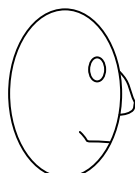
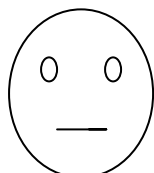
Is the image (or series of images) like a movie, still picture, series of still pictures?

If it is like a movie is it a single movie or multiple movies

If it is a picture

1 2 3 4 5
Single picture *a few pictures* *multiple pictures*

Where are the pictures located?



If it was outside your head, where was it?

Do you see the image as if you are a participant or an observer or both ?

What are the images of?

Does the image have a frame or are they panoramic ?

Are they black & white or colour ?

Are they 2D or 3D ?

What is the size of the image?

1 2 3 4 5
Postcard *life size* *Imax*

What is the extent of your peripheral vision?

1 2 3 4 5
Very narrow *medium* *broad*

Clarity

1 2 3 4 5
Out of focus *your standard clarity* *crystal clear*

Brightness

1 2 3 4 5
Dull *normal brightness* *bright*

**During that great round typically did you notice any physical sensations?
Are those sensations located in your body? If so where?**

How would you describe those sensations?

Was the sensation in one part of your body?

1 2 3 4 5
localised *entire body* *feeling extended beyond body*

Was there a sense of pressure? If so what was its intensity?

1 2 3 4 5
low *didn't notice* *high*

What was the weight of this sensation?

1 2 3 4 5
light *didn't notice* *heavy*

If it had a temperature, how would you describe it?

1 2 3 4 5
cool *normal body temperature* *hot*

Do they seem to have a shape? (like an object). If so, what is that shape?

What intensity does the feeling have?

1 2 3 4 5
mild *didn't notice* *strong*

If the sensation could have a colour to describe it, what would that colour be?

Does the sensation remind you of any object/animal, etc? If so what is it?

What sort of phrases would you use to describe this ideal performance state?

I hope you have benefitted from exploring your own peak performance state and modelling it. Visit www.golfpossibilities.com.au regularly for valuable articles and tips to help you improve your own personal best even more. If this e-book has helped you, please let me know, I love hearing success stories. E-mail me at peter@golfpossibilities.com.au