

THE MENTAL EDGE

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A Lesson from Chicago's Own Annika: It's the Mind that Matters

Chicago golf has its very own Annika. Like that other Annika of women's golf fame, Chicago's Annika was born in Sweden. She, too, has the heart—and mind—of a champion.

Of course, her last name is not Sorenstam. It's Welander. And she grew up in Winnetka.

Annika won the 2005 Illinois Women's Open three days after she turned 19. She won by one stroke in a dramatic head-to-head battle with Allison Finney, a 22-year veteran of the LPGA Tour. A few days later, Annika won her second consecutive CDGA Women's Amateur championship.

These victories were just part of a competitive summer in which Annika made it to the Sweet 16 of the Women's Western Amateur and to the Round of 32 in the USGA's Women's Public Links Championship.

It all came after a successful freshman season at Princeton, where the former captain of New Trier High School's two-time state champion girls' golf team helped her Tigers win the Ivy League title.

I've had the privilege and the pleasure of coaching Annika since she was 13 years old and couldn't break 100. All golfers—whether they're trying to play high-level amateur golf or just trying to play the game well enough to enjoy it as a business or social diversion—could learn from Annika.

Today, of course, Annika has great fundamentals. Her swing and stroke skills have come a long way.

But as her physical or "mechanical" skills improved, it became more and more apparent that what Ben Hogan said is true: "Golf is 20 percent skill and 80 percent management." And Hogan didn't just mean course management—he meant management of the mind and emotions.

This realization can help your game, too. In golf, perhaps more than in any other sport, it's the mind that matters.

When Annika came back from college in May, one of her goals for the summer was to break 70 in tournament competition, something she had never done.

I asked her to go through her best round of the year hole-by-hole and shot-by-shot. When she got to a shot that realistically could have been better—say, a three-putt or a ball in the water or out-of-bounds—I asked her to mentally change it. In other words, substitute a two-putt, hit the ball in the fairway not the water, etc.

The exercise made Annika realize she realistically was extremely close to shooting a round in the 60s. Understanding more completely the value of each wasted shot helped her concentrate on every swing. When Annika fired a 5-under-par 67 at the Illinois Women's Open, it was a true breakthrough—and it was mental.

"During our playing lessons, we play target games on the golf course," Annika said recently. "It's practicing to achieve a performance state-of-mind. In that mode, you acknowledge your preparation, you're faced with the execution and consequences of each shot, and each shot is played with a firmly defined purpose."

Jack Nicklaus has said he never hit a golf ball without a specific purpose in mind. If the word "focus" sometimes seems a little vague to you, Nicklaus' words certainly help clarify the concept.

Before the Illinois Open, Annika also went through the Mental Golf WorkShop Profile. It was developed by Bobby Foster, former golf coach at the University of South Carolina, where he coached both the men's and women's teams to national championships.

The Profile is aimed at defining your golf personality, which can be a key to unlocking your own personal mental game. Annika Sorenstam's mental coach, Pia Nilssen, utilizes this Profile. So do the

David Ledbetter Academy, Titleist's Performance Institute, the American Junior Golf Association and our GreenToTee Golf Academy. PGA Tour players and their mental coaches utilize it, too.

The Profile helped give Annika a better understanding of who she is as a golfer. You can take the test in about 15 minutes. Later, you will receive via e-mail a detailed printout of your results. If you have further interest, the GreenToTee staff is certified to interpret and help guide you through a customized process aimed at sharpening your mental approach to golf.

So go to greentotee.com, click on Mental Profile and follow the directions. It's your first step in trying to figure out the mind game that is golf.

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CDGA Women's Amateur Champion
Annika Welander.