

An Exploratory Study of the Meaning and Experience of Strategic Decision-Making for Elite Level Golfers

Erik O Gnagy¹, PhD, PGA, John B. Bartholomew¹ PhD

¹The University of Texas, at Austin

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to expand the field's knowledge and understanding of strategic decision-making in competitive golf. Thus far, most of the decision-making literature in sport has focused on the accuracy or *correctness* of individual decisions (Catteuw et al., 2010; Macquet, 2009) and the development of expert decision-makers (Berry, Abernathy, & Cote, 2008). Identifying both correct and incorrect decisions is useful because these decisions often directly impact the outcomes of performance. However, it is also important to understand the processes (e.g., judgments) that influence individual decisions (Bar-Eli & Raab, 2006). As such, findings from this study will expand the field's understanding of these processes and thus will be useful for applied sports psychology consultants, professional golf coaches, and elite-level competitive golfers.

Methods:

Utilizing methods consistent with the practice of applied sports psychology, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who have first hand experience competing at elite-levels of golf (e.g., collegiate, elite-level amateur, low-level professional, and PGA tour). Participants from this study have gone on to win PGA tour events, Major championships, Canadian tour, and European tour events.

Interviews informed by both existential and phenomenological methods range from unstructured interviews to semi-structured interviews (Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989; Greenfield, Greene, & Johanson, 2007). This style of interview typically involves the use of open-ended questions that are very broad and non-leading. For, according to Polkinghorne (1989) interviews are not conducted to confirm what is already known, but rather are used to expand our understanding. As such these interviews are driven more by the participant than the researcher (Fossey et al., 2002; Lavery, 2003; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio). This process assists in lessening any potential bias the researcher may bring to the study (Greenfield, Greene, & Johanson, 2007).

The semi-structured interviews for this study consisted of two questions. First the participants were asked, "What's it like to make strategic decisions in competition?" Follow up probes were used to gain greater clarity and to encourage the participants to provide more in depth descriptions of their experiences. At a point in which the participants had appeared to exhaust all their thoughts on the topic, participants were asked a second and final question. Each participant was asked, "How do you define yourself as a golfer and how do your decisions fit with that identity?" Again, follow up probes were asked until the participants felt they no longer had anything else to add. Each interview lasted approximately 101 minutes.

The data analysis consisted of an interpretive analysis informed by Hermeneutic procedures and recommendations from Colaizzi (1978), Cote et al., (1993), Dale (1996), and Tesch, (1990). These procedures are an iterative process utilizing idiographic and nomothetic analysis, which includes decontextualizing and recontextualizing the data. Decontextualizing of the data involves removing individual units of meaning from each transcript. Meaning units, which Tesch (1990) defined as "a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea..." (p. 116) are organized into similar groups. This process helps to condense the data into a more manageable form for interpretation (Phillips-Pula, Strunk, & Pickler, 2011). When recontextualizing the data the researcher checks for consistency between individual groupings of meaning units and the transcript as a whole. In addition, recontextualizing also includes the nomothetic analysis where the research looks for convergence amongst the meaning categories for all the participants (Sadala & Adorno, 2002). The convergence of the categories of meaning units constitute the structure or "essence" that are the essential components revealing the

experience and meaning of the phenomena as described by the participants (Valle & Halling, 1989).

Results:

These eight golfers provide a vast range of experience and represent a broad spectrum of personal preferences for making strategic decisions in golf. Their descriptions demonstrate the complexity of the phenomena and the infinite contextual factors that are interwoven within the experience. Therefore the participants shared experiences from a variety of distinct contexts rather than from a single event that they had in common. That is, participants shared decisions from numerous golf experiences rather than talking about a specific, common event like their first professional event, or the experience of making a hole in one. Although this makes it more difficult to derive commonalities, the present study revealed five common components that describe what's it's like to make strategic decisions in golf for these eight golfers. The five components are; **Strategies, The Swing, Flow-Like States, Disruptions-To-Flow, and Mind Games**. These five components constitute a dynamic process in which they are interacting and mutually influencing each other rather than working in an isolated or even a linear, causal relationship. The experience of strategic decision-making for these eight golfers described a dynamic process that was effortless and natural in times of flow, frantic and at times exciting during disruptions, and seemingly an effort to enhance the execution of their golf-swing. In summarizing the experience of these eight elite golfers, it appears that decision-making was largely a process of identifying a strategy that would produce the most confident swing.

Discussion:

Strategic decision-making in golf is a complex and dynamic process in which the golfer relies on internal and external factors when making a choice. The experience that these golfers described reveals that decisions in golf are not independent, nor do they adhere to rational models of decision-making, which suggest that individuals should choose the option with the greatest odds for success. Rather, decisions are being influenced by the residual affective and physiological responses from previous attempts or the anticipation of future outcomes. These affective processes are influencing individual judgments of shot difficulty and self-efficacy. For example, failure from one shot may increase the difficulty of the next shot due to the affective and physiological changes as well as declines in perceived self-efficacy. However, strategic decision-making has received relatively little attention in the study of sports performance and less in elite golf. As such, phenomenological methods were utilized to investigate the experience of strategic decision-making for competitive golfers. This methodology has been deemed a useful strategy for examining lived experiences for which little is known or as a means for taking a step back to reexamine a question from a different perspective. Moreover, use of phenomenological methods informed by hermeneutic or Heideggerian philosophies allow for both an idiographic and nomothetic analysis of lived experience. The idiographic analysis was based upon eight distinct, individual experiences of elite-level golfers. Their responses demonstrated the variability common to human behavior. Consistent with Heidegger's emphasis on "time" (Heidegger, 1962) these experiences were constructed based upon their past, present, and anticipated future outcomes. Through these discussions, it became clear that decision-making was a fluid phenomenon that could change within a round of golf, across rounds, and across years of competing. The nomothetic analysis of the eight golfers revealed five common components that depict the overall "essence" or general abstractions of strategic decision-making in golf. Although not a goal of phenomenology, these demonstrate a convergence among the experiences of elite-level golfers. As a result, while the process and overall goals appear consistent and potentially generalizable, the methods are idiosyncratic.

Practical Application

The golfers in this study provided numerous examples for how they experienced strategic decision-making during competition. This study represents a positive first step to understanding the experiences of strategic decision-making as lived by elite level golfers. The results highlight the need for further examination of global principles such as the "textbook" approach that is

guided by avoidance-based goals and may be over applied with golfers of this caliber. Furthermore, the results demonstrate the uniqueness of individual experience. The detailed descriptions of these golfers' experiences should be useful to both competitive golfers, their coaches, and applied sport psychologists. This is a strength of qualitative designs, in that the reader can use vicarious experiences to gain greater insight into their own experiences. As such, certain quotes may resonate with a golfer. If so, this may lead to a breakthrough helping them maximize their performance. The applied practitioner can utilize these results to inform a general approach to working with elite-level golfers, however, one must be cautious to avoid a single, "one size fits all" solution for each golfer.