



New Year Advice – Sneezes Come in Twos

By Debbie Waitkus, Golf for Cause

Here we are at the end of one year and the beginning of the next, a traditional time for introspection and contemplation. Have you started on your list of New Years resolutions? Have you made some time to reflect on some of the positive moments from the past year? Are you a goal setter - checking your accomplishments and making a list of desired achievements for the coming year along with a plan for execution? Or are you just glad to be along for the ride, enjoying the passage of time?



According to Annika Sorenstam, “some players don’t set goals – they just want to play. I need goals to know where I’m going.” She shared this with our small group at an informal gathering at Canyon Ranch this past October.

Annika has a matter-of-fact, down-to-earth style, matched with a delightful sense of humor. The insights gleaned from the evening with Annika are especially meaningful now, as we all look forward to and/or set benchmarks for the year ahead.

Interestingly, when Annika first hit the LPGA tour, she told us that she didn’t think she was going to win a single tournament. And now she’s won well over 50 and has already been inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame.

Christina Kim, a second-year star on the LPGA tour, tasted her first LPGA win this past September. She’s 20 years-old and is known as “The Ironwoman” since she rarely misses a tournament. Annika, on the other hand, has become more selective. She doesn’t want to live her current lifestyle the rest of her life. As a result, she played fewer LPGA events during the 2004 season than previously. She’s trying to never play more than three LPGA tournaments in a row. At this point in her career, she has learned the importance of balancing quantity versus quality and how that translates for her.

I specifically mention “translates” because I believe that we each need to find our own definition of balance. What works for Annika won’t necessarily work for me. And this is true in other areas other than balance, too. For instance, have you ever watched Annika strike the ball? Have you noticed that she doesn’t look at the ball at the point of impact?

We’ve all heard the *golf-isms*: “keep your head down” and “keep your eye on the ball.” During her golf swing, Annika defies these. She moves her head with her shoulders and back, prior to hitting the ball. Some call this her “signature head move.”

This “move” began many years ago when her instructor, Henry Rice, was trying to figure out a way to help Annika transfer her weight from her right to her left foot as she swung through the ball. He suggested she move her head before she hit the ball. It worked. Once she successfully transferred her weight, he told her to go back to the old way of moving her head. But her swing worked this way; she couldn’t imagine going back to something that didn’t work. Maybe it’s not the perfect ideal textbook stroke, but it is for Annika. So, the “signature head move” stuck.

What about risk and reward? Imagine that you’re just off the fairway on a par four. You’re faced with a *special* lie, a couple of tall, full trees blocking your approach shot to the green. Can you keep the ball low and thread it between them (if so, how did you ever miss the fairway to begin with?!) or can you hit the ball with enough loft to clear the trees and still reach the green in two? Is laying up even an option? How much do you have riding on the hole?

Annika likes to gamble every once in awhile. Yet, never more than one risky shot per hole. At her level, she can recover from a bogey, but a double or triple bogey typically present too difficult a situation to overcome.

Back to the *special* lie. Is this one of those risky shots to take? Annika knows that her adrenaline gets flowing during a match. She can easily get caught up in the moment, which can affect her judgment. To achieve a level of objectivity, she uses one of her resources, her caddie. Annika asks Terry, her caddie, whether or not this is a shot that she can execute. Given that the answer is “yes,” she goes deeper. How many times out of 10 can she successfully make the shot? Should Terry respond with a number greater than 6, she goes for it. She assesses her resources and options to mitigate risk and achieve results.

To be successful, Annika considers it important to get feedback from someone who knows her game. This goes beyond advice from Terry during a round of golf. Even as a professional, Annika believes that she needs help, all the time. Every six to eight weeks, she works with her swing coach. He flies to wherever she might be to see her. She also works on the mental side of her game with separate coaches. Whether it’s a refresher course or new learning, continuing education is an important part of the mix for winning.

Like most of us, Annika does get nervous. Just last year, the world watched Annika experience a huge test of nerves when she teed off with the men at the PGA Colonial tournament in Fort Worth, Texas. She was so pumped up that she hit her first ball 10 yards further than she anticipated, and on a rain-soaked fairway to boot! She still remembers telling herself to breathe.

Being nervous is a part of the game. Referring to other competitors during a round, Annika says it helps to “remember that everyone else is nervous, too.” The challenge is to get our nerves under control. Annika relies on sticking to her routine and trusting in herself.

As for a goal setting process, Annika shared that she doesn't sit down with pen and paper in hand to write down her annual goals. They come to her over a period of time. But she does believe in setting goals, lofty goals. In 2004 she set her sights on winning all four majors on the LPGA tour. She *only* won one. Not achieving her goal wasn't such a bad thing. "I'm paid well for putting a small, white ball into a hole," she told us. Winning a major is a tremendous achievement and definitely worth celebrating. Not trying or making her best effort would have been a different story. Rest assured, winning all four majors is on her list of goals for 2005.

Whether or not you write down your goals, here's one more thought from Annika to consider, perhaps the most important: it is essential to love what you do. Annika will be the first to tell you that there are not any short cuts to success. You have to work hard, both mentally and physically. You can have several coaches and read lots of books. Yet ultimately, you are responsible for your accomplishments. No one is going to do it for you.

When you're standing over the ball, ready to swing, and you hear someone sneeze, step away. You want to keep your mind clear and focused. If you make an indecisive swing, the ball could go anywhere. Since it's your game and your swing, the results, favorable or unfavorable, are yours. They do not belong to the person who sneezed. So, move away from the ball and start your pre-shot routine over again. But, as Annika suggests, be polite and wait for the person to sneeze a second a time – they usually come in twos.

Make the most of the New Year. Follow through for success and *Turn Golf into Gold.*™

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