

The Challenge to Measure Up

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

The need to "level-up" is a consistent and predictable obstacle presented in all sports, as competitors strive to achieve their highest level of performance "comfort." Either tour-level pros become "tournament tough" playing in front of large crowds with multiple distractions and attendant pressures, or they simply don't maintain at this level for very long. This is pro golf's version of the survival of the mentally and emotionally fittest.

One reason a player may have difficulty "measuring up" is that he may question whether he "belongs" at the next higher level in terms of his talent. It is easy for those who may feel like big fish in a relatively small pond to entertain debilitating self-doubt thoughts when swimming in the company of bigger, more talented fish in a larger and much more visible pond.

Over the years I have known dozens of players who had highly proficient shot-making ability, short-game skills, and were able to shoot low scores. They had proven themselves in high school, college, state or national amateur competition. They had much of what it took to qualify for and maintain on the "big-time" professional golf tour. And a few who I played against as a kid actually did make it and had some success on the tour. But what most of them ended up not having was the psychological self-knowledge and emotional temperament to be able to perform under the fierce pressure that is part of this environment. They just couldn't cope with the stress and strain of earning a living under this kind of intense daily pressure.

And so, at some point, they would be forced to give up their dream of playing on the PGA Tour, and have to settle for dropping to lower levels of competition. Some became teaching pros or ran the pro shop at a country club. Some "stayed in the game" by becoming sales representatives for equipment companies. Others found a way to earn a living outside of golf. Most found it tough to admit they just couldn't make the grade and move on.

Levels Within Levels

There are various demarcated levels of competition, and then nested levels of performance success within the main levels. Each broad level of play (for example local, regional, state, national for amateurs; state "mini-tours," regional tours, European and Asian tours, Nike Tour, PGA tour for male pros) may be assigned a greater degree of importance by the player. The higher the importance attributed, the corresponding higher degree of nervousness and felt pressure may be hypothesized to exist during any given tournament at that level.

The recognition of levels of competition is important to understand why a skilled amateur or professional will perform well at one level but not as well when pushed up to the next level. If a player consciously or unconsciously believes he is out of his element of performance comfort and skill, added pressure will be one result.

For example, there are some pros who play well in small tournaments in various regional "mini-tours" with players who are good but at least a notch or two below PGA Tour mastery. As long as these players compete in these smaller tournaments (less money offered, smaller or nonexistent crowds, less glitzy event, and less skilled players) they perform reasonably well. But should they qualify to play in a larger tournament, like a PGA Tour event or the U.S. Open, the new environment will create added pressure, making it difficult for them to "measure up" to this higher level.

All professional golfers who play the game for a living are aware of these levels and sooner or later, figure out where they stand. It is safe to say, however, that almost all pros currently competing believe they are capable of moving to the next level. It is this belief and hope that keeps some competing for years despite little or no success.

Even when one is able to make it to the PGA Tour, there continue to be nested levels of achievement that distinguish the players. So, a player may be skilled enough to make it through the rigorous qualifying rounds to get his Tour card for one year, but unable to perform well enough (i.e., be in the top 125 of money earnings) over that year to keep his privileges. At the next level is the pro who can win enough money to keep his tour card but is unable to ever contend to win a tournament. A few top 10 or top 5 finishes become his best showings.

The next level might be the player who can finish in the top five when playing well, makes a lot of money, and is periodically "in the hunt" to win on the final day, but is unable to break through and win.

One notch up would be the player who occasionally wins a tournament but is unable to contend for a major championship. Or contends for a major but is unable to ever secure victory. It should be noted that a player who wins ten or more tournaments in a whole career is a very well-respected player and in the minority. This benchmark indicates how tough it is to win very many tournaments against the best in the world.

We are now approaching the higher altitudes of pro tournament golf. The next level includes those who were able to win one or two major championships over a career, perhaps a handful of lesser tournaments, and are considered to be in the upper echelon of players. A few dozen players over the decades would fall into this group.

As the air continues to thin, we have those "near greats" who won more than one major championship, have won numerous lesser tournament titles, and became "name" players to the golfing and sporting public during their respective eras. In this group, we might include players from the past like Walter Hagen, Jimmy Demaret, Cary Middlecoff, Lloyd Mangrum, and current senior players like Billy Casper, Gene Littler, Lee Trevino, Raymond Floyd, Hale Irwin and Johnny Miller. We would also include such current players as Tom Watson, Greg Norman, Nick Faldo, Seve Ballesteros and maybe Nick Price.

The penultimate level would be reserved for that handful of players who, thorough major championship performance, total number of tournaments won, money list standing over the years, and shotmaking ability as assessed by their peers, are considered to be the greats of all time. In this rarefied group we would find Gene Sarazen, Byron Nelson, Bobby Jones, Sam Snead, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, Jack Nicklaus, and Ben Hogan.

Arnold Palmer holds an honored place as not only one of the best ever but as the most colorful, electrifying player of his time and the single most influential figure to the growth of the game in the modern era.

And, at the top of the heap, we would co-crown as "greatest to ever play the game," Jack Nicklaus and Ben Hogan. Nicklaus would clearly stand out for all-time tournament performance records and playing longevity. And Hogan would get the nod for the best shotmaker who ever lived and for, arguably, the greatest sports comeback of all-time after severe injury. (Curiously enough, Hogan died at age 84 as I was completing this article.)

I might add that Tiger Woods, despite just beginning his pro career, appears capable of making it into at least the penultimate group. That is, if he is able to continue on his current trajectory without alien abduction, major injury, or loss of motivation. In twenty five years or so we will be in a better position to judge. He may also end up rivaling Palmer as most able to influence the future popularity of the game.