

## Golf psychologists say players who control their thoughts are most likely to be successful

<http://triblive.com/sports/golf/10625843-74/rotella-golf-open>



*Barry Reeger | Tribune-Review*

Soren Kjeldsen signs autographs for fans next to the ninth green during the second day of U.S. Open practice rounds Tuesday, June 14, 2016, at Oakmont Country Club in Oakmont.

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BY ANDREW ERICKSON | Wednesday, June 15, 2016, 9:33 p.m.

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When golf psychologist Dr. Bob Rotella first sat down with Ernie Els after his U.S. Open victory in 1994, his purpose wasn't to fix a hitch or a bout of nervousness but to analyze what was then the young South African's proudest golf achievement.

The video replay of Els' playoff victory at Oakmont stood out to Rotella because Els wasn't perfect. He often missed when his opponents, Colin Montgomerie and Loren Roberts, did not. But he responded to those misses, and the result was his first major victory.

"It was amazing because Ernie got it up and down from everywhere. I use that as an example for all the guys that it is very doable," Rotella said of winning the U.S. Open. "Mentally and emotionally, it's 'Are we ready to accept the fact that everyone's going to miss a lot of shots?' "

Rotella, whose list of clients has included Rory McIlroy, Padraig Harrington, Darren Clarke and Keegan Bradley, said two primary factors whittle the U.S. Open field from 156 to between 15 and 20 realistic winners each year.

The first is the difficulty of courses like the one hosting this year's U.S. Open — Oakmont Country Club — but the second and more important reason is belief in oneself, Rotella said.

"A lot of people just eliminate themselves because as soon as they get a bad bounce or a bad break, they just say, 'Well, people like me aren't supposed to win tournaments like this. Here we go,' " Rotella said. "They're looking for something bad to happen."

Dr. Gio Valiante, a golf psychologist who has worked with players like Matt Kuchar and Davis Love III, said that number of potential winners shrinks even smaller down the stretch Sunday, when, traditionally, closers close and others don't, some of which has to do with genetics.

"What I've found is people who don't close well, they're what's called 'high arousal,' right? Their heart beats faster than the next guy. Their blood pressure goes up. They sweat more. They get quicker, so it's just an amplification of nerves," Valiante said. "Some people are born with a very low arousal level, some people are born with a very high arousal level. It's really a key thing out of the back nine."

In some cases, Valiante said, one's personal motor can be trained to handle situations of stress.

For William McGirt, whose first career PGA Tour win came a couple weeks ago at the Memorial Tournament, pulling out a playoff victory over Jon Curran on Sunday stemmed largely from ditching his normal tendency of speeding up his routine.

Helping him stay in the moment was his caddie of six years, Latrobe native Brandon Antus.

"His tempo slowed down. His golf swing, his walk all slowed down. Even our conversations, like talking about the wind and everything, slowed down," said Antus, who will caddie his seventh U.S. Open this week but his first with McGirt. "That was a huge factor for Will. When it got tough, Will was at his best."

Traits of relaxation and quick mental recovery are learned over time for many professional golfers.

Soren Kjeldsen, now 41 and set to play a U.S. Open at Oakmont for the second time, said it has taken him years of oscillating success and failure to understand he is at his best when forgiving himself for his mistakes on the course.

At courses like Oakmont, there typically are many mistakes that appear out of nowhere, so they are best met with a relaxed attitude, Kjeldsen said. During preparation for majors, he said it takes a little additional time to get in the mindset of not worrying about his score but instead trying to hit his best shot every shot.

"It's sort of acknowledging that the game is one thing this week, but actually being patient is probably more important than it is any other week," Kjeldsen said. "Apart from that, I still think there's a lot to be said for standing on the first tee, being free and loose and playing the game that you love with a smile."

Two-time U.S. Open champion and Fox golf analyst Curtis Strange said the toughest part of closing out a major isn't playing but waiting.

Nervous thoughts would creep in, Strange said, the night before a final round or Sunday morning while sipping a cup of coffee and waiting for a mid-afternoon tee time.

"That was the toughest time I ever or any player would ever tell you. That's the hardest time of championship golf," Strange said. "Once you tee off, you're fine. You play. Good, bad or indifferent, you go play."

Rotella said it is easy to recognize the golfers who are mentally the strongest as they are the ones who need between three and five seconds after sinking a tournament-winning putt to realize what they've done.

They are the golfers, Rotella said, who are so locked in that they have no way of producing negative thoughts. They already eliminated those thoughts Saturday night.

"You've got to prepare yourself to not let those thoughts jump in, and as soon as they do jump in, you've got to dump it and laugh at it and say, 'Look, you silly son of a buck, let's just get back to doing what I need to do on each shot,'" Rotella said. "That's the ultimate challenge."

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