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Co-Leader's New Focus Is Strategy, Not Distance

By Larry Dorman
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PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — J. B. Holmes, who has a share of the lead after the first round of the Players Championship, is not your garden-variety touring professional. Built like a lumberjack, bearded, with barrel staves for forearms and a neck like a hickory stump, Holmes looks more like a bouncer than a golfer.

Once known as the PGA Tour's longest hitter, Holmes has been focusing on hitting the ball shorter off the tee. Try to find anyone else out here looking to find the key to less distance. He also has dyslexia and recently tested "off-the-charts gifted" on a battery of I.Q. tests given by Dr. Julie Elion, a Washington clinical psychologist who is also his mental coach.

And that is one thing Holmes has in common with a large percentage of the golfers on tour and a number of the players near the top of the leader board at the Players. He employs a mental coach, otherwise known as a sports psychologist. Every level of the tour has a golfer who is seeing one of the many mental coaches who can be found walking the ropes at PGA events.

It is not a new phenomenon — back in 1981, the Texas sports psychologist Dr. Deborah Graham was working with the L.P.G.A. star Carol Mann, and in the 1990s she worked with Fred Couples. Dr. Bob Rotella has a large clientele of PGA Tour and Champions Tour players, including Robert Allenby of Australia, whose 66 on Thursday tied him for the lead with Holmes, and Davis Love III, who shot 69.

On any given week, there will be nearly as many mental coaches as player agents on the practice tee, including Lanny Bassham, who works with Ben Crane, who shot 67 and is tied for third; and Morris Pickens, whose clients include the reigning United States Open champion Lucas Glover, the British Open champion Stewart Cink and the former Masters champion Zach Johnson, to name a few.

There is also Dr. Joe Parent, the author of two books about a Zen approach to golf, who has worked with Vijay Singh and David Toms. And Dr. Gio Valiante, whose work with Camilo Villegas of Colombia has yielded results this year.

Holmes, a Kentucky native whose prodigious tee shots were the talk of the tour when he won his first of two Phoenix Opens at the T.P.C. Scottsdale in 2006, was not happy after he won that tournament, nor after he repeated the feat on Super Bowl Sunday two years later.

"He had just won his second tournament and he was so down, in a funk, and it was awful," Elion said. "His agent called and said, 'How can he get happier?'"

After Holmes and Elion began working about 18 months ago, and she established a bond of trust with him, she said, she was able to help him get away from some of the things that had been holding him back on the golf course and off it. And though the T.P.C. Sawgrass Stadium Course is fraught with peril that is visually intimidating and

stress inducing, Elion said she and Holmes did not work on any routine specific for this week.

Where Holmes is right now is in a pretty peaceful place, happy with his efforts to develop more shots, to rely less on driving the ball far and more on thinking and plotting his way around the golf course.

He was a little hard on himself at times on the golf course, once slamming his putter on the ground after missing a short birdie, but in general he was pleased with the way things worked out by hitting his driver only five times.

“The public always assumes that all you do is hit drivers, all I do is hit drivers,” Holmes said, not the least bit defensively. “You don’t keep your card by hitting drivers out here all the time. So you’ve really got to work your way around.”

Elion, who works with 12 other PGA Tour players as well as N.B.A., W.N.B.A. and N.F.L. players, is less systematic with her work with Holmes, but the results have been just as impressive.

“He was known as a bomber for so long, but what’s really happening is that his short game’s gotten great, his wedge shots and his putting have gotten much better,” she said.

And his disposition and attitude toward the game have improved accordingly.

Elion has not been responsible for totally transforming Holmes from a one-dimensional player to an all-around one. His process has been steady, and began with the most important discovery.

“J.B. is dyslexic,” she said, “and when he came to me, it was a heavy burden for him. He really felt stupid. He would say things like, ‘I’ve got all these smart friends.’ The more I talked to him, the more I thought, ‘This guy is brilliant.’ We did some I.Q. testing with him, a battery of tests, and sure enough he scored off-the-charts gifted. That’s one of the best things I could have done for him.”

