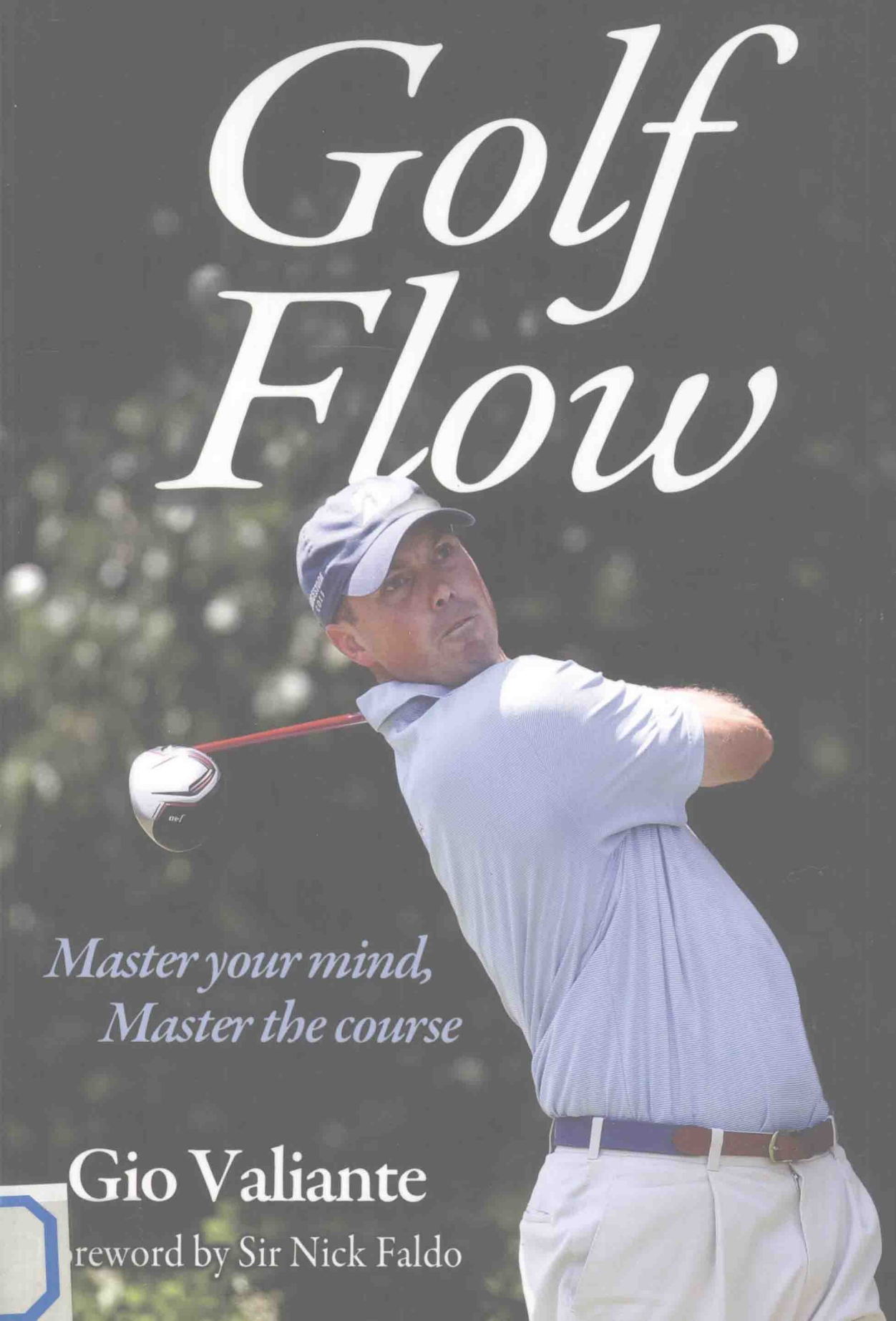
Golf Flow



Master your mind,
Master the course

Gio Valiante

Foreword by Sir Nick Faldo

Golf Flow

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Gio Valiante

Human Kinetics

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I was once told that you cannot define love, but that you know it when you see it. In that spirit, I dedicate this book to Melissa Conrad Valiante and Christian Jude Valiante. I can't define it, but I know that pure, unconditional, boundless love exists because I see it every day: A thousand thanks for opening up my world.

I also dedicate this book to Christian David Hoffman, a brilliant, enduring, loyal friend and model of integrity and excellence. *Haec olim meminisse iuvabit.*

Foreword

There are many reasons I love golf and have made it my life's pursuit. One of the main reasons is that it tests the totality of a person, the observable, technical, physical skills as well as your mental agility and inner fortitude.

Most of the time championship golf requires a careful, deliberate, dedicated mindset. This was how I won the 1996 Masters, and why I am especially proud of that victory: The game didn't come easy to me that week, and the level of sustained concentration required to coach myself through each and every shot tested the full capacity of my mental toughness.

Those challenging days contrast greatly with days when everything comes together, and golf feels effortless. The first time I remember getting into flow was during the 1987 British Open at Muirfield. I was completely engrossed in my process, and my only focal point was no more than two or three steps in front of me. I especially remember how my 5-iron into the last hole on Sunday seemed to unfold in super-slow motion. I seemed to experience *every single second* of that shot—takeaway, transition, downswing, impact, and follow-through—and I was able to watch the penetrating flight of the ball as it sailed toward my intended target. It all felt so calm and so perfect. Before I knew it, I had been escorted to the 18th green and was holding the Claret Jug. That's how deep my concentration was that day.

Years later I again fell into flow at the 1992 World Match Play Championship. I remember feeling focused, fearless, and confident over each and every shot that week. The result was that I blitzed the field, winning my final match 8 & 7, the largest winning margin in the history of that tournament. If memory serves me correctly, I was approximately 42 under par through 92 holes that week. Such is the power of the flow state.

My experience of flow is similar to what you'll read in this book: I feel confident, relaxed, and patient. I'm aware of my surroundings but acutely focused on each shot, and my rhythm and tempo are in harmony with my mindset and mechanics. In addition to being completely engrossed in the *process of playing*, my thinking is crisp, and I get so in tune with my targets that there is none of the mental interference that often accompanies competitive golf. I see the ball in relation to my target and instantly say, "This feels like a fade" or

"That's a 5-iron." While this is happening, somewhere in my mind I'm also effortlessly registering my environment—dampness in the air, ground angle, breeze, yardage. It is like the old adage: I see it, feel it, react, and execute the shot . . . while running at 100 percent self-belief.

Many people think that I was a very technical golfer, but I don't really see it that way. While I definitely worked hard at my golf swing, when I was playing my best golf my process was simple and consistent with what Gio teaches in this book. I was more into target than technique and was fully immersed in my processes. Even today when amateurs ask me for tips, I default to the mental side of the game. They may ask "How do I chip?" and I will respond, "Never mind the technique. Can you land the ball there, on that spot? Can you see it running to the hole, can you see it go in?" If they say yes, I tell them, "Go ahead and do that." Great golf leads with the mind. Every golfer can choose to think of what to do or what not to do; if you can visualize what you want to do, then you can play well.

While reading Gio's book, I found myself recognizing many of the keys to my own success: the emphasis on rhythm and tempo, and the importance of studying success. For example, when I was a lad of15, I drove over to Troon for the 1973 British Open. I was there to study Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Arnold Palmer, Tony Jacklin, Johnny Miller, and Tom Weiskopf. Afterward I would come back home and play against the greats in my mind. I'd play 3 balls—one of my own, and two belonging to these acclaimed golfers. The benefits that came from these imaginative days were immeasurable. While I didn't yet have full *self-belief,* I knew Jack Nicklaus would hit a booming drive and that Johnny Miller would flush his irons, so while pretending to be them, I developed their habit of being fearless, free, and confident.

Gio also talks about the importance of finding a target on every shot as being essential to flow. When I was growing up in England, my whole practice ground was a single golf hole of about 150 yards, with nothing more than a green, a bunker, and a flag. In retrospect, this minimalist setup was a blessing, because it forced me to craft my mind to hit balls over a bunker, to a target, every time.

In this book you'll read about the strategies that many of the game's top players use to generate flow and play their best golf. You'll be learning the skills Gio's clients have used to amass over 50 professional wins. You'll be joining the legion of golfers who are all seeking that perfect state of mind known as flow.

Sir Nick Faldo

Acknowledgments

As William James said, "It is your friends who make your world." This is certainly true for me, and if I have had any good fortune in life, it is that early on I stumbled upon friends who would remain my companions throughout my life. This book in many ways is largely the result of endless conversations with these autotelic personalities that took place in coffee shops, on airplanes and boats, in hotels and living rooms and libraries, and wherever else we'd collectively pick up the conversations that seem like one big, long talk around a campfire.

Therefore, I'd first like to thank Professor Jack McDowell, Brian Kaineg, Brian Froehling, Dino Doyle, Joe Sora, Ty Underwood, Adam Sehnert, Cory Nichols, Brian Nehr, Andrew Williams, Ben Heron, Rich Shalkop, John Bartell, Kevin Thomas, Greg Pascale, Charlie Sternberg, Jeremy Moore, Walt Rivenbark, Jen and Scott Hayward, Jocelyn and Jason Nettles; the Houle family: Mary, Dave, Ben, Katie, and Joanna; the Lynn family: John, Beth, Tessa, John William, Nick, and James; the Lee family: Gene, Amy, Jamie, and Samantha; the Parra family: Tim, BJ, and Chris; and my newest family: Ryan, Desi, Art, and Anita Conrad.

The golf world is full of enlightened, well traveled, humble, smart, and fascinating people. Those who challenge me and help fashion my thoughts on the game include Roberto Castro, Buddy Alexander, Dr. Craig Davies, Jeff Paton, Camilo Villegas, Jaime Diaz, Tim Rosaforte, Kelly Tilghman, Bryce Molder, Matt Kuchar, Stuart Appleby, Heath Slocum, Charles Howell III, Sean Foley, Jimmy Johnson, Julieta Granada, Steve Bann, Geoff Ogilvy, Notah Begay III, and Justin Rose.

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Finally, to my father and best friend, Fred Valiante, and my gracious, brilliant mother, Joanne Valiante, thank you for the unfailing love, guidance, and support.

Introduction

In 2010, golfers I work with won 8 PGA Tour events, completing a run of 10 wins in 12 months. The wins were distributed across 8 different golfers all with different personalities, talents, tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. This pattern mirrored the 2008 season, in which golfers I'd worked with won 5 of the last 15 events on the PGA Tour.

The results from my work are often dramatic. Justin Rose hadn't won on the PGA Tour in the nine years he'd been competing. Twenty-eight days after our first session, he won The Memorial with a final round 66. Twenty-eight days after that, he won the AT&T National. Similarly, when Arjun Atwal and I first began working together in April 2010, he was ranked 750th in the Official World Golf Rankings and had never won on the PGA Tour. Four months later, he won the Wyndham Championship. Sean O'Hair hadn't won in over two years and when we had our first meeting in July 2011, he had missed 8 of his 10 previous cuts. Fifteen days after our first session, he won the Canadian Open. What's most compelling about these results is that between my first meeting with these golfers and their subsequent wins, not a single one of them changed their golf swing, their equipment, their diet, or their fitness. They simply changed their minds.

If there is any secret to the work that I do, it is that I try to guide my athletes toward what modern psychologists refer to as "flow states," a term that describes a synergy in which all aspects of a person's being—mind, body, will, and intentions—converge to work in perfect harmony. According to the leading researcher on flow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "The metaphor of flow is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives" (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). When this happens, people sense their full potential, achieve excellence, and perhaps even glimpse perfection.

Golfers in flow states enter another realm, as their descriptions attest. They report being able to better see the breaks in greens, more accurately calculate the yardage of a shot, and more fully feel their bodies in space as they intuitively make the necessary adjustments to hit the exact shot they desire. Their walks are more confident, their emotions are softer and more positive, and their perspectives are well suited to the unique round of golf they are playing. The end

result for golfers in flow is that they are able to better control the shots they hit, to hit shots that are usually beyond their capabilities, and to shoot scores lower than their handicap would suggest.

Ever since I experienced flow on the golf course first hand more than 20 years ago, I have continued my research into flow as a college professor and a mental game consultant for athletes spanning the spectrum from recreational to professional golfer. I've attended psychology conferences from Vancouver to Boston, and everywhere in between. I have been able to help my clients apply much of what I have learned, and the results have been very rewarding. As a professor and researcher, it has been thrilling to witness the theory come alive in the reality of performance.

One insight that has emerged relates to the way aspiring golfers approach the process of improvement. As young golfers, many in the sport play the game with an unthinking simplicity. Generally, they play well; at the very least, they play mentally free and clear. As they progress and accumulate a deeper understanding of golf, they intuitively seek more instruction and information. Their logic goes something like, "If a little instruction has made me a little better, then a lot of instruction will make me a lot better."

How does this barrage of information influence a brain that is designed, at any given moment, to effectively process seven bits of information (this fact, discovered by scientist in the early part of the twentieth century, is the reason phone numbers have seven-digits)? When you stand over a golf ball, what should you be thinking? What does the brain actually *do* with all the information it has accumulated? The answer depends on the individual, but for a large portion of the population, all that information essentially becomes cognitive gridlock, clogging your brain the way that cholesterol clogs an artery, or too many sheets of paper jam a paper shredder. Too much thinking makes your brain more inefficient, makes you less decisive, and generally distracts you from the simple task of hitting a ball at a target.

Consider this: I have never had a golfer come to me looking for help because he or she was thinking too little, and no one has ever contacted me with the complaint of "there are not enough thoughts running through my mind." Nearly all the golfers who have ever sought my advice have done so because, in one aspect of the game or another, they were having too many thoughts. In an atmosphere of contradicting swing theories and magazines, books, and television shows offering hundreds of conflicting tips, golfers are bombarded with sensory and intellectual information.

All of this affects interpretations, stress levels, and mood, and the emotional toll is enough to overwhelm even the sharpest of minds and to destabilize the purest of talents.

Playing golf in flow is all about doing the simple things required for a golfer to stay out of his own mind, stay out of his own way, and simply hit shots to targets. Consequently, in this book I share with you what cutting-edge research tells us about the flow state and its impact on golfers of all levels, from the high handicapper to the PGA Tour golfer. Fortunately, research suggests that flow is universal (with very few exceptions, everyone can experience flow). My ultimate goal is for you to simplify and refine your thinking so that you can channel your skills and knowledge into simple, effective, repeatable processes that lead to winning golf.

My quest to understand flow, and to apply that understanding, has spanned an entire stage of my life, accompanying me through marriage and the birth of a son, and it has introduced me to a group of athletes with whom I have shared many personal and professional milestones. Learning about flow has not only made me a better golfer, it has provided me with a framework and a perspective that has markedly improved the quality of my life. I hope that this book will bring you the same sense of enthusiasm and excitement that I feel when listening to people describe their flow states and helping my clients get into flow. I also hope that by helping you understand flow, the book not only gives you a clearer view of the game and opens up new ways to improve your play, but also provides some insights that will help you to live a more meaningful and more fulfilling life.

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PART

I

THE GOLF FLOW EXPERIENCE

Peak experiences provide a window into an alternate universe that we visit beyond the covenants of our normal lives and, bound by nothing, are able to sample the energized freedom of our potential. The high that we feel when we are in peak states is like the high that accompanies a moment of courage or important self-discovery. Peak states flood us with the type of joy that teenagers feel behind the wheel of a car as they master the basics of driving or that first-time parents feel when they hold a newborn baby. Athletic endeavors offer myriad opportunities to perform beyond the norm and unleash untapped potential. The common theme of all such experiences is the overwhelmingly positive feelings that emerge from the sense of personal growth and the potential for this breakthrough accomplishment to help us to achieve even greater things in the future.

Researchers studying these peak experiences have found that people consistently use the word *flow* to describe them. Furthermore, they reported feeling no sense of doubt, fear, or distraction; they were completely immersed in the moment.

The past quarter century has brought about a remarkable amount of research on flow states. Two key findings from this research have revolutionary implications for the sports world and beyond. The ability to generate flow states is invariably tied to the overall quality of a person's life, and this ability can be cultivated.

I have found that people often think about flow in the same way that they think about love or luck—as something that happens to them rather than something they do. But just as with love and luck, psychologists have found that people can control many of the factors

that improve the opportunity to find flow. Because the factors that determine flow states are things over which people have a measure of control, flow need not be an experience that merely happens, something to wait and hope for. People can learn to identify its characteristics so that they can go with it effectively, nurture it, and get the best out of it when it begins to appear. They can help generate flow!

Aristotle once observed, "We are what we do every day. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit." Flow is a habit that emerges from a way of thinking about experiences and the meaning that we assign to those experiences. And people who habitually generate flow in other areas of their lives are more likely to generate flow on the golf course.

Now we need to explain in more detail this state of optimal functioning called flow. Flow has been a buzzword for decades, yet it is either poorly understood or, more frequently, misunderstood—even by athletes who know what a struggle it can be to generate flow! But everyone knows it when they're in it. You often hear phrases such as "in the zone," "in the moment," and "dialed in" to describe the experience. These descriptions are accurate, but they don't tell the whole story.

I've spent more than a decade trying to uncover and elucidate the mysteries of flow in golf. This quest took me down unpredictable paths, led me to ask unanticipated questions, and ultimately revealed insights that delighted me and that I hope will also delight you as you learn about them by reading this book.

One fascinating but powerful finding that I uncovered was that golfers usually describe their flow states using seemingly contradictory, or paradoxical, expressions. They report experiencing time moving slowly but the actual event seeming to end rather quickly, gaining control by giving up control, making an effortless effort, and being aware of everything around them while being completely focused on their task!

These paradoxes both define and explain the flow experience in golf, and understanding them is essential to engaging the frame of mind needed to energize flow. Because the main purpose of this book is to improve your golf game by teaching you how to get into flow more frequently, I'll take you through each of the paradoxes. Understanding what flow is and how it works will prepare you to attain it more easily and frequently.

CHAPTER

1

Time

You are alone on the golf course late in the day. The sun is beginning to duck behind tall trees, the shadows are growing long across the fairways and greens, the air is becoming more still and a little cooler, and you are walking from one shot to the next with the easygoing, casual air of a person without a care in the world. There is calmness in your mind and vagueness about your awareness. You are paying attention to your game but giving it no more thought than the attention that you're paying to a breeze, a bird that flies by, or a squirrel that trots across your path. Without much thought, you gaze down the fairway and hit the shot that you were picturing. For the next shot, without a yardage book or any technical thoughts, you aim and hit the shot toward your target. It comes off with perfection, leaving you with a feeling of mild satisfaction as you put the club back in the bag and continue your shuffle down the fairway, toward the green and the forthcoming 8-footer you have for birdie. You hit the putt, and off the putter face it feels different in your hands. Pure. Soft. Happy. Without looking, you immediately know that the putt was good, that it will be going in the hole.

As the round goes on, you hit one good shot after another, and you react with softness as if you are buffered from anything bad happening to you. You move with smooth, rhythmic movements. If the ball doesn't go where you expect it to, you don't complain or get angry. You simply put your club back in your bag, walk down the fairway taking in the totality of the experience, and hit your next shot. Your chipping is crisp. Your touch on the greens is perfect.

And your mind is quiet. If you were describing yourself as a piano, you would describe yourself as perfectly tuned. Before you know it, you're walking off the ninth green, and you realize that you haven't made a single bogey, that you've just shot your lowest nine-hole score ever, and that along the way, you'd lost track of your score. Your last realization is that you are also late for dinner because you'd also lost track of time.

Does that sound familiar? I've heard assorted versions of that story from countless golfers over the years. They begin a round of golf with no expectations of shooting a score or playing a particular way. They are on the golf course simply to enjoy the process of playing. To a degree, they mentally check out, and before they know it they are enjoying their afternoon, immersed in their round of golf. They are lost in the moment, lost in the task or experience, oblivious to the pressure associated with passing time. In fact, as they are playing golf, the way that they experience time changes.

BULLET TIME

If you've seen the movie *The Matrix* you are familiar with a special effect that filmmakers use known as bullet time. Bullet time provides the viewer with an alteration of time and space that parallels the real experiences of flow. Bullet time allows viewers to perceive typically imperceptible and unfilmable things (such as a flying bullet) by slowing them down. Bullet time also changes camera angles so that viewers can view the experience from outside themselves—experiencing the moment as both subject and object—all in a slow dimension of time. Generally, golfers in flow experience something akin to bullet time. Time on the course moves slowly, almost eerily so, and sometimes time even seems to stand still, such as when Phil Mickelson won the 2004 Masters Tournament by making five birdies on the back nine:

> *I would certainly go back to what got me here in this event, the Masters, the back nine at Augusta. To shoot 5-under those last seven holes, it was a very slow-motion back nine. Everything was going at a slow pace, and I could see very clearly the shot that I wanted to hit and how I wanted the ball to roll on the greens.*

Note Phil's description of his back nine as a "slow-motion back nine" in which he experienced everything moving at a "slow pace." Phrases like this provide insight into the mental transformation that takes place when golfers get into flow. As with most flow states, the