

## Embracing Failure

I play a fair amount of tournament golf, and I hear a lot of invocations on the first tee. Usually they're no more than mutterings of personal swing thoughts – “low and slow”, “finish it” and that sort of thing – but I heard a great one recently at an event in Monterey. A guy in my foursome stood behind his ball, looked up the fairway and said, “OK, Jack, don't suck.”

Admittedly, it was a pretty effective release valve for first-tee jitters. The rest of us shared a not-very-convincing laugh that said, ‘yeah, please don't let *me* suck today.’ Reflecting on both the comment and my immediate reaction to it after the tournament, it seemed to me that I was saying to myself, at some level of awareness, “you've messed up before, let's hope it doesn't happen today.” And that got me to thinking about failure in golf, and perhaps anywhere else I care to look in my life.

For most of us, golf is a game rife with failure. Sure, we arrange as many factors as possible to be in our favor – the right club selection, shot shape, alignment to the target, determination to swing freely among many – but inevitably, and often many times on any given day, we just don't execute as we intended.

This is all relative to skill level too. In my experience, the low handicapper may be able to get the ball in the hole in fewer strokes than the high handicapper, but not necessarily with fewer expectations. Getting up and down for par looks good on the score card, but it doesn't completely compensate on the memory card for the tee shot blocked into the trees or a thinned long iron from the center of the fairway. Let's face it: screwing up is integral to the game of golf for everyone and fear that it will happen again is one of the greatest producers of tension in the game.

Here's my question: Wouldn't we be better off finding some way to embrace this essential nature of our games rather than being stuck in an endless cycle of hope and fear? Instead of stashing unintended outcomes to the large sack labeled “I Suck” that we drag to the golf course, can we have some other form of relationship to our inevitable failures?

I believe there are ways I can make failure work for me rather than against me. Seems to me I need to be as present as possible in the moment of swinging. Shakespeare notwithstanding, past is *not* prologue in golf, or needn't be. As Fred Shoemaker says, be fascinated with what's happening *right now* in your swing. We need to look for what we can't see. I've found a good post-shot routine helps me stay neutral rather than lapsing – or leaping – into self-critical judgment. (Dr. Glen Albaugh's book, *Winning the Battle Within*, has a terrific post-shot routine that can do wonders for shrinking the “I Suck” sack.) Most important, I believe, is forgiveness. I don't stand over a shot with the intention to do less than my best. But I go unconscious. I have blind spots. I add effort. And failure happens. As someone sagely said, forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past – and how different golf would be with that frame of mind.

So it seems to me that creating a mental environment that enables me to learn from failure rather than trashing myself for it could really accelerate the performance I seek. But I need to do a better job of inviting failure in, accepting it, gleaning what I can and letting the rest go.

Many years ago, a young man asked Henry Ford what he should do to be as successful as Ford in business. Ford replied simply, "Fail faster." Good advice for golfers.