

A Special Report:

Refuse to lose; The mental side of tournament golf, by Alan Martin.

An inside the ropes view of my weekend of tournament golf,
from an every day amateur just like you ...that lives in your shoes every day.

Winning never felt so satisfying

and losing was never an option.

I describe them as insignificant club tournaments only a few people on the planet even care about. But, for those of us beyond our college playing days, with families and the stress that comes with adult life, they mean everything. Much more than just another round of golf, it's our opportunity to really compete again and win something. Even if it's just seeing your name on the board and receiving a few congrats, nothing does more for an athlete's psyche than the thrill of being the champ.

Where I play, winning a board tournament also means pro shop credit, so hello new hat, shoes, and maybe a shirt and a few extra pairs of socks. With or without any perks, winning always gives me that feeling of doing something special. It never gets old and feels better than losing 100 percent of the time, every time.

My tournament journey begins with an overview from high above, then gets more granular with hole-by-hole details of the two weekend matches featured, as they progressed. Hold on tight, as I describe the action along with my personal experiences during both roller coaster adventures. I hope you enjoy my unique first hand view of the mental side of tournament golf. If you're a serious recreational golfer like me, or want to see how much golf relates to everyday life experiences, reading this special report will be well worth the time invested.

Each year, golf courses all around the world play tournaments to determine the club's best players. At my club, Saturday July 5 was the qualifying round of the 2008 Club Championship. The top fifteen scores and the previous year's winner have the privilege of playing in a match play competition for the title.

What I love is if you don't make the top fifteen you're placed in a flight (or bracket) with your peers, based on everyone's handicap. What this means is that you can be a loser one week, then hoist the trophy the next. Realistically, I know I don't have the complete game to beat all the best players heads up, so I'm better off playing in the A flight, against guys who I can and should beat. I'm honest enough with myself to know that the only way I can win in this event is to play poorly during the qualifying round, and NOT make it into the championship flight. Don't let that make you think I don't try to qualify, because I always do. It's just that if I don't, it doesn't hurt as much because I know I'll play again, with at least a chance to win.

Keeping that in mind, this year's tournament turned out as if it was pre-arranged. You'd think it was scripted to be a life lesson, with a "never give up", "it ain't over till it's over", "never say die", "don't ever quit" message (choose your favorite cliché). Here's what I mean. As I just finished explaining, if I had qualified I knew I wouldn't win.

On Saturday I woke at 5:00 as usual for my 7:30 tee time. Because it was raining hard when I went outside I didn't think we'd play (I was wrong), so I took my time getting

ready. I arrived at the first tee at 7:29, with no time to warm-up. My typical routine for a tournament is just the opposite. I like to get there early, warm-up on the range, chip and putt, then at least feel ready to play.

Beginning with an ugly 3-wood hook on the opening tee shot, the round didn't start out exactly how I planned it. Double bogey's on four of the first five holes and a front nine 46 usually means hello "A" flight. These days at my club are different because you never know what scores will qualify, mainly for these reasons:

- ◆ Fewer players sign up to play in tournaments each year
- ◆ The course is tougher with challenging hole locations we've never seen before

One thing about me is that I never quit on the golf course, so miserable front nines are usually followed by much better back nines. This day was exactly that as I played well, with mostly pars and a few bogies. To give you an idea of how pre-determined and scripted this appeared to be, on the 18th hole I'm on in two with a makeable birdie putt for a back nine 39. This would give me an 85 total and a realistic chance to qualify. The birdie putt just missed, but ran six feet passed the hole. In typical fashion I missed the come-back putt, turning the birdie into a three-putt bogey and an 87.

Making too many double bogies, NOT making the makeable birdies and too many three-putts are my killers in golf. Instead of being crushed because of the results of the eighteenth hole, the three-putt was a blessing in disguise because my playing partner shot 86 and took the final spot. This meant he was in the championship flight and had to play the multiple time champ in round one. Of course he lost. The irony is that because I didn't make par on eighteen and tie him with 86, we didn't go to a tie breaker, a match of cards which I think I would have won. He was happy to make it, I was happy for him and we'll never know who would have won the tie-breaker.

Now that I got myself right where I wanted to be in the first place, the fun part is telling about my roller-coaster adventure to the winner's circle. Get ready for a blow-by-blow description of how I bent, but refused to break. It's good to feel like Tiger Woods when he snatches victory from the jaws of defeat, finding a way get the job done even when it looks like it's over ...at least for one day in my life.

Before I describe in detail how I did it, it's important to understand that every player in the A flight has under a fifteen handicap, which means they consistently shoot in the 80's. What that means is that we're all better than over 95% of all the golfers in the world. I don't know the real number but it's tens of millions, give or take. If you do know the official number of golfers around the world please email it to me.

During the three total matches I played I experienced the full gambit of emotions, starting with the initial nerves and anticipation. Once the matches began I was up, even, down, even again, up again, down again, back and forth, but never out. How do you deal with these mood swings and still perform at your highest level? That's the challenge, but it's also the fun part of sports competition for me. The tough part was keeping positive and always grinding away without negative thoughts about losing. The demons are always there waiting around the corner.

The round one match on Sunday went pretty much like I expected, as I played well enough to always stay even or have the lead. My opponent was a nice guy I've known for over ten years. He's a good player, but beats himself with too many swing thoughts

and changes during his round. Also, he expected me to beat him and as expected the match ended with my victory on the 15th hole.

In the match playing behind me, a guy I regularly play with was losing to someone I've known for years but don't remember ever playing against. All week I felt confident I could beat him, even if my "A" game wasn't there. On Saturday morning I showed up at 7:30 for our 8:40 tee time, so I was warmed up and ready. Unfortunately, on the opening tee shot I hit the same hook as I did during the qualifying round. Since his second shot to the green was thirty yards short I decided to play it safe and punch out into the fairway with a 7-iron, trying to make a great par or a bogey at worse. Confidently I stepped up and got all of it, sending my safety shot across the fairway, into a large evergreen tree with low hanging branches that snatched my ball. I located the ball but had no way of hitting it, but tried anyway to advance it enough for a next shot to the green. The ball dribbled two feet then I picked it up and said, "your hole" to my opponent. Not exactly the way I wanted to start, but it's only one hole. No worries.

We exchanged wins for the first few holes before I got hot and won the next two holes with pars, taking a two-up lead after eight holes. On nine I wasted a perfect drive with a chunked 8-iron after my opponent hit a long second shot onto the green, to within twenty feet of the hole. His par beat my bogey, so I was now only one up going into the back nine. He continued his good play as I managed to make enough mistakes to quickly lose my lead and find myself two down going into the thirteenth hole.

After his tee shot on the 126 yard par three landed on the green, I thought how quickly I could be three down with five to play, if I didn't hit the green and at least tie this hole. That thought literally came and went in a split second, because I didn't want my brain thinking about losing. Instead of being nervous or feeling any negative pressure, I felt calm, focused and positive about executing the shot with my 9-iron to a back pin. With my 9-iron I could go over the back of the green with a full shot so I knew I needed to hold back just enough. Since, I've played this hole at least a few hundred times over the years I knew what I needed to do. I launched a shot to the back of the green that looked like it would land in the hole on a fly, but ended up around seven feet short. I then watched his twenty-five foot uphill putt fall six feet short. On my birdie putt I made a good stroke, but just missed and ended up winning the hole, when he missed his putt for par. Being on the right side of someone else's three-putt felt good for a change.

Now I'm only one down with five holes to play. I stepped up and hit a perfect tee shot on the short par four 14th, with only a wedge left. His tee shot was very short, then his long second looked like was headed for the green, but ended up just short. In all too typical fashion from this location I chunked my shot into the front bunker. His chip ended up fifteen feet short for par, so I wanted to give myself a chance for a winning par and felt confident I could at least make a tying bogey. With a bad lie and the hole about seventy feet away in the back of the green, I blasted a great shot that ended up about six feet away, but on a ridge. Match play is usually the time when players either make their best and worst shots. Of course my opponent chose this time to be great as he made his par putt. That left me with only one option; make my putt to avoid being two down with three to play. Like Tiger Woods' left to right slider at the 2000 PGA to keep the match alive against Bob May, I made the same putt, keeping my hopes alive. Once again, I'm steady and focused, not nervous.

On the 15th hole, the toughest hole on the course we tied with bogies. On 16 I thought I'd finally gotten it back to even after his greenside bunker shot flew well over the back

of the green, almost out of bounds. Even after a bad break, when my seemingly perfect tee shot rolled down into the fairway bunker, my bogey looked safe, but not his. Remember what I just said about match play? From a terrible lie he flopped a perfect chip onto the green and let the slope take the ball just past the hole, ending up within ten feet. Considering how the hole was on the bottom tier, his shot was as good as anyone could play it without going in, which it almost did. I made my safe bogey, then he made his tough breaking putt to tie. You don't expect players of our ability to make putts like that, but in match play you need to always be prepared for the unexpected.

Two holes to go and I'm still one down. My mind told me I had him right where I wanted him, but anything can still happen. I had an opportunity to fold under the pressure or step up and make him beat me, but so did he. There was still enough golf to change the outcome in a hurry. The match turned in my favor after our tee shots ended up side-by-side, but then produced very different results on the second and third shots to the 570 yard par-five hole. He hit a weak second shot into deep rough, then pulled his third left and twenty-five yards short of a front hole location. My 5-wood second left put me in extreme right side of the fairway with 136 yards left.

It was decision time and I quickly realized also the turning point of the match. I needed to put this shot on the green, but because the hole was so far up front, I could easily have a long, difficult two putt if I hit it too far. With the hole at the front of the green there was a very small target to hit and little room to keep it on the green. Usually from this distance I'd hit a 9-iron, but I knew if I didn't hit it perfectly the ball could end up short or in the greenside bunkers, which I couldn't afford to do.

An easy par was all I wanted, but there was nothing easy about this shot. In fact, this one makes my all time highlight film, both for being one of the best decisions I've ever made during an important match, followed by precise execution of the actual shot I pictured. I only hope my description does the spectacular shot I hit justice. Usually I have my mind made up as I approach the ball and play the shot. Instead, this time I slowed everything down and gave it a lot of thought before selecting an 8-iron. I knew I could easily clear the front bunkers with a full shot. The tricky part was shortening the back swing just enough but not too much to clear the front bunker, but not hit it too far.

Perfect is the only way to describe how I hit this three-quarter shot that landed just over the bunker, exactly where I planned it. Two putts downhill from twenty feet, followed by his bogey and my strategy worked. Here we go to the final hole, all square. Finally back to even, with a chance to win the match by winning one hole. In match play, Plan A is to beat the opponent as early as possible. Plan B is this; If Plan A isn't working and you fall behind, hang in there as long as you can and make the other player beat you. In this match I fought back and finally had him where I wanted him.

Experience DOES go a long way, in my opinion. Because of my past winning experiences in tournaments, I knew I could perform when it got tight. In fact, I've hit some of my best golf shots in matches when I'm under the gun, but fortunately for me the same can't be said about my fellow competitor on this day. With the honor on the 18th tee, I played a 5-wood for position, since the hole is only 318 yards. I hit it right down the middle (actually left center), in ideal position for a wedge or 9-iron shot left. That's all I wanted to do. He promptly dribbled his tee shot directly toward the high grass and wooded area on the left. In case you're wondering, of course I was rooting (to myself) for it to end up in an impossible spot. As we approached, we saw it didn't quite make it into the long grass, but ended up underneath some overhanging branches.

They restricted his swing, giving him virtually no chance to reach the green. As we amateurs are prone to do when we try and force a great shot after a bad one, he flubbed his second shot. Then, his third shot darted right, under a tree near the green.

Now he lies three in trouble and I'm in perfect position, only needing to hit the green or get close. The logical first thought is to stay out of trouble, but thinking about missing was not in my thoughts as I prepared. As I said earlier, the more important the situation, the more focused and calm I feel. Again I decided to hold back on the 9-iron instead of forcing a wedge from 110 yards. I came through with the safe 9-iron that rolled back down to the very front of the green, leaving just over twenty feet on an extreme upslope. No problem as I two-putted for the win. Hewwwwwwwww. What a great escape act on my part! A well earned and extremely satisfying victory to say the least. Two down, with one more to win tomorrow. I can't wait. Hey, like I told you earlier, this is what we live for.

Now I'm in the final match, where I've never lost; a perfect 6-0 since joining the club in 1984. In fact, every time I've made it to a championship match, no one's gotten close to beating me. On Sunday I expected the same, but if a victory was that easy this time, this article would never have been written.

The following morning we teed off at 8:16. My opponent followed the script beautifully on the opening drive as he drilled it left into the trees. No one saw it land, but after searching for a few minutes I found it in the rough and he had no shot to hit the green. My tee was struck well but landed in an old divot in the left rough, with a tricky next shot. I knew at best it was going to come out low and hot, so all I wanted to do is avoid the greenside bunker and keep it on the green. I hit a great 8-iron which hit the green, then ran just off against the back fringe. It was time for some early improvisation as I couldn't make a normal putting stroke and didn't feel comfortable with any other club. Since the shot was slightly downhill, with a ridge that would feed the ball towards the hole, all I needed to do was get it started on line and hope for a short par opportunity. I stabbed at the ball with my putter and just as described I got my par, making a four-foot confidence builder. A one-up lead to start as planned gave me a spring in my step.

On the following tee shot I hooked one into a tree, but still had a shot to get it near the green. Not my best, as it went short and right leaving a flop shot over a bunker to get close. I thought I needed par at the least because he tattooed his drive and stuck a wedge to within twenty feet for birdie. His putt ran three-feet past the hole, leaving what looked like a simple par. I missed my par, but so did he. An early 3-putt and I dodged an early bullet, thanks to my opponent's mistake.

After I hit the #1 handicap 3rd hole in two and made a tough five-foot downhill par I'm 2-up, feeling even more confident. On this day I hit greens in regulation like I hadn't all season long, so it was no surprise on the forth hole when I had a makeable birdie putt from under fifteen feet, to potentially take a 3-up lead. This is where my putting demons decided to appear. As soon as I hit it I realized it was too hard, then watched it roll over six feet past. I missed it for a 3-putt bogey, losing the hole. On the next tee with a slight breeze behind us he drilled his shot to the 193 yard par three hole over the green, followed by my perfect 5-iron, fifteen feet away. Again, it was a makeable birdie to extend my lead. I misread the putt, but this time I didn't 3-putt. After he missed his par, I outdid myself by 4-putting for another lost hole. As you can imagine I was stumped with a big question mark in my brain.

What happened? What did I just do? I'm striking the ball as well as I can and my putter's abandoning me. Well, that's golf. Just as I described in my recent story titled, "In golf, if the putts don't go in, you don't win," I explained how some of my most frustrating days are when I'm hitting my best shots, but not making the putts. Today was turning into one of those days. Another simple birdie missed on the next hole followed with a bogey and suddenly after seven holes I'm one down. How could my dream turn into a nightmare so quickly? Like I just said; that's golf.

The most encouraging thing at this point was that there's still plenty of golf left to be played. The funny thing about players of our caliber is that we can be great on any given hole, then stink the place up on the next. My opponent did just that when he dribbled his tee shot on the eighth hole, followed by a shot into the right rough, followed by a shot that darted right, struck a tree and was lost. I didn't even get to hit my third shot before he said, "your hole". I won the ninth, then entered the back nine one-up. See, I told you things can change in a hurry.

We tied the next three holes, then he squared the match with a par on the thirteenth, but I got it back on the fourteenth when his short chip ended up long, in 3-putt range. My bogey beat his double. What happened during the final four holes reminds me of something out of the Twilight Zone, as several bizarre events made for a spine tingling finish.

The 15th hole is by far the toughest on our course, even though it's rated as the sixth. It's a dogleg right with a lot of slope, over a creek that runs the length of the hole. It requires a sharp left to right drive for a level lie and a good shot into a narrow hourglass shaped green. We both hit good drives and my 7-iron second shot landed on the green, fifteen feet above the front hole location. He pounded his drive, leaving only a wedge to the green. One thing he showed me during the match to this point was that his long game was outstanding, but the short game was vulnerable.

According to the script, his wedge shot scooted into the right greenside bunker, leaving a downhill sand shot with no green to work with. In my opinion, this is the toughest shot in golf, so when his shot ran through the green into the rough I wasn't surprised. I was even happier when he chunked his chip to lie four, and still off the green. After his fifth shot ran down the hill and came to rest off the green, I had the match right where I wanted it. In fact, I began picturing myself hoisting the trophy over my head.

What a mistake that was as I misread my first putt and it ran eight feet past the hole. Still no worries because there were plenty of shots in hand to still win it. I just finished watching him slop it up, then hole his sixth shot. I calmly stepped up to my ball knowing that all I needed was two putts for a 2-up lead, with three to go. Don't ask me how, but after missing the first putt I then missed the second and also the third putt for a 5-putt. Instead of preparing my victory speech I lost the hole and was back to all-square. How could I do this to myself, but more importantly how does one rebound from a screw-up like this? Stay tuned. There's still three holes left and plenty of action ahead before the happy ending (oops, did I just give away the ending?).

Mentally at this point, the most important thing to do is to stay focused in the moment. With the wind at our backs on the 16th hole par-4, it surprised me that his tee shot with a driver didn't carry the right side fairway bunker. It turned out to be a break because the ball was fading and if it had carried the bunker it could easily have ended up in the trees, blocked from a clear shot to the green. I blasted my 3-wood tee shot almost

exactly where I hit it yesterday, but this time I avoided the left fairway bunker. This is where I wanted to be, with only 115 yards left to the front left hole location. This green is very narrow, with subtle slopes you can't easily read, making it the hardest on the entire course. It used to be the finishing hole before our new clubhouse required a re-routing of the course. The front hole locations on this green are the most challenging, because any putt from above the hole, wants to keep running down the slope, especially here.

After I saw his shot from the sand hit the green and finish just over ten feet past the hole, I knew I needed to hit the green, but as I just mentioned I didn't want to be long. Usually from this distance I hit a three-quarter 9-iron, but today I felt I could hit the perfect pitching wedge close. This shot sums up probably the weakest link in my game, the mental part where I'm determined to try and kill the ball on the back swing. It seems that whenever I reach back for a little extra as I take the club back, especially with my wedges, I don't hit it flush and instead block it to the right. This shot was no different as it wound up right, in a small flat greenside bunker. As I approached I saw the ball was sitting in very wet sand, pin high about 25 feet from the hole.

Desperately needing an up and down, I was left with one of the toughest touch shots in the game. Under non pressure conditions this is a three out of ten chance for par (at best), so what were my chances today, especially after 5-putting the last hole? You do the math. Feeling calm and focused, I placed the club-face wide open, chopped down and flopped it beautifully to just inside ten feet. That's as good as I could expect, but after the collapse on the last hole, why would I expect to make this must make putt? The answer is that I wouldn't allow myself to think about missing it. Instead, full of focus with my game face on I went through my normal routine and played for a slight right to left break. Because it's match play and his par was certain I knew there were no worries about a next putt if I hit it past the hole. Concentrating only on the line back and through I hit a great putt and BANG, right in the hole. Take that! I said to myself after escaping with this much needed par and the match still even.

As we stepped up to the 17th tee my concentration and confidence levels were peaking. I had the match right where I wanted it, two holes left and a chance to virtually put it away with a win on this hole. After he pulled his tee shot left toward the tree line, I nailed one down the middle. Advantage Alan, but lots of golf left on this 570 yard par-5 hole. He had no choice but to play it safe over the trees, leaving about 250 yards into the wind for his third. Because of the wind I hit my 3-wood instead of the 5-wood, which usually leaves me in 8 or 9-iron range. Well, I reached back again and pushed it right, just far enough to be partially blocked by trees, with an uncomfortable shot to the green.

After tattooing his 3-wood, my opponent only had a short pitch left and my shot was extremely awkward to pull-off. I needed to keep it low and fade it, but from 130 yards I didn't have a comfortable shot like that in my arsenal. This is the time in a golf match when you need to make smart decisions, then execute the shots. All too many times we talk ourselves into believing we can perform miracle shots like we see on TV, then fail miserably.

I hit a 7-iron the perfect distance but just right, enough to find the edge of the greenside bunker (again). The only blessing was that I needed to hit almost the exact shot as I just did on the last hole, and of course make the putt. Sometimes, *Déjà Vu* is a good thing. I blasted out to six feet, with my opponent's ball three feet behind me putting for par. Again, advantage Alan, but only slightly because either of us could make these putts and either could just as easily miss them. On this day I couldn't predict anything on the

greens. When his putt missed just left I knew exactly where I needed to hit mine. "Get in" is what I yelled out, just before the putt dropped in for my par.

A one-up lead with one hole to go. In golf they call this 'dormie', meaning he has to win all remaining holes to keep the match alive. In reverse, all I needed to do was tie to win. Aggressively, I smoked my 3-wood down the middle, just before my opponent killed his driver. He hit too much club because it ran through the fairway into a bunker, 90 yards from the green. This is NOT where you want to be when thinking you need a birdie to stay alive. Against the wind I had a perfect 9-iron to a back/center hole location. My go-to club came through, with my shot ending up twelve feet away in two. I then watched as his second shot finished in the greenside bunker.

I took a deep breath knowing he had to hole his bunker shot for a chance to win the hole, but I couldn't let myself think too much yet, based on my screw-ups throughout the match. After his shot scooted fifteen feet past the hole, all I thought about was staying in the moment and thinking 2-putts. Even after his par putt missed and I could now win with 3 putts, I kept my composure and concentrated on the job at hand. The first putt was smooth and only eighteen inches short. Still locked-in and virtually brain-dead I knocked it in for the win.

Although I had won many tournaments before, I mentally broke down for a few moments. A tear or two formed as I said to myself, "I can't believe I did it". Never before had I won while performing so many escape acts like the ones this weekend. Although winning is always a thrill, this weekend was the most satisfying win I can remember.

They say golf is a lot like life. Personally, I've been a believer for many years that the ups and downs in golf are great preparation for the bumps in the road, surprises, highs and lows that life throws at us. Here are my life lessons learned that applied during the tournament this weekend, in a simple Do's and the Don'ts format:

Do's

- Prepare
- Plan your strategy
- It's OK to bend, just don't break
- Keep your focus
- Stay in the moment

Don'ts

- Get ahead of yourself
- Think about failing
- Beat yourself
- Give up

In sports, the main lesson I've learned is this; if you don't execute, you can throw all the fancy clichés out the window. Getting the job done and closing the deal is all that matters. Fortunately, I remembered to do all three and oh by the way, I also played my best golf in a long time, a winning combination. In golf, when the putts don't go in you don't win, but when they do, it's funny how the game's a lot more fun.