

# WHEN GOLF REFUSES TO OBEY



[This is an AI generated image to protect the players identity]

## Golf Reveals Hidden Frustrations

Most golfers know the feeling. The shot does not match the picture in the head. The score does not reflect the hours of practice. The swing that felt reliable yesterday feels strangely unfamiliar today. The game, rather rudely, refuses to bend to what we want from it.

That gap between expectation and reality is where frustration takes hold.

I saw this earlier this year at a tournament I was attending. A young player, who I will call Dennis, was clearly struggling. He is a good golfer. His growing frustration was beginning to lead him rather than inform him.

His scores were not what he was capable of producing. That was true. But he could not see that other players were fighting their own private and yet similar battles. He berated himself for wrong club selection, poor decisions and imperfect execution.

I wish I could say I only observed this from a distance. I didn't. I recognised it. I have been there many times. The self-criticism. The feeling that I should be better than this by now.

But golf keeps offering the same lesson, whether we want it or not.

We are incomplete.

We are imperfect.

And whatever is happening right now is impermanent.

## **Incomplete**

The idea that we can reach a point where we know enough, understand enough and are somehow finished as learners is absurd. Yet many golfers behave as though they should already be the finished article.

This is particularly true of emerging players. Once they reach a certain level, they often expect progress to continue in a linear fashion. They believe that if they have hit a shot well before, they should be able to hit it well again. Of course they can. But, every time? On demand? Under pressure? In different weather? From different lies? With different feelings in the body?

Golf does not work like that.

Every shot gives a result. That result is not automatically good or bad. We label it. A seven-iron to ten metres from the flag may be excellent for a mid-handicap golfer and disappointing for a tour professional. Same result. Different expectation. Different label.

This matters because golfers often do not suffer from the shot itself. They suffer from the meaning they attach to it.

"That was terrible."

"I always do this."

"I am useless under pressure."

"I should not be making that mistake."

None of those statements help the next shot. Most of them are not even accurate. They are emotional labels, usually applied in the moment when the golfer is least able to make a fair assessment.

A more useful response might be:

"That's not like me."

"Was it my decision, my execution, or my expectation?"

“What does the next shot need me to do?”

These are better questions because they keep the player in the game. They turn the shot into information rather than evidence for the prosecution.

Dennis is not a finished player. None of us are. As long as we are breathing, we are incomplete. That is not a weakness. It is the human condition that makes learning possible.

## **Imperfect**

The pursuit of perfection can be useful, up to a point. It can sharpen standards, improve practice and push a golfer to prepare properly.

But perfection can also become destructive.

Golfers often talk as though the perfect round exists. I am not sure it does. Even on our best days, there is usually a missed chance, a loose swing, a poor read, a decision we might have made differently. I have been fortunate enough to have a handful of course records, and in all but one of them I dropped a shot somewhere along the way.

That is golf.

Some of my most satisfying rounds were not the ones where I executed every shot beautifully. They were the ones where I played poorly, managed myself well, scrambled hard, and signed the card knowing the score was probably the best I could have produced that day.

There is a lesson in that.

Good golf is not always the result of having it all together. Often it is the result of managing the game we have on the day.

Many golfers are waiting for their “A” game before they allow themselves to enjoy the round. That is a mistake. The stronger player is not the one who only plays well when everything feels perfect. Almost anyone can do that. The stronger player is the one who can still function when the swing feels slightly off, the putter is cold, or confidence has wandered elsewhere for the afternoon.

If most golfers could turn their “B” game into something reliable, their scores would improve. More importantly, their experience of the game would improve.

Perfection may be a direction of travel, but it is a dangerous destination to demand.

## **Impermanent**

Even the idea of a reliable “B” game is not quite as simple as it sounds.

Everything changes.

A swing thought that works today may be useless by the weekend. Confidence can appear without warning and disappear just as quickly. A player can feel fluent on the range and uncomfortable on the first tee. I have often found the opposite: a poor warm-up is sometimes followed by a solid round. The body changes. The weather changes. The course changes. The pressure changes. The mind certainly changes.

This is not a fault in the system. It is the system.

Golf is played in changing conditions by changing people. Yet many golfers act as though the game should remain still long enough for them to master it completely.

When things are going well, we want them to stay exactly as they are. When things are going badly, we fear they will remain that way forever. Neither is usually true.

Form changes. Feeling changes. Scores change. Understanding changes.

The player who accepts this has a better chance of adapting. The player who refuses to accept it usually keeps arguing with reality.

This does not mean we should be passive. It does not mean accepting poor preparation, lazy thinking or careless practice. It means recognising that golf is not a fixed object. It is a moving conversation between the player, the course, the conditions, the body and the mind.

“The question is not, ‘How do I make this stay the same?’ ”

The better question is: “What is true today, and how do I respond?”

How to use this during a round

Ideas are only useful if they can survive contact with the course.

So the next time frustration appears, the golfer might pause long enough to ask a few simple questions:

What was I expecting?

Was that expectation reasonable?

Was the mistake technical, tactical, emotional, or simply part of the game?

What information did the shot give me?

What does the next shot require?

These questions do not remove frustration. That would be unrealistic. Frustration is part of golf because expectation is part of golf. But good questions can interrupt the downward spiral.

There is a difference between caring and clinging.

The golfer should care about the shot, the score, the preparation and the effort. Caring gives energy to improvement. But clinging is different. Clinging says the result must be exactly as imagined. It leaves no room for uncertainty, bad bounces, poor timing, nerves, weather, or simple human imperfection.

That is where damage is done.

A player who can say, "I am incomplete," remains open to learning.

A player who can say, "I am imperfect," can make mistakes without being destroyed by them.

A player who can say, "This is impermanent," can handle both good and bad golf with a little more balance.

### **The lesson**

After the round, I had a quiet conversation with Dennis. I was not speaking as his coach. I simply asked what he had been sensing while he was playing.

It was clear that frustration had been building inside him. Not just disappointment, but something heavier. The feeling that he should already be beyond these mistakes.

"I explained the idea, often associated with Zen-influenced Japanese aesthetics, that things are incomplete, imperfect and impermanent. I encouraged him to see mistakes not as proof of failure, but as part of the learning. I asked him to recognise that he was still early in his journey, with plenty of time to understand the game and himself more fully.

In simple terms, I was saying: it is OK to make mistakes. Not because mistakes do not matter, but because they are often where the learning is found.

The next time I saw him, he seemed a little lighter. Still frustrated, of course. Frustration does not give up its grip that easily. But perhaps there was a small space between the poor shot and the self-attack. Sometimes that space is enough.

Golf will never fully obey us. That is part of its cruelty, and part of its beauty.

The game does not bend simply because we want it to. The ball does not care what we intended. The scorecard does not record how much we hoped, practised, or believed we deserved better.

But if we stop demanding that golf confirms who we think we should already be, it can show us something more useful.

It can show us where we are.

And if we are willing to look without tearing ourselves apart, that may be enough to help us move forward.

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