

Bring Your Range Game to the Course

by Matt Cuccaro, Ed.M.

Struggling to take your “range game” to the course? You’re not alone. The interesting piece of this puzzle is that one of the biggest shifts to be made is actually in the way you practice.

Stand on the back of any driving range in the world and you will see the same thing. Golfers take swing after swing with the same club, seeking the best execution they can possibly muster. Once a rhythm is established and shots start flying fairly well, the player feels secure enough to move on to the next club. This “comfort approach” feels great in the moment, yet brings a false sense of confidence and makes the divide between range and course feel that much bigger.

On the course we face awkward lies and yardages, wind, emotional uncertainty and a myriad of other conditions and situations which are hardly trained by the “comfort approach” on the range. Golf is endlessly complicated and dynamic, which also makes it so enjoyable...and keeps us coming back for more. Rather than striving to make the range a place of repetition and comfort, we’d be better served making it a place of preparation, curiosity and learning.

Fascinating research has been done around the idea of transferring skills from one domain to another. Here’s an example:

One group was given a golf-ball sized beanbag and repeatedly attempted to tossed it onto a target three feet away. Another group was given the same beanbags and alternated; one toss from two feet and then the next from four feet. Both groups took the same number of throws over a period of 12 weeks. Researchers counted the score of each group to compare the results. The three-foot “comfort group” was more accurate in this practice setting. So they were better at the skill, right?

This is where learning and transfer of skills gets interesting. In the next phase, both groups were brought together to compete in a contest from three feet. The three foot group must have done better again, since this is exactly what they practiced...right? Wrong. The two/ four alternating group beat the three foot training group by a steady margin. How? Why?

The quality of the alternating group’s practice was deeper and their ability to adapt to the ever-changing emotion of the competitive setting made them better equipped. To make it even more prominent on the golf course, no two 7-irons are exactly the same with how the ball lies, wind blows, body feels, etc. So why would we think that practicing the same task repeatedly would translate to on-course performance? In the end, it’s likely not that we thought it was better, we simply didn’t think about a different way to approach practice.

Make your practice more variable (course-like) to allow skills to transfer better. Change clubs, targets, and trajectories often...even after a mis-hit. This is what on-course performance is actually about, yet most golfers don’t practice in this dynamic manner. Keep in mind, like the two/four variable group, your outcomes might look worse this way during practice, yet you are confidently and intentionally preparing yourself for the variability and acceptance required to score when it matters most - on the course.

Passionate about maximizing talent, personal growth and the development of high-performance team cultures, Matt Cuccaro has more than a decade of experience working with athletes, coaches, parents, businesses and educators on the mental aspects of elite performance.

Matt has mentored men and women along every step of their athletic journey, from the junior level to the highest professional ranks, and his clients include American Junior Golf Association All-Americans, Olympians, NCAA champions and professionals currently competing on the PGA and LPGA TOURS.

For nine years, Matt served as the Director of Mental Training for Junior Sports Corporation where numerous All-American student-athletes continue to emerge from the culture created under his guidance. Today, Matt collaborates with the coaches and athletes of Smith Stearns Tennis Academy in The Sea Pines Resort to maximize their growth and development on and off the court.

Matt received his Master of Education in Counseling/Sports Psychology from Boston University and is an active member of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology.

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