New research shows how Ryder Cup golfers can have the edge

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Elite golfers can recognise when they enter 'the zone' and can control the experience to perform at their peak for longer, new research has revealed.

Previously, research suggested that individuals only become aware they had been in a so-called 'flow' state when they finished the activity, but the study has revealed elite golfers are aware that the phenomenon is happening as they play.

The researchers from the University of Lincoln, Leeds Beckett University, and St Mary's University in the UK, and the University of Canberra in Australia, say it could be down to the self-paced, stop-start nature of golf which affords players time for reflection between shots, unlike faster-paced sports such as football where the athlete needs to react to what is happening in the game.

Flow – the term given to being in the zone – is the mental state an athlete reaches when they are fully immersed in their discipline, feeling energized and focused, and playing at their peak.

The study was conducted with 10 European Tour golfers including former Ryder Cup players, European Tour, Challenge Tour and Senior Tour winners. Its aim was to explore perceptions regarding the experience of flow.

Lead researcher Dr Christian Swann, a lecturer in sport and exercise

psychology from the University of Lincoln, said: "Athletes experiencing 'flow' are completely immersed in their task and perform at the peak of their ability, making this state highly desirable in sport.

"This ability to recognise when they hit that sought-after zone may be important for them to develop skills to maximise flow if a performance is going particularly well. For example, being able to manage flow states could help players avoid choking in pressurised situations such as being in the lead in the final holes of a tournament.

"One golfer described how he was aware that he was in the zone when he was in contention to win The Open. He was determined to finish the round in that state, and was able to accurately visualise the flight of the ball, where it would land, and where it would finish – as if he had complete control of the ball. Another of our participants said that once the zone hit him, he just wanted to squeeze it until the last hole to maximise the experience."

Participants reported altered cognitive and physical perceptions, such as visualising the shot with positive results, and magnified visual clarity where they could see the ball-flight in the air more crisply.

Golfers in the study also described 'tunnel vision' and how crowds became blocked out as they focused solely on the flag. Other effects include forgetting that they hit certain shots, being lighter on their feet, and feeling stronger, fitter and quicker.

Players also found it easier to deal with distractions or bad shots, had heightened confidence and concentration, and felt more motivated to succeed.Interestingly, players can also see when their competitors are in the zone through body language, the research found.

Dr Swann added: "In sport the possibility of observing flow could be

particularly relevant in coaching, in terms of knowing when to give advice, and when to avoid talking to – and possibly distracting – the athlete. This idea could also be relevant to practitioners such as sport psychologists.

"Specifically within golf, it may be especially relevant for caddies who are in closest contact with the players during performance. Experiencing flow has important performance-based and psychological benefits, and understanding these experiences from the athlete's perspective could yield important insights into how it may be experienced more often."

The findings could lead to new ways of studying and understanding flow states within sport.

The study, An inductive exploration into the flow experiences of European Tour golfers, was published in the journal *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*.

More information: Christian Swann, Lee Crust, Richard Keegan, David Piggott & Brian Hemmings (2014): An inductive exploration into the flow experiences of European Tour golfers, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2014.926969

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