



## Recovering from Mistakes & Failures

On April 10, 2011, golfer Rory McIlroy started the final round of the Masters tournament with a four-stroke lead. By the end of the day, he shot an eight over par 80 and finished in a tie for 15<sup>th</sup>. What occurred in between was difficult to watch and was highlighted by a shot that landed in a water hazard on the back nine. McIlroy, in response, buried his head in his arms – a poignant gesture for, what had to be, a devastating experience on such an intense stage.

Approximately two months later at the US Open, McIlroy found himself in contention for a major golf title again. He began the final round with an eight-stroke lead. Many in the press wondered if he would suffer a collapse similar to the one he experienced at the Masters. Instead, he shot a two-under par 69 and won the tournament by eight strokes, setting several low-score records along the way.

So, what did McIlroy do after the Masters that may have helped him win the US Open? He stated that he worked with Dr. Bob Rotella, a sport psychologist who specializes in work with golfers. He also returned to tournament golf fairly quickly, playing in three tournaments between the two majors and experienced progressively improved performances. Finally, perhaps the most important tool at his disposal was his attitude. At the televised press conference, immediately after his collapse at the Masters, he stated, "In a few days, I'll be able to learn from this."

### Recovery

Most of us will never be under the microscope in the same way that McIlroy was in the spring, but we all make mistakes and fail at times. One of the most important things I regularly tell the performers with whom I work is that the mistakes or failures we experience are frequently less important than how we respond to the mistakes or failures.

If you look closely, you will see that McIlroy did three obvious things in between the Masters and US Open: 1) he consulted with a sport psychology professional; 2) he "got back on the horse that threw him;" and 3) he looked to learn from his failure at the Masters. Let us look at how you can apply a similar approach the next time you are confronted with mistakes or failure.

### Consult with a Sport Psychologist

Sport psychology has numerous skills and techniques that can help someone who is recovering from either mistakes or failures. In addition to meeting with a sport psychologist, the reader is directed to our website where he or she can read about sport psychology in general, review previous newsletters, and explore books on the topic within the recommended resources section.

### Getting Back on the Horse...

It is easy to understand why someone would want to avoid an activity in which mistakes and/or failure on a world stage led to significant embarrassment. However, McIlroy played his next tournament a few weeks after the Masters. This was not only a courageous act, but was also precisely the correct thing to do. The longer you avoid an activity, during which you had a bad or embarrassing outcome, the more difficult it will be to resume the activity. To quote many of the coaches I have known, "Get back out there!"

### Learn from the Mistake or Failure

The third part of the process is to learn from the experience. I teach this in roughly five steps.

*Take Some Time Off.* I am not talking about months and months (see the preceding section). I do suggest an appropriate period of time during which you can clear your head by focusing on

something other than the situation in which you made a mistake or failed to reach your goal(s). This can range anywhere from a few minutes to a few days. Do something else: take a slow, deep breath; read a book; play a video game; go for a run; go to Disney World; etc.

*Evaluate What Went Wrong.* After your time off, examine the performance that includes either the mistake(s) or failure. McIlroy had the benefit of having nearly every shot he took in the fourth round of the Masters on tape due to the nature of the performance. Most of us, however, will not have that luxury. So use imagery of your performance (see the March and June 2008 issues of the newsletter for more on imagery). As you do, evaluate your performance **objectively and without judging**. Imagine you are watching someone else.

*Identify What You Can Change.* Becoming a better putter (or dribbler or public speaker) can happen with practice but being taller (or shorter in some situations) after a certain point is not likely to happen. **Be realistic!**

*Make Plans.* We have talked about goal setting in previous newsletters. Focusing on what you can change, set short and long-term goals, identify what methods (physical or mental) you are going to use to meet your goals, and set a date to review your progress.

*Put the Plans into Action.* Finally, using the goals you set, **get to work!**

Note: All of the newsletters referenced can be downloaded from the website.

For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport and performance psychology, contact Dr. Moncier or your local sport psychologist.

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