

Learning New Boundaries

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How could I be so unlucky? With my mind in turmoil, the digital leaderboard stared me down as I sat on the fourteenth tee, uncertain of the outcome. Fifteen minutes earlier, making the cut in the Future Masters junior golf tournament seemed almost a guarantee. My hours of daily practice were finally going to pay off, and my dreams would become reality. However, on the thirteenth hole, circumstances took a turn for the worse. A pushed tee shot, a chunked chip, a poor putt, and there sat my ball six feet from the hole. Still, I had a chance to salvage a bogey and escape without much damage. I approached the ball, aimed my putt, and stroked it intuitively well. The ball rolled pure to its line and unsuspectingly dove left, rode the rim of the cup, and shot out of the other side. My heart sank, and my face burned red with frustration. I finished with a double bogey and allowed one stroke of bad luck to consume my confidence and to disrupt my focus. After paring the next hole, questions of my abilities circulated in my head as a shark who has found its prey.

Such a mindset proves futile in almost any challenging endeavor, and so was the case that warm June afternoon. Only two holes after my unfortunate putt, anger still brewed in my mind. I no longer possessed the calm, collected mind necessary to take on the challenges of the day. For that reason, when my playing partner Griffin announced, “the wind seems to be in our face today,” I immediately fell to pessimism.

Of course it is. Nothing ever goes my way. I get to the hardest hole on the course, and even Mother Nature seems to be against me.

“Boy it’s playing long. Even *I* have to hit my driver, today,” Griffin noted. Though not intentionally, Griffin’s comments added fuel to the fire that was my mental state. I already feared the challenges of the hole, and his proclamation put even more emphasis on the difficulty of the conditions.

If this hole is playing long for griffin, it might as well be a mile long for me. He’s obviously the stronger player. My only chance to escape this hole is to outplay my abilities and stray from my comfort zone.

With that thought I reached for my driver and swung with all of my might, focused on overpowering the breeze. *You have got to be kidding me.* I looked up to see my ball dive towards the left trees. *I should have known better. When have I ever found success abandoning my natural game.* Scolding myself, I walked to my ball situated in the trees left of the fifteenth fairway.

When I arrived at my ball I realized I had placed myself in another predicament, leaving me with a choice to make. The safe option emerged to the right. *I don’t have room for safe play. I must reach the green in two shots to be back in good position.* Impatiently, I looked for an alternative plan, and after a minute of scouring, there it appeared—a tiny opening in the dense pack of trees, granting me a shorter route to the green. The risk largely loomed, but I remained too headstrong to make the better choice. With the judgment of a horror movie character, I reached for my four iron and struck the ball with great force. *Dumb.* Spectators watched with trepidation.

Flying with the grace of an eagle, the ball zoomed at the tree canopy. I watched hoping that I might have pulled off a shot for the ages, but then...*Clunk!* The ball struck the last branch.

My smile vanished. With a harsh ricochet, the ball bounced towards a golfer's worst nightmare: a series of white posts. It raced out of bounds. With a lump in my throat, I stumbled over to determine my ball's status, but somehow I already knew that it had surpassed the boundary. My mental game collapsed, and failure felt final. I wanted to cry, and maybe I did. Golf has always appealed to me because of its ability to challenge the patience and the pride of man.

During the play of my final holes, thoughts about making the cut had subsided.

Depression that accompanies failure abound...that is, until the 17th hole. As I walked toward my ball with my head down, my dad called my name and held up a lemon-lime Gatorade. With an encouraging smile, he gave me the drink and said, "Relax, we'll get 'em next year."

Looking at his relaxed and cheery disposition, I could not help but grin. "Thanks dad," I replied, with a touch of buoyancy and joy that I had not felt for several hours. With this kind gesture of my father, I finally recognized the foolishness of my behavior. My dad, who had sacrificed his time and his money for me to pursue this dream, remained optimistic even after my theatrical breakdown. I realized then that the pressure I felt came from within and that my need for perfection had been detrimental to my performance. Had I kept my mind in the present and accepted my mistakes as only minor setbacks, *who knows how much better I could have finished.* Either way, I would have better enjoyed the experience. Through this failure, I discovered the valuable life lessons of patience and composure, but more importantly, I learned that to succeed in golf and in life, I must remain thoughtful, adaptive to change, and forgiving—even of my own mistakes. These are the problem-solving skills needed to address today's complex issues, and I plan to use them to the best of my ability as I strive to make a difference in the world.