Practical psychology: the ABC approach to competing effectively

Practical sports psychology for croquet players

By Stephen Mulliner

Introduction

ABC stands for Attitude, Belief and Commitment. These are the long, medium and short-term components of a sound and effective mental approach for taking part in competition.

Attitude consists of adopting an effective approach towards the adversity inevitably encountered in competitive situations. Belief is building and maintaining a positive self-image of your performance as a croquet player. Commitment is displayed by giving every shot your best effort. All three components are mutually reinforcing and, together, build the self-confidence that enables good performances in "clutch" situations.

History

It is 30 years since the appearance of the first written reference to the role of sports psychology in playing competitive croquet[1]. Since then, sports psychology has grown considerably in its applications, in the number of publications devoted to it and in the amount of media coverage that it receives.

Players of both Association Croquet ("AC") and Golf Croquet ("GC") are fortunate. Sports psychology has risen to prominence in golf, a still-ball game that shares important characteristics with croquet. Given the enormous material rewards now available to successful professional golfers, it is little wonder that sports psychologists are in great demand on the professional golf tours and there is no shortage of books on the subject.

Croquet can be regarded as a physically simpler version of golf but it is subject to the same basic principles and pressures. In both games, the player strikes a stationary ball with a club or mallet which is swung by the hands either around the body or between the legs. The golf swing is longer and more complicated than the croquet swing and is designed to generate much higher clubhead speed than is either possible or required with a croquet mallet. Yet the goal is the same, to cause the clubhead or mallet head to strike the ball as precisely as possible with the desired amount of force in the direction of aim.

Unfortunately, it is easy for a few unwanted twitches of muscle fibres in the hands and arms to cause the swing path or the direction in which the clubface or mallet face is pointing at impact to alter by an amount which, although tiny, is sufficient to have a significant effect on the accuracy of the shot. Professional tournament golfers devote many hours a day on the practice range to try and embed the movements and "feels" in their swing which lead to a successful outcome. The role of the mind in achieving a golf swing which operates smoothly and accurately under the stress of competitive pressure is now better understood than ever before.

As croquet is an amateur sport, its players generally have neither the time nor the inclination to practise more than a small fraction of the amount typical of a professional tournament golfer. To an extent, this is mitigated by the shorter and simpler nature of the croquet swing. The path followed by a golfer's clubhead in making a full backswing (about 270 degrees from the address position) is over four metres. Few croquet players will have a backswing more than two metres long and many players using the Irish style will typically have a backswing of about one metre. The larger relative size of the croquet ball compared to the size of the mallet face and the much lower susceptibility to side spin also make swinging a croquet mallet accurately an easier task than swinging a golf club.

However, despite the greater simplicity of the croquet swing, it does not necessarily make croquet an easy game to learn or to play at a high level. The best croquet players will usually be able to point to a period near the start of their careers where they played intensively. In AC, the most difficult challenge is the development of the ability to play accurately a wide range of croquet strokes in which both balls travel significant distances, often in different directions. These strokes cannot be calculated during play. Instead, an expert AC players will have learned by repeated trial and error to translate subconsciously the desired final positions of the balls into a movement of the mallet that strikes the striker's ball in such a way to bring about the required movements of both balls. This is no mean feat, involving a combination of how hard the stroke is played, where the striker's ball is hit on its circumference and the amount of follow-through applied.

This aspect of AC does not apply to GC which involves only single-ball strokes and explains why it is now not unusual to see young players make very rapid strides from taking up GC to competing successfully in major events.

Three key dimensions – the ABC of successful competing

There are three key dimensions involved in maximising your chances of performing successfully and consistently under pressure – Attitude, Belief and Commitment.

As noted in the Introduction, Attitude is the adoption of an effective approach towards the adversity encountered in competitive situations based on successful self-management. Belief is building and maintaining a positive self-image of your performance as a croquet player, supported by appropriate mental and physical practice regimes. Commitment is displayed by giving every shot your best effort. It involves the adoption of a consistent routine before playing every stroke which covers controlling your physical environment, how your body is set up to play the stroke and how your conscious mind operates before and during the stoke. All three dimensions are mutually reinforcing and, together, build the self-confidence that enables good performances in "clutch" situations.

Before discussing these three components in detail, it is helpful to set out the psychological framework that lies behind them. The conscious mind is the name used to describe the mode in which we make most decisions in life – when reading and trying to understand what the author is saying, when making a cup of coffee, when writing an e-mail or when making a tactical choice in a croquet game in an unusual situation. When we say "that needs thinking about", we mean that we will have to apply conscious thought to decide how to react. The subconscious mind is the mode that operates when we react automatically to situations or carry out a familiar physical task. The fact that no conscious thought is involved or required generally allows greater speed and smoothness in performance. The subconscious operates when you perform competently a complex learned physical activity such as driving a car or playing a musical instrument. Car drivers can devote their conscious mind to matters other than operating the controls while their subconscious, aided by adequate attention paid to the road ahead and the rear-view mirror, can look after the job of steering the car and operating the pedals. Successful players use Attitude, Belief and Commitment to maximise their probability of swinging the mallet under subconscious control in pressure situations and thereby continuing to play accurate and successful strokes.

Attitude – the major game/minor game approach

There has never been a perfect croquet player and there never will be. Everyone makes mistakes and loses games and matches. All that varies is the frequency and the scale of the errors. It is also possible to lose even without making an obvious error if your opponent outperforms you. It is a fundamental truth of competing that making mistakes and losing is an occupational hazard of trying to win.

Adversity in competitive sport is unavoidable. In croquet, an unkind slope can divert an otherwise accurate roquet or translate an opponent's misdirected roquet into a hit. Form can vary. One day, you can bring off three successive triple peels but the next day you cannot complete an ordinary four-ball break. One day your long hoops at GC are infallible but the next day they keep bouncing out. The list is endless.

But while experiencing adversity is unavoidable, and is often the result of random chance, how you choose to react to it is under your personal control. This statement is at the heart of the matter and bears repeating – how an individual chooses to react to adversity is under their personal control. Making this choice is a conscious decision. Every croquet player is a free individual who can decide how they will react when things go wrong.

While a small minority of sports players(usually in dynamic sports) have appeared to benefit from erupting into emotional outbursts during play, the general experience is that such reactions are destructive as well as unpleasant for those within sight or sound.

The solution to the problem of dealing with setbacks is simple to state, namely to take a personal decision never to be upset by any example of adversity experienced on a croquet court. It does not matter if this is something within your control, such as an error in your pre-shot routine or your croquet swing or a random element like an unhelpful slope or a severe gust of wind at the wrong time.

It is important to understand that the reason for taking such a decision is selfish and pragmatic, not unselfish and moral. Maintaining a pleasant and equable demeanour on court is a desirable by-product but it is not the purpose. The purpose is simply to play better and win more often, especially in high pressure situations.

However, implementing such a decision may not be easy for some and that is why it is helpful to explain it in terms of the "major game/minor game" approach, abbreviated here by the author as "MG2". The major game is "self-management". It is a game you can and should win every time you choose to play it – and the opportunity to play it arises every time you choose to play a minor game, whether that be a game of croquet, some other competitive activity or any other part of your life. Imagine that – the major game is a game that you can and should win every time.

I prefer the term "self-management" to "self-control" because the latter has a moral overtone which, while worthy, is not the reason why a normal, selfish competitor should be attracted to MG2. The pragmatic reason for adopting MG2 is that it allows better performance and hence more success and satisfaction when playing minor games. MG2 does this by deliberately dissociating playing a minor game such as croquet from playing the major game of self-management.

MG2 works because it makes use of the normal human craving for satisfaction. It treats an adverse situation in a minor game as an opportunity to gain satisfaction by scoring yet another win in the major game. In croquet, an exponent of MG2 will treat a difficult hoop or crucial long roquet as a win-win situation. If you follow your pre-shot routine and hit the ball with commitment you have done everything under your control correctly and thereby scored a point in the major game. The outcome of the shot is irrelevant. If it is successful, you can give yourself a bonus point in the major game because your attitude allowed you to swing the mallet correctly and successfully. If the shot is unsuccessful but your emotional equilibrium remains undisturbed because that is how you, as the independent self-governing master of yourself that you are, have reacted to that example of adversity as you have decreed that you will always react, you have also scored another point in the major game.

Playing the major game successfully brings rewards for its own sake as well as in relation to the minor game. Who wouldn't want to walk away from a day's play knowing that you had won the major game each time that you played it? The fact that you lost one or two games of croquet, the minor game, while doing so is of only limited importance. The benefits that playing the major game successfully bring to playing

croquet include an immunity to remorse after losing a game or making a mistake, an increase in playing satisfaction by being able to take better and usually more aggressive tactical decisions (because you know that you will not suffer any emotional harm if the risk fails to pay off) and the development of an on-court persona based on stamina, determination and a refusal to acknowledge defeat until it actually occurs that makes you more difficult to beat.

It is important to remind the reader that they are the only person who can make the decision to adopt the "I am not and never will be affected" attitude of the MG2 practitioner. As part and parcel of that decision, you must accept completely that you and you alone are responsible for the attitude you adopt towards taking part in competitive play and all the consequences that go with it. You cannot place any responsibility on anyone else's shoulders – not parents, partner, pals or playing coaches. Do not associate the occurrence of mishaps with blame-placing. Mishaps are simply events that did not go as planned. They should be accepted for what they are and treated with no great importance.

When you fail a hoop for no good reason in the middle of a break, by all means take three seconds to say something colourful to yourself – but then drop it. Take a few more seconds to review whether the event or the strokes preceding it contain a learning experience of any sort (and if it does, write it down as discussed below in the Belief section in relation to deliberate mental practice) and then forget it. Literally forget it and consign it to the dustbin of history where it belongs. If you like, use the neuro-linguistic programming technique of reaching into a trouser pocket, withdrawing your hand and casting away an imaginary object which represents the bad memory. As we shall see, there are things that you definitely do want to remember and re-live repeatedly but they are not your mistakes or spots of bad luck.

In summary, MG2 maximises your chances of playing well when you next have a chance to play a minor game. This might be the next stroke or turn of a game of croquet or your next game or next tournament. It is in your self-interest to develop a strong, tough mind that treats the mishaps of competitive play philosophically and objectively, draws whatever lessons are to be learned and keeps you, the competitor, in good shape to play the next stroke or turn as well as possible.

Harry Vardon remains the only man to have won six British Open Golf Championships. His prime was in the early years of the 20th century when terms like sports psychology and self-image had not been invented. But he was an excellent self-manager as summed up by one of his comments:

"To play well you must feel tranquil and at peace. I have never been troubled by nerves in golf because I felt I had nothing to lose and everything to gain".

To take part in competitive sport is to give yourself the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of performing well under pressure and proving to yourself that you have what it takes. You should see it as a privilege to have such opportunities. The downside of exposing yourself to the risk of competitive defeat is small because no-one can expect to be successful on every occasion. As Harry Vardon said, "I had nothing to lose and everything to gain". In addition, you can enjoy the satisfaction of winning the major game of self-management every time and that is always a prize worth winning.

Belief –a positive self-image and purposeful practice

It is easier to understand the benefits of adopting MG2 and its philosophical attitude to mishaps and losses if you see yourself as a fundamentally effective and successful player. But what if you are not currently in this happy position? What if you feel you lack certain key skills (like the ability to complete a delayed triple in AC or a reliable jump shot in GC) and, deep down, you have a nasty feeling that when the pressure rises, you tend to buckle or "choke"? In other words, what if you have a negative or insufficiently positive self-image of yourself as a competitive croquet player?

Self-image is a relatively recent term and represents perhaps the single most important development in sports psychology in the last three decades. It is best understood as a part of the subconscious mind which represents our deepest and most private beliefs about ourselves in any given dimension of our lives. An individual will typically have several self-images, perhaps as employee, entrepreneur or professional, spouse or partner, parent, friend, member of the local community, club member or sports competitor. A self-image can be essentially positive or negative and an individual can have different self-images about their various life dimensions. It is quite reasonable for a happily-married and successful professional person who is also a high handicap weekend golfer to have positive self-images about their roles as spouse and breadwinner but a poor self-image as a golfer.

A player's self-image will often differ from what they say in public about their current standard of play and this disconnect is likely to be greater among top or aspiring players. While those who play games mainly socially may be willing to describe themselves cheerfully as "rubbish", better players are less likely to be publicly self-denigrating. Imagine a young player on the verge of national selection in conversation with a selector. If asked directly about the state of their game, the aspirant is likely to give a positive and glowing account of how they feel about their current performance and their hopes for the future. However, deep down, with painful memories of several near-misses in important events, the aspirant may not be able to suppress the private fear that they are a "choker" or "bottler" and that they are doomed always to stumble at the final hurdle.

The way the subconscious seems to work is that it tries to give you what it thinks you really want, namely the outcome that is consistent with your current self-image. If that is negative, your subconscious will assume that you privately prefer to end the unpleasant feelings of pressure and stress when competing by losing. It will then faithfully provide the means of bringing about this apparently "desired" outcome. This creates a vicious circle and the only way out of it is to improve your self-image. Fortunately, there is way to build a positive self-image which is simple to describe but requires considerable determination and perseverance if you are to succeed.

As indicated above, your self-image as a croquet player represents your deepest and most private beliefs about you as a croquet player because it consists of your accumulated memories of past croquet performances. However, not all memories carry equal weight and the self-image is dominated by memories that are recent or intense and especially by those which are both.

The way to improve your self-image is to flood the subconscious with positive memories of your play in competition and in practice. These will crowd out negative memories and force them further and further back in time until they are all but forgotten. Your emotional state is important. A memory associated with a state of high emotion will be more intense and hence have greater impact on self-image than one without that association. That is why adopting a calm attitude to adversity helps to minimise and preferably eliminate the harm that might otherwise flow from making errors and losing games. Conversely, when you achieve success, these are memories you want to amplify, preserve and relive. In contrast to the calm attitude you should adopt on court, your positive memories of good play and the glow of victory after winning an event should be recalled at a later date with as much passion and self-congratulation as you like.

A model of the self-image that may appeal to some is to regard it as a stack of papers which can only be added to and accessed from the top of the stack. Its contents are your croquet memories and may never be completely deleted but they can be pushed further and further down from the top and out of immediate recall by continuously adding new and positive memories.

Self-image does need to be grounded in reality. If your playing abilities are not yet in the A-Class category, it is futile to try and create the self-image of a world champion. However, developing improved croquet

playing abilities through purposeful practice is available to almost everyone. The ideal is to build a positive self-image that goes hand-in-hand with your current playing level and steadily develop both over time.

Purposeful or "deliberate" practice

The term "deliberate practice" was coined by Anders Eriksson in 1993 in his seminal paper *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*[2]. It describes the form of practice that he and his research co-workers asserted was necessary to develop and maintain top performance in any field. They rejected the belief that top performers were always distinguished by "God-given" or genetically-endowed talent and their work gave rise to what became popularly but erroneously known as the "10,000 hours rule". Mathew Syed, a former English table-tennis No. 1 and three times Commonwealth Games champion, preferred the term "purposeful" practice in *Bounce*[3] and I have adopted that term.

Purposeful or deliberate practice is practice with a defined purpose which uses clear and developing goals intended to constantly expand a player's range and level of skills. In *The Inner Game of Golf*[4], Tim Gallwey described the "Inner Game Equation" which states that "Performance equals Potential minus Interference". In this context, "Interference" means mental challenges that can impair performance at any time. Techniques for reducing Interference can have beneficial short-term effects which can lead to an immediate improvement in "Performance".

"Potential" means the highest performance of which a player is currently capable. Improving Potential is a longer-term project which can be best achieved by adopting a regime of purposeful practice.

Purposeful mental practice

Purposeful mental practice in croquet can be divided into two main subject areas. The first relates to the strategic task of building and maintaining a positive self-image. The other deals with shorter-term techniques of visualisation, mental rehearsal and positive self-talk.

Building and maintaining a positive self-image

A positive self-image of yourself as an effective and successful croquet player is built by crowding out negative memories with intense positive memories and continually nurturing, re-living and relishing these positive memories. So, how do you create and preserve good memories?

The answer is simple to describe but, perhaps reassuringly, demands real effort and perseverance to put into practice. It consists of writing down in a journal or diary a description of every example of your good play, whether in competition or in practice, and then regularly re-reading this self-congratulatory material on a regular basis, certainly at least weekly but more often if possible and always before embarking on a competitive game. The intention is to be able to bring to mind these positive memories and picture oneself carrying out the strokes successfully.

It is best to make an entry in the journal as soon as the relevant event that you wish to remember has occurred and hence it is wise to carry the journal or diary with your croquet kit so that updating it can become second nature. At the end of each day, the best way of reinforcing and reliving a positive memory is to update a spreadsheet or document dedicated to this purpose. Then read what you have written time and time again.

Modern technology now makes it possible to reinforce the written word with concepts such as video self-modelling. Have your play recorded and make a "highlights" video showing a series of successful stokes and then replay it on a regular basis. This provides a powerful visual message to your subconscious of your ability to play successful strokes.

What you are doing by these techniques is giving your subconscious an overdose of positive memories which you know to be true. The fact that this a deliberately unbalanced and skewed set of memories does

not invalidate them. There is no law that demands that your memories of your past play should be fair or balanced. The great performers at any sport have always had powerfully selective memories. Jack Nicklaus can recall in great detail the final rounds of all 18 major golf championship that he won – and almost nothing of the final rounds of the 19 majors in which he came second! Jack was an excellent self-taught sports psychologist and this is a typical example of a selective memory and how to negative memories can be crowded out with positive ones.

The power of positive memories is enhanced when associated with strong emotion. So don't hesitate to include in your journal how you felt immediately afterwards and, if it is a big win, in the days and weeks afterwards. Do not hold back in what should be a private document. Have no compunction about embellishing these memories. A really good performance deserves to be celebrated and made much of. You need to develop an inner arrogance that you are fully entitled to succeed if you prepare well for an event and play the major game of self-management. Winning may not always happen but it should never be a surprise when it does.

The other important use of your journal is to record learning points. These usually emerge from committing errors or losing games or matches. Winners generally find it much harder to recall similar lessons because they generally suffer from a form of amnesia in which the memories of all the shortcomings they displayed in winning are swamped by the euphoria of victory. Committing learning points to memory alone is unreliable. Writing them down in your journal is essential and transcribing them into your computer record is highly desirable. You do this for a hard, objective reason, namely to inform your next practice sessions and so further improve your chances of playing well and winning next time you play.

It is difficult to be a regular chronicler of your play and practice. It is easy to start out with great enthusiasm and fill the first few pages of your journal with the right sort of material. But then you miss a day, and another, and another. Sometimes you forget to read it before a game and the whole exercise becomes a chore and soon the journal remains unchanged for weeks. This is why it is difficult to maintain a positive self-image. It takes constant attention and effort and, in a completely amateur game, there are not many players with the necessary determination or, indeed, the necessary interest in self-improvement. Building a positive self-image as an effective, resourceful, self-reliant and generally highly-successful croquet player can be done and is a hugely important part of developing the strong, tough mind that, in turn, is the foundation of real self-confidence.

Visualisation, mental rehearsal and positive self-talk

Visualisation means forming a bright video image in your mind of the outcome of the stroke you intend to play. You "see" the ball either hitting its target bang in the middle or running smoothly through the hoop or coming precisely to rest at the intended point on the court. This process can be seen as programming your on-board computer and it is astonishing how effective it can be. In AC, every croquet stroke should be played only after the striker has identified exactly where the striker's ball is to come to rest. "Somewhere over there" is not good enough. With hoop approaches from short range, a particular blade of grass should always be identified.

Mental rehearsal is used here to describe two slightly different concepts. The first is an extended form of visualisation that involves many shots and so is of particular relevance to AC. You can "watch" yourself play a break, especially a complex peeling break like a sextuple, and extend your expectations without actually having to get out of bed. If you are about to play a strong opponent, visualise a game in which you inflict a crushing victory. The subconscious does not differentiate between real and imagined experience. If you find yourself 6-4 up against the GC World Champion, victory will be easier if you have already imagined many times completing the win and accepting his congratulations.

The second form of mental rehearsal involves going further than merely "seeing" the outcome of one or more strokes. Instead, the entire process of producing the intended stroke is rehearsed, including the "feels", such as how the mallet is held and the force and timing of the stroke.

Positive self-talk means the private encouragement that many players give themselves before playing a stroke. It can take the form of phrases such as "You're a great player", "You are going to play this shot so well", "This is just what you like" and anything on similar lines.

Purposeful physical practice

Purposeful physical practice is the other important contributor to building and maintaining a positive self-image. As such, it deserves some comment in this chapter. It is important to emphasise that such practice is focussed and goal-based and quite different from general warming up. 30 minutes spent practising one stroke, such as approaching hoop 2 from corner 2 in AC, will improve your skill in that respect far more than six sessions of five minutes devoted to six different skills.

However, the benefits of purposeful practice go further than this. Purposeful practice is most effective when it involves an objective measurement of some aspect of a stroke so that the subconscious can use it as feedback to improve performance.

As an example, suppose that you had been advised or had decided that you needed to improve the stop-shot ratio of your short-range hoop approaches in Association Croquet so that you can achieve forward rushes more frequently. One way of practising would be to repeat the same shot at an odd-numbered hoop from the same position and, each time, try to run the hoop to obtain a forward rush. After 20 or 30 repetitions, you would expect to see a noticeable improvement in the frequency with which forward rushes were obtained.

Now consider measuring and recording the distances that each ball travels. This can be easily done by extending a tape measure alongside the hoop. Record the distance travelled by each ball and calculate the ratio after each repetition and write it down – preferably in your journal. This simple extra step of measuring and recording will prove surprisingly effective in improving both the outcomes and the rate of improvement. It makes the trial and error process, which is at the heart of learning anything new, more precise. An attempt that informs the subconscious whether the outcome was too large or too small is not as informative as one that also provides information about *by how much* the outcome was too large or too small.

Routines like these enable a player to extend their boundaries and expectations. In the lexicon of the "Inner Game" approach to sports psychology, purposeful physical practice is the main method of extending Potential.

Commitment – playing every stroke as well as you can

Attitude is long-term, preferably lifelong or, at least, career-long. Belief is medium-term and something that may have to be worked on season by season. Commitment is short-term and applies every time you swing a mallet with intent. While there is no purpose in worrying about matters outside your control, it is vital to deal properly with those aspects of each shot that you can control. As noted earlier when discussing Attitude, if you do display Commitment even in a shot that fails, you can still give yourself a point in the major game of self-management.

Commitment is used here in relation to the "execution phase", namely the physical process of playing a stroke. It is displayed by applying a set routine which is intended to exert control over three aspects that will affect every stroke you play, namely the playing environment, your body and your conscious mind.

Before discussing these three aspects in detail, it is necessary to recognise that the execution phase will sometimes be preceded by a "choice phase" which, while distinct from the execution phase, can affect it.

The "choice phase" involves conscious thought and is required in two situations. The first is when it is necessary to choose the most appropriate line of play. This can be a strategic question (usually more applicable to AC than GC) or a tactical question (usually more applicable to GC than AC) but also involves judgement of your own current ability level so that the next stroke is one that you are capable of executing successfully. It is difficult to engage full Commitment to a stroke about which you are doubtful.

The second situation is when things are going wrong and you need to pause before playing the next stroke in order to consider the situation and decide on a remedy. Pressure can easily lead to losing focus, speeding up your play and forgetting your normal execution routine. What is worse, pressure can also prevent you from realising that this is happening for several strokes. Once the situation is appreciated, a choice phase is needed to "reboot" yourself and actively bring to mind the correct process to be employed in the execution phase.

The environment

Controlling the playing environment simply means recognising that, when it is your turn to play, you "own" the court for a short time. You have the opportunity to make sure everything is as you want it to be before you swing the mallet. In GC, many players test the firmness of the hoop before they attempt a hoop stroke and, if they find that it is a little loose in the ground, will firm it up. The practical benefit is that this reduces the risk of a slightly inaccurate hoop stroke being held up in the jaws or a forceful hoop shot wasting energy on vibrating the hoop and failing to travel as far as intended. The psychological benefit is that by taking steps to control the playing environment you make it less likely that you will rush the stroke.

There are other small housekeeping jobs that may be done, such as brushing away any detritus on the planned path of the ball or removing a loose item on the court that may catch your eye. But, above all, you are demonstrating to yourself that you are taking the proper amount of care in preparing for the stroke and, by so doing, are providing justification for success.

The body

The next step is to ensure that you have aimed the shot correctly and that your body is in the correct position to maximise the chances of making a successful stroke. This consists of three stages. The first stage is aiming the stroke, usually by stalking the ball. This is followed by settling into your stance and then by initiating or "triggering" the swing. Effective players have a consistent routine from the moment they feel ready to take their stance to the moment when the clubhead is accelerated from the end of the backswing (or final backswing for those who cast) to hit the ball.

The second stage involves taking a comfortable stance that feels exactly the same every time it is taken – and therefore gives rise to no doubts about the aim, the distance that the ball is from the feet or where the weight is placed on the feet.

The third and final stage is when the mallet is put into motion. Everyone has their own personal trigger. If you cast over the ball, it might be a set number of swings that leads to the final backswing and hence to the forward swing that hits the ball. If you do not cast, it could be a slight downwards pressure on the ground by either the toe or the heel of the mallet-head. The important point is to be completely consistent and use the same trigger every time.

The conscious mind

The last aspect is control of the conscious mind. Ideally, it should be empty and quiet when you swing the mallet. It should be in a state of detachment and "unconcern", with at most a polite and non-judgmental

interest in the outcome of the stroke. I adopt the attitude before a hoop stroke that the ball has already run the hoop but the hoop just doesn't know it yet. Then I watch myself swing the mallet back and through and see the ball pass smoothly through the hoop, ideally to the desired position.

It is easier to say this than to achieve it under pressure. If such a state of detachment is not something that you can currently achieve or, perhaps, bring yourself to trust, the next best approach is to give the conscious mind something precise to do. In my case, when needed, the task I give it is to judge whether the exact centre of the mallet face hits the exact "rear apex" of the ball (the point on its circumference nearest the player) and then score the accuracy of the contact out of ten. Another technique is to use a three-beat mantra such as "Keep It Smooth" where you say to yourself "Keep" as the final backswing begins, "It" when you detect the end of the backswing and "Smooth" as the mallet hits the ball.

Keeping the conscious mind out of the swing is something that many croquet players find difficult. The best way to convince yourself that it works is by experimenting. Begin by playing a practice break in "spectator mode". Then play a friendly with the same attitude. Simply regard the experience as an experiment, the outcome of which you will record in your journal. If it works and, most importantly, if you find that it is a satisfying way of playing croquet, then you should use it when playing in your next tournament. In this respect, it is important not to be worried by the impact of such experimentation on your playing record. The development of grading systems in both AC and GC has been popular but it is easy to become too concerned about grades and rankings and avoiding "bad" losses. A further benefit of the MG2 attitude is that it makes it easier to experiment in this way in order to achieve long-term benefits.

The need to entrust stroke execution to the subconscious is well understood in dynamic sports. The sequences of muscle movements required by expert performers in racket sports, cricket and baseball to react to a moving ball and hit it successfully are too complex and need to happen too quickly to be able to be directed effectively by the conscious mind. These sequences have to be developed over a long period of purposeful practice and encoded in the subconscious so that they form a single "chunk" of activity that can be called for as soon as the player detects the need for a particular stroke. This is "implicit" monitoring in action and a player who displays it can be said to be "unconsciously competent". In contrast, a novice depends on the conscious mind to conduct "explicit" monitoring of the same activity and can be said to be "consciously incompetent".

The same principle applies to the still-ball sports of golf, croquet and table games (such as billiards, pool and snooker). Expert performers trust their swings or cueing actions and play their strokes with as little conscious thought as possible.

It is appropriate to end this section with a word about "choking", which is when a normally expert player suddenly displays a significant drop in competence. The explanation is that they have, at least temporarily, ceased to play in the implicit or unconscious mode and have somehow switched to the explicit or conscious mode. Suddenly, they look like a novice because they have reverted to the control system they used when they were a novice. Choking is associated with high pressure situations but exactly why it happens and why some people are less affected than others remains obscure. Perhaps the greatest benefit of adopting the MG2 attitude is that it reduces the likelihood of a choking episode and, when it does occur, permits a practitioner to survive it with relative equanimity.

Conclusion

Let me finish by repeating that Attitude, Belief and Commitment are the long, medium and short-term components of a sound and effective mental approach for taking part in competition. The most important is undoubtedly Attitude. If you are able to take the decision to free yourself from agonising over mishaps or beating yourself up after making a mistake, a more effective and enjoyable future awaits you. But only you can take that decision.

Stephen Mulliner

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Footnotes

1. McCullough, John and Stephen Mulliner. *The World of Croquet*. The Crowood Press, 1988.
2. Ericsson, K. Anders et. al. *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*. American Psychological Association, Inc. 1993
3. Syed, Matthew. *Bounce*. Fourth Estate, 2010.
4. Gallwey, W. Timothy. Jonathan Cape Limited. 1981.