



Elite sportspeople can teach us a lot about competency and expertise. Professional golfing, in particular, is a high-stakes mental game, where managing the emotional and mental state is crucial. For over 20 years **Lee Crombleholme** has worked with a range of amateur and professional sportspeople, including elite golfers on the major tours.

## LEARNING FROM SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: A CONVERSATION WITH LEE CROMBLEHOLME

### KEY POINTS

1. Elite players are not only more technically competent. They are a lot clearer, with a quieter mind, and are better able to manage their emotions.
2. Elite golfers keep the direction of their thoughts more 'towards'. They focus on what they want to do as opposed what they don't want to do. Asking 'effective questions' helps a player to focus on what they want to achieve.
3. Turning attention from frustration to what's going well, even if not completely successfully, helps to build confidence and manage arousal.
4. People naturally like to practise what they are already good at, and need psychologically safe environment to practise what they need to improve on.
5. Leaders help to set up the team for success, bringing players together to support each other and adapting the approach to each individual.
6. We need to pay attention to our biological state, attitudes, and behaviours.



**Steven Shorrock (SS):** Lee Crombleholme, thank you for joining me. Could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background and what it is that you do.



**Lee Crombleholme (LC):** I'm a registered sport psychologist. I work predominantly in golf now.

Historically, I went to university and studied psychology and sports science, and then started working with golfers and other people in other sports, right up to the European Tour. I'm in America at the moment for one of the big events on the US tour. I've also worked at a Ryder Cup. I currently work with about eight of the top European tour players. I help them to stay focused and deal with pressure. This week at the Players' Championship in the States, I think the

winner takes home nearly two million dollars. There's a lot of pressure. So, it's making sure they are motivated, in the correct way, and for the right reasons. Making sure that they practise and in a way that will help build confidence, getting into the zone.

**SS:** So one question I have is, what is the difference between a very good pro golfer and the elite golfers that you work with today?

### The Quiet Mind

**LC:** It's multifaceted in sport. But golf is quite a technical, physical movement. So they have to be very competent in their basic golf swing, or the way that they chip the ball, or the way that they putt. They are constantly tweaking and changing their technique. And the more elite the player is, the more competent they are from a technical, physical point of view. But from a mental point of view the difference between a top 20 player in the world and someone who is 500th in the world would be that they would be a lot clearer. They would have a much quieter mind. Things are more subconscious, more automatic. They have a better ability, generally, to manage their emotions, sometimes their expectations. But from a mental point of view, one of the key things is they have quieter minds. They are thinking less about the technique because they are more competent with that. They just stay focused on things that are relevant. And they keep the direction of their thoughts more 'towards'. So they focus on things that they want to do as opposed what they don't want to do, if that makes sense.

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**SS:** That makes a lot of sense. If as an air traffic controller you are thinking about a flight level not to use, then there is a risk you actually instruct an aircraft to fly to a level or altitude that is actually blocked. Because you're actually thinking about the wrong thing, rather than thinking about what you should do. How would that would translate to a golfer?

### Asking effective questions

**LC:** If they're on a tough tee shot where there might be water down the left-hand side and out of bounds down the right, and if they start saying "don't hit it into the water", the brain pictures very quickly and creates an image of hitting into the water. Now there is a good chance that they might hit it left into the water, or overcompensate and hit it right, into the out of bounds or into the trees. So I get golfers to ask effective questions. Rather than come up with statements, which would be "OK I want to hit there", I get them to ask questions: "what would a really good shot look like here?" If you ask an effective question, then 99 times out of 100 they might create a positive image. But also in asking an effective question it gets the subconscious to answer. So asking effective questions would get a player to really focus on what it is that they want to achieve. That doesn't guarantee that shot but we are loading the dice in their favour.

**SS:** Right, what would an effective question look like?



An effective question on putting would be, "where do I want to start it to hole it?" On a chip shot around the green, "where do I want to land the ball in order for it to go in the hole?" Asking those questions creates the more positive, 'towards', directional image and answer. So it's not only creating the image. It's also a loaded question because you are getting the player to focus on holing the putt, as opposed to missing the putt – that would be an avoidant goal, trying not to miss the putt. And even good golfers can think like that.

**SS:** What else do golfers do in practice? How do they practise physically as well mentally?

### Practice

**LC:** We create drills, challenges, games. We bring some competitiveness into the practice days and into the warm-ups. Set little challenges, how close you can get, a certain number of chip shots, and measuring those. So there is something at stake. You can't

create the same pressure as high-level competitive golf in practice but you can create an intention. These guys are so competitive that if I set a challenge they will want to meet the challenge. It is very difficult to replicate the pressure of coming down the last hole of a major championship because the heart rate is going, the emotions can be all over the place. They can be thinking avoidance, you know, "don't mess this up, if I win a major it can be worth 10 million". So you're not going to be able to create that kind of pressure but you can facilitate that need to achieve. I set them quite strong challenges; ones that if they work really well and perform really well, they can reach, and their confidence goes up.

**SS:** So what would be quite a tough challenge that you might set to try to recreate, obviously nowhere near the kind of pressure of an actual game, but to recreate some of the conditions?

**LC:** With the technical coach they will just hit and repeat, repeat, repeat. I'll mix it up, so they might drive a shot towards the target and then change it to different club towards another target. And the better they get I will make those target areas smaller. The other day with one of my players here, we set up a 15 foot, a 30 foot putt and then a 45 foot putt. The 30 footer was taking a long time and I can see the frustration building in this player because he kept just missing. After 10-15 minutes I went over and said, "Look, we need to be focusing on the good things you are doing with the ball. If you shift your focus away from the frustration of missing, to actually appreciating the fact that you might have really good speed on that putt, even though it missed, or you started it on line." There's always something, some positive that you can pick out, unless it's a real disaster.



I've got in my mind the image of a spotlight that was previously on his frustration and on his annoyance, which I guess is going to raise his arousal in a bad way, and you have tried to get him to move that spotlight to examining what went well and how can I keep that, and build on that. And again that's something that air traffic controllers and pilots can use in their training to focus on what has gone well.



Even if you do fail but you learn from it, then it becomes a very valuable experience. In sport, you know you can't win all the time, especially in golf. When Tiger Woods was at his absolute best I think his win percentage at tournaments was something like 25%, which is phenomenal. So even Tiger Woods was losing 75% of the time. If you can constructively reflect on failure then you are always learning.

**SS:** So I think what you've touched on is the difference between technical skills, which is how you putt, and your posture, and so on, and non-technical skills, which you might call mental skills, which are more about decision-making, situation awareness, managing stress, fatigue, arousal, and those kinds of things.

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**LC:** Absolutely. But also, a golfer will tend to practise things that they do really well all the time. If they are not very good at chipping then they might avoid practising chipping, which seems absolutely crazy. But it's just human nature. They want to stand there on the range and hit their iron shots and boom the driver down there because it makes them feel good and boosts their ego. But if they're not very good at the chipping aspect around the greens, they might avoid that because they don't want their confidence to get knocked. So I make sure that they work on these things and they manage their mental state effectively in order to be able to build confidence in those areas. People always say I want to build my confidence and I ask a question, is it confidence that we

need to build or is it the mind that we need to quieten down? There is quite a distinction there. Someone who lacks confidence will generally have a busy mind.

**SS:** But I think the insight about us as human beings, we like to practise what we're good at. I guess practising something that you are not good needs a psychological safe environment, which means that you will make mistakes and that's fine. We're here to learn from them. No-one's going to judge you for them. So how do you create that psychological safety with someone who is actually one of the world experts in their field – in your case in golfing?

**LC:** You start off with the easy stuff. If you use chipping as an example, you start off with a simple basic chip shot, just get that within 5 feet or something like that – a nice, simple, basic task. And gradually make it more challenging.

### Competency and Teams

**SS:** Right, so we've covered quite a bit of ground, and a lot of that relates to the individual golfer I suppose so we've talked about arousal, preparation and practice. And we've talked about effective questions, and the quiet mind. But what about the Ryder Cup, the team tournaments?

**LC:** A lot of the Americans were individuals. They never used to mix with each other off the golf course. The Europeans, even though our world rankings weren't as high as the Americans, we went on a run of winning Ryder Cups. A lot of that was put down to the fact that the Europeans were

friends. They would go out for dinner together. But with the Americans, there was a running joke where all you see in a hotel corridor was empty plates from room service. But now the Americans socialise a lot more, especially young guys. And I think that's why they picked up their game in the Ryder Cup. I was at Hazeltine at a Ryder Cup with one of my clients. In the team room, everyone was encouraging everyone else. Everyone put their individual rivalries to the side, just working for the team. They'll bring motivation speakers in. Alex Ferguson came to one. And communication is vital. Honesty is vital. But positive reinforcement within the team is essential. If someone already won or lost the match they will go and support the other matches. They don't just go into the clubhouse and sit there and have some lunch. Everyone is out on the golf course.

### Leadership



I read about Colin Montgomerie's team in this book called *Superteams* and a couple sentences here describe that kind of environment. "He won the 2010 Ryder Cup with 12 players who in a straight match up with their American counterparts were the inferior team on paper without playing a shot. But he'd create an environment where the team was meticulously set up for success, choreographing its members to maximise the benefits of collaboration empowering leaders throughout the playing order and supporting his charges with the vital personal coaching at the most critical moments." So that kind of thing that you've just been describing.



**LC:** They call it 'synergy', when the power of the team exceeds its individual components. Colin Montgomery created an amazing environment. They had artwork on the walls – very positive and energetic – so there were constant subconscious reminders about how well this team could perform. And they played fantastic. The captain's role in the Ryder Cup is huge. You can see the energy in the teams when they are directed into that kind of peak performance.

**"They call it 'synergy', when the power of the team exceeds its individual components."**

**SS:** And obviously in aviation we have captains on the flight deck. But from an air traffic control point of view, it's a little bit different, because each traffic controller in a way is a captain of their sector or position, but there are also supervisors. Are some of the captains from the golfing world using some of the same kinds of approaches that are you might use? Or is it something really quite different that they're doing?

**LC:** There's certain players that you want to rev up, and certain players that you want to calm down. And a good captain will know. So someone like Ian Poulter is a player who needs to be revved up. He needs to be energised, and when he does that, then he is unbelievable, and his Ryder Cup record is phenomenal. The polar opposite of that would be someone like Victor Dubuisson, who is a very talented French golfer. He's very introverted.

**SS:** So you can bend human nature to a degree but with someone who is very introverted, you can't change that too much. So you've got to work with their nature rather than work against it.

**LC:** The sign of a good captain, or a good manager, if you look at some of the great football managers like Bill Shankly or Sir Alex Ferguson, is they get the best out of each individual player. They will talk to them completely differently. I'll have completely different approach with Player A to Player B depending on personality. And a good manager in a traffic control would do exactly the same thing.

**SS:** So they'd have to have good emotional intelligence. They'd have to be well attuned to the different individuals and have that level of empathy, to understand what their needs are, and what strengths are. You'll know over time certain people will respond in different ways.



That's right, absolutely. Whether to put their arm around them and nurture them that way, or to give them an earfull!

**SS:** What that means then though, is that as a captain, or at any level of management, you've got to spend enough time with the frontline people – the golfers, the pilots, the controllers, the footballers – to know them, to know their strengths, to know how they will respond under pressure, or in different situations. To know, well, how are you going to tailor your approach as a captain, or as a supervisor, or as a manager? As a sport psychologist, if you were to spend some time with air traffic controllers or with pilots, what might you do with them to help them to get their best performance?

**LC:** I would explain the framework that I work around. It's a three level framework. Level three is the top level – the behaviours and processes. With a golfer it might be their course management, decision-making, pre-shot routines, effective questions. But in order for level three to function level

two needs to function, and I call that the attitude level. Within that you've got different types of motivation, whether it's mastery or ego. A mastery motivated individual would be into learning about the nuances the game. It would be me versus me, me versus the golf course. The money side, and playing against other competitors, would be the ego side. And within the attitude level we've got the 'towards' goals and the avoidance goals. So with air-traffic controllers I would guess we need to be more 'towards', more 'mastery', focusing on the task. Then we go into level one, which I call biological level, because it's about how the blood is flowing around the brain, so it's more the emotional management. So with air traffic controllers, generally you would want them to be emotionally calm, clear, a nice quiet mind, so they can make the right decisions. If you can get all three levels functioning really nicely, that's when you get that peak flow state. That's almost when the behaviours on level three just happen automatically.



*I think that's really a nice simple framework that any air traffic controller or pilot can probably remember and relate to.*

**LC:** And it works from the bottom up. You can be the best golfer in the world technically, from a golf swing point of view, but if level one isn't functioning well – if they are an emotional wreck – then they're not going to be able to swing a golf club under pressure or perform to their ability. We see amazing golfers on the practice range who just can't do it on the golf course because they are getting too emotional or they focus on where they don't want to hit the ball. They never get down the top 500 in the world.

Lee Crombleholme studied Psychology and Sport Science at undergraduate and postgraduate level. He has over 20 years experience helping golfers from club level up to International amateurs and European Tour professionals. Lee travels around the World working with sports people and conducting Mental Coaching Seminars to all levels of players. Lee is the founder of Winning Golf Mind.



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A link to the audio conversation and the full transcript is on SKYbrary for HindSight 27 under 'Online Supplement'.