

# Lessons in Success for Golf and Life

# CONFIDENCE

**I**N THE SIXTH CHAPTER of David Cook's sequel to his beloved *Golf's Sacred Journey: Seven Days at the Links of Utopia*, the young Luke Chisholm is again getting schooled by his mentor, Johnny. This time, they're setting out for a ride.

"You good with a horse?" Johnny asks Luke.

Not so quick to blow his trumpet these days, Luke replies, "I love to ride but have a lot to learn."

"Confidence is king with a horse," Johnny tells him, then offers a little crossover advice for the young romantic: "It seems to help on a date as well."

Cook's own confidence is growing in delivering a well-told story that conveys a lot of what he has learned through the years as a both a learner and a mentor. The original *Golf's Sacred Journey* has now sold more than 400,000 copies, and the feature film that played in theaters in late 2011 got many people asking, "Did he make the putt?" That question was prompted by the open ending to that first story and likely will lead many to read the follow-up.

For both books, Cook owes a lot to a little town in the hills outside of San Antonio. That's right, Utopia is a real place—the legitimate location for the filming of *Seven Days in Utopia* and the outpost for a lot of Cook's work these days. He conducts retreats here, incorporating many of the locations from the movie: the café, the inn, the cemetery, and the golf course. But most

of all, what Cook does here is dream. If it were a verb, a better description of Cook's work is that he *visions*.

He sees big pictures and goes after them. Then he turns them over to others. The most famous of Cook's big ideas is SFT. The letters stand for See it - Feel it - Trust it, and they comprise the pre-shot routine that he hopes will produce

masterpieces—golfing masterpieces, that is. More than anything, SFT is designed to infuse a measure of confidence into the competitive crucible that can quickly melt a golfer's easy

instincts.

Admitting that his confidence comes and goes on the golf course, 1987 U.S. Open champion and current Champions Tour player Scott Simpson says, "I don't think you can fake confidence. What you can do is stay committed to your fundamentals."

To a sport psychologist like Cook, who was the mental coach for the San

**ARTICLE BY JEFF HOPPER**

*Photo Illustration by Aude Cabaldon*

we go to get confidence on the golf course? David Cook has three big ideas that can make a difference in your game.

**1 CONVICTION** The first thing you can do to attain confidence on the golf course is to believe in your method. If that sounds simplistic, consider this: most golfers figure that if they're going to get any better, they need to follow someone else's method. They leaf through magazine after magazine, figuring sooner or later somebody's idea of how it *must be done* will take hold. Cook says, "Find your swing, not *the* swing—then spend your life perfecting it!"

Once Cook was talking with the late Jim Flick, who worked with Jack Nicklaus through the years. Flick told him about a time when Nicklaus was hitting a 5-iron on the range and asked Flick to take a look. Nicklaus hit a ball weak right, then followed it with another just like it. When he hit a third to the same spot, Flick said, "OK, I've got a thought for you." Nicklaus retorted, "I don't want to hear it." Flick was surprised, but Nicklaus told him, "I can put a towel over those three balls. I know exactly where it's going. I'm playing with this."

Cook loves that story, because it shows that even the

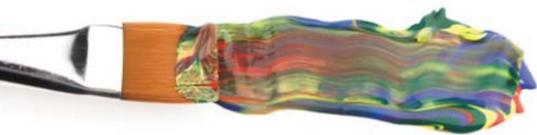
Antonio Spurs during their championship seasons of 1999 and 2003, layering in confidence-inducing triggers like SFT should be part of every golfer's fundamentals. It's the best way to go from desire to result in spite of all the surrounding pressure.

And that pressure isn't just for the best players in the world. Anyone who has ever stood on the first tee with his buddies all around, or had a putt to win a country club invitational, or needed a par to secure a personal best, has faced pressure enough to steal their confidence.

So let's figure it out. Where do



at times, making the most of the swing he had working that day. “If you don’t have conviction in your method,” Cook says, reciting Johnny from the *Seven Days in Utopia* movie, “that casual comment thrown out by another player or teacher as they walk by will take you out of your game and erode your confidence.” **Find your swing and stick with it.**



**2 PAINT A MASTERPIECE** When Cook was a junior golfer, learning the game from the teacher who would become the model for *Utopia*’s Johnny, they played the course together one day when the real Johnny shot 61. Late in the round, he knocked his tee shot on a par-3 to within six inches. When he turned around and dropped his club back in the bag, Cook heard him say, “Picasso.” Actually, Cook had heard him say it all day long, and the 14-year-old finally got up the nerve to ask him what he meant. Johnny responded by asking Cook to look toward the green and tell him what he saw. Cook saw what any of us would see: a green and a flag. Johnny couldn’t get him past this obvious answer, so he explained, “You’ve got a blank canvas as a player. Golf is an art and you have to plan your picture before you hit it. Unless you paint a masterpiece, you’re going to spend your days as a golfer—and your days as a human being—dealing with a lot of stick figure outcomes.”

Cook has since translated this indelible lesson into the simple act of calling your shot—target, shape, and trajectory. What this forces a player to do is move their mind away from possible disastrous outcomes toward successful results. They see a great shot in their mind’s eye before producing

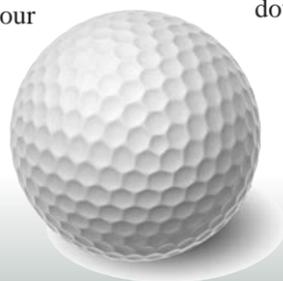
it with their body. **When you start by painting a masterpiece, you enter the gallery of confidence.**

**3 KNOW HOW TO FACE ADVERSITY** Too many players give up on painting masterpieces when the results don’t match the pictures. “What am I supposed to do if I paint a masterpiece then hit it in a bunker?” they ask with contention. “Paint another masterpiece?”

Cook says the answer to that question is yes, but in order to do this well you must practice adversity, both physically and mentally. He calls golf the worst-practiced of all sports. Golfers rehearse their shots on level, mown surfaces, making sure to give themselves the best lies they can find at their spot on the driving range. Then they step up to long, tight holes, with trouble down both sides and the wind howling away and try to draw on their practice routines. No chance!

From a physical standpoint, Cook tells players to move off to the side of the range, setting the ball in the rough or on an uneven lie. Practice uphill and downhill shots, wet lies and bald lies, buried bunker shots and sidehill putts. Give yourself every possible challenge you’ll face on the course so when you land in that situation in the midst of play, you can say, “I’ve practiced this. I know what to do here.”

On the mental side, Cook recommends what he calls “the three-challenge mindset.” He suggests that in an average round of golf you’ll encounter three unanticipated circumstances—from your least favorite weather to an annoying playing partner to an “impossible” lie. While you may not accurately foresee what these three



challenges will be, you can anticipate their happening. That way, when they do come your way, you can begin by saying to yourself: “Hey, here’s one of my challenges. Let’s see what I can make of this.” Welcoming trouble, so to speak, allows a player to take control over it, rather than it controlling them.

**Confident players have a plan for fighting through adversity rather than trying to pump themselves up in a difficult moment.**

**WHEN IT COMES TO** confidence on the golf course, you will always be most confident when you are most prepared. In fact, Cook usually finds himself defining confidence from its opposite: anxiety. So foundationally, he has always made a habit of teaching athletes to replace anxiety rather than strategize against it. That replacement comes in the form of images of excellence, what he calls masterpieces.

When it comes to the whole of life, however, the best image of excellence is not an idea but a person. Cook’s work in his writing and his *Utopia* retreats never stops at golf. He is man consumed by the idea of true excellence, which is achieved by people confident in something far greater than themselves. When we place our confidence in our own ability—even well-trained, doggedly practiced ability—we eventually fail ourselves. We trust the wrong advice, we extend our resources too far, we face the limitations of illness or age. Any number of self-defeating errors or circumstances can knock us down.

When, however, we place our lives in the hands of the God of the universe—the God worshiped by David Cook and his not-so-fictional mentor Johnny—we find a firm confidence. Cook especially



appreciates the promise of Jeremiah 17:7: “Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.” In the extension of this passage into verse 8, Cook’s own ideas about confidence and anxiety occupying distant ends of the competitive continuum are fleshed out: “[These trusting people] will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

2002 U.S. Senior Open Champion Don Pooley sees the difference between golf confidence and life confidence. “We never play ‘perfect’ golf, so our confidence there can waver. Christ is perfect and because of that our confidence in him doesn’t waver.”

This God-founded confidence is like bedrock to those who believe—even when troubles come.

Cook leads us to this conclusion when he draws from his biblical namesake three principles of spiritual confidence. They parallel the confidence he speaks of for golfers.

**1 CONVICTION** When David came to the battlefield as recounted in 1 Samuel 17, he was prepared simply to supply his enlisted older brothers with food for their tiring bodies. What he discovered there led him to walk with confidence in a way that others around him would not.

The enemy’s champion, Goliath, dared the Israelite army to send out its best man and settle this conflict one-to-one. Because their minds were fixed on conventional methods of fighting such a colossal warrior, no one stepped up. When David approached King Saul to offer to go to battle with Goliath as one who had defeated lions and bears in the fields when they tried to attack the sheep in his care, Saul figured David would do best with royal armor. David declined. Instead he went with the method he knew best, the same method he had practiced according to the skill God had given him.



The young man went to the nearest riverbed and plucked out five stones, ammunition for his soon-whirling slingshot. “I like that part about, ‘I can’t do it your way. I’ve got to do it mine,’” Cook says. “It wasn’t arrogance. It was conviction.”

**A person with spiritual conviction draws confident strength from the gifting God gives.**

**2 PAINT A MASTERPIECE** David’s next steps led him down into the valley to face the champion, Goliath, who met the shepherd-warrior with insults and curses. “Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?” he bellowed. It was

just the kind of bluster that had held every other Israelite soldier back.

Not David. The boy who would be king himself one day painted a masterpiece. “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin,” David called back, “but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head.” Now that may not be your idea of a masterpiece for your living room wall, but to a warrior in the battle of his life it was the very picture of success, the painting of victory.

What’s key, though, in Cook’s way of looking at the precursor to one of history’s most well-touted results is that David saw himself only as an agent of God’s plan. While he announced what he would do, he gave the credit to God, for he had no strength of his own without God. When this all happens, David announced to his enemy, “the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.”

**With God’s glory as our goal, we can act in the confidence of knowing that he will ensure that very outcome.**

**3 KNOW HOW TO FACE ADVERSITY** Of course, David’s story is one of adversity. We might say that he faced three challenges in one with Goliath—a warrior of superior size, superior

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strength, and superior military experience. But David had been made ready for such challenges in his time as a shepherd in the hills of Judea.

In his extensive hours alone, David had learned to hear God's voice, trusting the guidance of the one who taught him faith. Just as a golfer may turn to the proven reminders of her swing coach when she is on the course in the thick of competition, a person whose confidence is in God can fall back on biblical truths when times get tough.

David also had experience in victory. He had faced stern tests when wild animals came with intent to kill the sheep in his care. The fact that God had helped him in these urgent hours enabled David to tell King Saul, "I have fought battles this dangerous before. God delivered me then, and he will deliver me now."

Cook asserts that God's people are best equipped for adversity because they recognize that it is part of his plan. Some people, he says, have picked up the idea of writing SFT—See it, Feel it, Trust it—on their golf balls, but they miss the whole theological aspect of handling emergencies. He loves the quick run of instructions in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, where the apostle wrote: "Be joyful always, pray unceasingly, and in all circumstances give thanks because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Cook calls this

"a convicting verse. But" he says, "it is also very doable because it's the power of God that allows us to do it."

**Those confident in God's plan possess a built-in defense against those circumstances that threaten to knock their faith off course.**

## WHEN A TOUR

pro wins a tournament and gives credit to God in the post-round interview, Internet message boards light up with criticism. "How can he say that God caused him to win?" the commenters want to know. "What about his Bible-thumping buddies who didn't win? What about the weeks when the cussing, club-throwing guy gets the trophy? Where is God then?"

Cook thinks this kind of backlash misses the point. Players aren't giving God credit for particular wins, or even a good round here and there. "What they're saying is that God has given them the ability to think clearly and not be taken out of the game in the heat of competition," Cook says. "They're saying that their confidence is in the Lord, and this kept the fear that others have to deal with from overwhelming them."

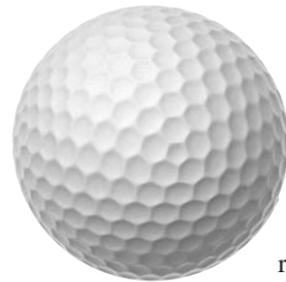
Scott Simpson confirms this notion. "I don't think God makes me hit good or bad shots, but he does give me tools

to live a meaningful life with peace and contentment. That helps me with everything, and that includes golf. My faith gives me the freedom to just do my best on each shot, play with more joy and enjoy the process of playing and practicing."

David Cook isn't the only sport psychologist on the planet. He recognizes that the secular side of the equation—achieving success in sports through positive mental imaging, say—can alone bring desired results on the playing field.

But he is equally certain that an approach devoid of the theological aspects of knowing God and drawing on a relationship with him will always come up short. "Without that," he says, "you can't get all the way there. But when you are all the way there, that's when you walk on water, that's when you face Goliath, that's when you go into the pit with the lions. People who do that are the people who say, 'I got this. Either I'm going to see God right now, or I'm going to have people talking about this for the next 2000 years.' Either way it comes out all right." ↵

**Follow David Cook's progress toward completing the sequel to *Golf's Sacred Journey* and learn more about his Utopia retreats at [linksofutopia.com](http://linksofutopia.com).**



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## CONFIDENCE WHERE YOU PLAY

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## Lesson 3: Seeing, feeling, trusting

Begin by reading "Confidence: Lessons in Success for Golf and Life."

Where do you lack confidence in your golf game? Where do you lack confidence in life? Have you ever considered how you might overcome these shortcomings, or do you just "let it be what it is?"

Read *Jeremiah 17:7-8*, a passage that David Cook considers bedrock in establishing proper confidence. What keeps you from placing your confidence in the Lord? How have you found life to be different when you have given him trust over your circumstances?

How does the picture in verse 8 effectively translate into evidence in a person's life as they trust in God?

Now read *1 Samuel 17*. In this account, what specific words and actions of David demonstrate his faith in God?

How does verse 45 instill a sense of empowerment in you as you depend on God for your spiritual victories?