

Keep Your Cool

DISCOVER WAYS TO REMAIN CALM WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF
IN STRESSFUL SITUATIONS ON THE COURSE.

By Ashley Ryan



Golf, often seen as a calm and leisurely sport, can be surprisingly stressful, especially in high-pressure situations. Whether it's a crucial putt to win a match, hitting over water on a tough hole or playing in front of a crowd during a tournament, golfers regularly face moments that test their focus, nerves and mental resilience.

"Overcoming stressful situations on the golf course is crucial, because it directly impacts performance, mental resilience and overall enjoyment of the game," says Carlo Borunda, the director of instruction at Newport Beach

Country Club. "Golf is as much a mental challenge as it is physical, and handling stress effectively can change the outcome of your round."

Learn how to successfully overcome stressful situations with Borunda's suggestions.

BAY WINDOW: *How can overcoming stressful situations impact your overall golf game?*

CARLO BORUNDA: Learning to overcome stressful situations is essential for improving your score. By managing pressure effectively, you can maintain control over your technique

and even add clubhead speed in your swing. Ultimately, staying relaxed during the game is key to maximizing your overall enjoyment of the game.

BW: *What advice would you give to junior golfers who struggle with the pressure of competition?*

CB: For junior golfers, the competitive pressure in golf can be overwhelming, especially for those with less experience or playing in high-level competitions. Handling pressure is a crucial skill that can significantly enhance their performance and

overall enjoyment of the game. My advice to these younger golfers is to remind them that they are playing a game, and games are meant to be fun. I encourage them to seek opportunities to enjoy the day, such as making friends and appreciating the beauty of the golf course. I want them to talk about and even write down all their highlights so they can frame the day in a more positive light.

BW: *What are some other challenges golfers may face on the course?*

CB: Golfers encounter numerous challenges on the course that test their skill, strategic thinking, mental concentration and physical endurance. These challenges significantly influence their performance and ultimately determine their score.

BW: *Why is there so much pressure on the first tee? How can golfers overcome the stress of it?*

CB: The first tee shot in a round of golf often carries immense pressure due to a combination of mental, social and swing-related factors. Golfers frequently allow this single shot to dictate how they will play the rest of the round. Years ago, I made a conscious decision to approach this moment with enthusiasm. I mentally remind myself that this first swing is the beginning of a great day on the golf course with my friends. If I can't be the first to tee off, I try to be very encouraging to the person who precedes me. I remember that they are also feeling the same level of stress and will appreciate a word of encouragement. Thankfully, they often reciprocate when it's my turn.

BW: *What can you do to overcome anxiety before and during important tournaments?*

CB: The anxiety you experience before and during an important tournament can be significantly reduced by your preparation. The primary objective of your preparation should be to reach your peak performance just before your round. This will instill the necessary confidence to perform at your best. Considering the available time, create a detailed plan outlining the hours and days you can dedicate. Identify the skills you need to improve and seek guidance from your PGA coach to help you achieve your goals. Prioritize rest and maintain a healthy diet to maintain your energy level throughout the round. During your round, continue to build momentum by practicing positive self-talk. Remember, you wouldn't hire a caddie who

constantly reminds you of potential challenges on the golf course and is overly critical of your performance. Be a great caddie to yourself.

BW: *When you're close to shooting your best score, how can you remain calm and focused to reach your goal?*

CB: Shooting your best score puts you in a high-pressure situation where excitement and nerves can easily derail your focus. The pressure of completing this round intensifies the more you think about it. Staying calm and focused on the verge of a personal best demands mental discipline, physical control and strategic play. Personal experience and observing TOUR-level players in action have led me to realize that everything feels faster in these moments. The most effective strategy I've discovered to help me in such situations is to deliberately slow down my actions, including my thoughts, breathing and pace of play.

BW: *How can mental preparation impact you in all of these situations?*

CB: Mental preparation is crucial in overcoming high-pressure golf situations, such as nerves on the first tee, important tournaments and attempting to shoot your personal best score. While I prefer to remain calm and mentally positive, some golfers find success by embracing stressful moments with more intensity. Ultimately, mental preparation directly impacts performance, adaptability to challenging situations and the overall quality of play. Experimenting and practicing with different approaches can help you sharpen your focus and improve decision-making, directly impacting your play in these situations.

BW: *What types of things can you do to prepare mentally?*

CB: Mental preparation is beneficial for maintaining composure and focus during stressful situations. Golfers can enhance their mental toughness through various exercises, such as improving breathing techniques, developing a consistent pre-shot routine and utilizing visualization techniques. These strategies are designed to help golfers remain calm and composed in any pressure scenario.

BW: *What strategies help you stay present after a bad hole or poor shot/round?*

CB: Staying present after a poor shot, a bad hole or a disappointing round is crucial for maintaining focus and preventing a single mistake from spiraling into a worse score. This mental resilience allows golfers to reset their

mindset and approach after each shot with renewed determination. By focusing on the present moment, you can utilize your skills and make more informed decisions, ultimately enhancing your overall play.

BW: *Can you tell us about your most high-pressure golf experience?*

CB: Almost 20 years ago, with the help of a good friend and former NBCC member, John Stuart, I attempted to qualify for the US Open. The first of two qualifying rounds was held at NBCC. I was in one of the last groups to compete that day. I felt tremendous pressure on almost every shot of my final nine holes, having to make several lengthy putts for par as the round progressed. My final score turned out to be good enough to make it into a playoff with three other golfers for the final three spots. It felt like the whole membership—in reality, it was roughly 20 members—came out to watch the playoff. I had never been in a situation like this before.

On the first playoff hole, the long par-4 16th, I made an 8-foot par putt to remain in the competition. The 17th hole at NBCC, redesigned in 2022, is a 195-yard downhill par-3 over water to a two-tiered green. Two golfers hit excellent shots safely onto the green. One player hit his into the water hazard, which meant that a par would almost certainly secure my spot into the next round. I knew a ball in the water was the worst mistake, so I chose an extra club to make sure I cleared the hazard. Unfortunately, I pulled my tee shot some 20 yards beyond the putting green. I was now faced with a downhill pitch shot to a green that sloped severely away from my location. My shot bounced through the rough with just enough speed to tumble onto the green. It slowly rolled off the green toward a deep green side bunker, but stopped precariously on a sidehill lie about 15 feet from the hole. With everyone watching, I chipped in for a miraculous par.

BW: *Anything else to add?*

CB: Stress is one of the first challenges that golfers face. Arriving at the golf course or practice facility, making their first swing, and learning the etiquette and rules can all be extremely stressful for a new golfer. Remember this when introducing the game to a friend or family member. The primary goals are to be encouraging and supportive and to make it fun. They'll thank you later.

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