

In a Trance

The life story of Pete Solana shows that it's never too late to reinvent yourself, and help others in the process

BY GREG MIDLAND

Pete Solana's business card is simple and to the point. Directly under his name are the words "Sports Hypnotist," and rarely is a person more perfectly entwined to his vocation than Solana. The congenial White Plains native is one of the foremost practitioners of hypnosis in the country, and has the ability to convince even the most skeptical observers that yes, this is real, and it works. Yet if you had told him two decades ago that he would one day hypnotize people for a living, he might have said it was you who was in need of counseling.

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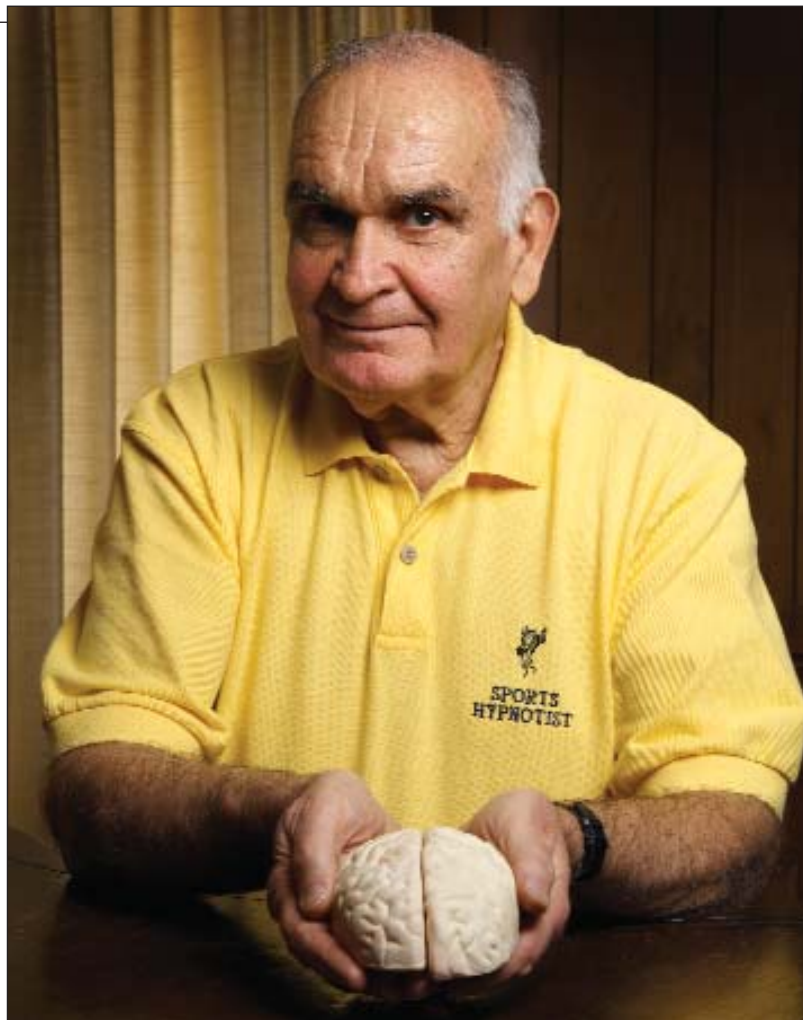
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All of Solana's teachings originate with the functions of the brain.

In the late 1980s, Solana was enjoying a successful 30-year career in the insurance business – he worked for a large company out of college and then started his own firm. Business was good, and a career switch seemed unlikely. Then, in 1991, he came across an article on hypnosis and its growing acceptance among athletes. Solana was always into sports – he played basketball for White Plains High School and later at Rider University in New Jersey. He played golf regularly. Knowing the mental challenges that all athletes face, Solana quickly became enthralled with the idea that hypnosis could lead to higher performance, and read any book he could find on the subject. In a matter of weeks Solana decided to, in his words, “start fresh.”

He enrolled in a weekend hypnosis certification class taught by Dr. Al Krasner, a California-based Fellow at the International Hypnosis Federation and one of the leading hypnosis scholars. Solana emerged from the weekend with a new direction in life, deciding to leave the insurance business behind and set up shop as a sports hypnotist. It was a leap of faith, and one that he saw as more than just

a change in job title.

“I always thought there were a lot of benefits with the insurance business, and there were. But I saw this as a major, major benefit to my life. So I didn’t hesitate,” says Solana of his decision.

Sitting down with Solana today, it’s hard to imagine him doing anything else.

Through a connection with the head pro, who was also his first client, Solana was able to lease a storage room in the hotel at Doral Arrowwood Resort in Rye Brook, N.Y. He got referrals, and within a few years was seeing scores of golfers as well as people looking for help with weight loss or to quit smoking.

A typical first session with Solana goes something like this: He explains the hypnosis process in detail and seeks to learn as much about the person as possible, specifically what they care most deeply about. He talks to them about the negatives that hypnosis will help them overcome – specifically, “mental blocks” and “limiting beliefs.” These are the enemies of achieving the goals set forth by the individual. Then, he goes forward with hypnosis.

Was he nervous when he sat down to hypnotize someone for the first time? “No, I never felt like I wasn’t going to be able to hypnotize someone. The more I did it, the better and more advanced I became. It comes a little easier.” It’s important to note that hypnosis is simply a change in a person’s brain wave patterns. Through it all, they are lucid, alert and talkative. “Once I show people how natural it is, they get it immediately,” says Solana.

As Solana’s client base grew, he opened a home office in White Plains. Today, that office is a quiet, peaceful retreat from the outside world, and filled with his tools of the trade. No, not coins dangling from a gold chain, but all matter of items that stress positive reinforcement and getting your brain waves to reach the “alpha state,” known in sports as “the zone.” This is the essence of what Solana does.

“I stress forgiveness – total, unconditional forgiveness of what anyone ever did to you or what you ever did to yourself,” says Solana. “The brain records everything it hears, and it doesn’t know the difference between reality and fantasy. So if you call yourself an ‘idiot’ on the golf course after a poor shot, that’s what your psyche will believe. Whereas if you take the time and effort to stay positive, it can have a direct impact on your next swing.”

The list of Met Area golfers who have benefited from Solana’s counsel contains an impressive list of tournament winners, including Andrew Svoboda, Carl Alexander, Mike Gilmore

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Top: Andrew Svoboda saw a rise in his game after working with Solana, as did former Yankee Paul O'Neill (above).

If you think this sounds too good to be true, you're not alone. Solana has had to combat people's initial skepticism for many years.

and Mike Downey. Solana worked with Svoboda during the 2006 U.S. Open at Winged Foot, meeting with him each morning and accompanying him during practice rounds.

"His philosophy is eye-opening, and can really help a lot of players," says Svoboda. "I started working with him in 2001 when I was at St. John's University, and I won the Big East tournament that year. I use his teaching a lot in competition, and it has been one of the best things I've ever done."

In fact, Solana started working with St. John's in the late 1990s, and as head golf coach Frank Darby puts it, he has become an integral part of the team. "One of our guys just had a 61 in one round, and another shot 63-65-64 for a tournament. Pete works with us as a team, and then with each player one-on-one. We're in touch with him constantly, and his impact on the team has been so positive," says Darby.

Solana's work isn't limited to golfers. Paul O'Neill was a client during his last couple seasons as a New York Yankee, and Solana helped him get over the feeling that he was too old to produce anymore. O'Neill ended up hitting 21 home runs in 2001, and was a key part of the Yankees team that made it to the World Series.

"Anyone can work with a hypnotist," says Solana. "Mike Tyson was hypnotized before his first 40 fights. Jim Courier used to be hypnotized before tennis matches. And Tiger Woods was taught hypnosis at a very early age."

Ah yes, Tiger. Solana gives numerous examples of Tiger's superior mental strength, and attributes much of it to Jay Brunza, Tiger's caddie during his junior and amateur days. "Brunza was a former U.S. Navy cap-

tain and a certified hypnotist," says Solana. "He taught Tiger about hypnosis and now, there is no one out on Tour who is better at getting into the zone than Tiger. You learn how to get in there over time," says Solana.

If you think this sounds too good to be true, you're not alone. Solana has had to combat people's initial skepticism for many years, and even today, only a small minority of sports psychologists use hypnosis as a tool. One of those Solana won over was Carl Alexander, now the head pro at Golf Club of Purchase.

"I think anyone would be skeptical," says Alexander. "But at the same time, golf is a crazy game, and we'll try anything. When I originally went to see Pete, in 1998, I was much more focused on competitive golf. I decided the missing link was the mental side of it, and I decided to seek out new ways to think on the golf course. By changing the way I approach the game and the way I competed, I immediately had more success."

To Alexander, who doesn't compete as often as he used to, the benefits haven't stopped paying dividends. "I still use a lot of the concepts in my teaching. It is a side of the game that definitely holds a lot of people back from reaching their potential."

Though Solana has gained notice working with top players, the club golfer can also benefit from practicing what he preaches. Here are a few basic tenets:

- Learn to "score from anywhere." If you hit a shot in the trees, for example, accept the outcome and embrace the challenge of trying to make par or bogey from a difficult spot.
- Limited beliefs, mental blocks, and tension are the greatest hindrance to peak performance. Instead, focus on positive self-talk, focus, trust and patience.
- Take a lesson from Tiger. You can get angry once in a while after a poor shot, but then, before your next swing, you have to build yourself back up by displaying extreme confidence.

You would think that with all the ways that Solana has helped golfers, he'd be able to help himself reach new heights in the game as well. Wrong. "I used to be a golfer, but then I gave it up when I realized what it does to everybody! I enjoy coaching and working with people more than working on my own game."

That dedication and time commitment is a hallmark of Solana's hypnosis practice. It's enough to leave golfers across the Met Area entranced. ■

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