



Attacks of the dreaded 'yips' afflict golfers of all levels in all corners of the globe, with German Bernhard Langer among the most high-profile players to have suffered.

Avoiding the Yips

In his latest exclusive contribution for *Asian Golf Monthly*, putting guru **Dr Paul Hurrion** takes a view of resolving or avoiding the yips from the perspective of a practical golf coach instead of the usual psychological angle. And he suggests solutions you already know about and which are in your own hands without resorting to psychology. First we have to examine this phenomenon. Pictures by *Getty Images*.

THE TERM 'yips' generally describes the inability to execute a regular putting stroke and, in particular, the occurrence of involuntary and uncontrollable jerking of the hand or the wrist just prior or during impact with the golf ball.

The result of cocking or twisting the wrist or the fore-arms or twitching the hands is an unpredictable putter action. Simply, the putter face is not delivered through the ball in the intended way and the ball does not come to rest in the intended position.

This mysterious problem has been described as psychological and can be unsympathetically termed 'choking'. It can affect professional golfers and club golfers alike and generally leads to a high level of frustration, desperation and unhappiness about the sufferer's golf game.

It is relevant to note that similar breakdowns of motor performance in highly skilled athletes and amateurs are also known in other sports such as darts, bowls and cricket. They all have the common similarity that the problem occurs in pressure situations.

It undoubtedly starts as a result of psychological pressure. I believe that anxiety and energy levels within the body start to boil over leading, in putting, to the dreaded involuntary movement patterns or yips affecting the point of impact. Even worse, once the victim is aware of the yips it can become a vicious circle producing its own self-induced pressure.

Typically it is thought that shorter putts requiring a limited complexity of movement skill where the slightest twitch invites disaster are affected rather than more difficult longer putts. Admittedly the possibility of failing to hole a short putt is perceived to be much more noticeable so adding



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more mental pressure. It then becomes impossible for the affected golfer to access their normal movement pattern, even if they consciously try to force it.

The more the player focuses on trying to avoid the problem, the more it tends to happen. Many prominent golfers have been affected by the yips, including **Bernhard Langer**, **Sam Snead**, **Ben Hogan** and **Tom Watson**. However, in my experience of coaching the art and science of putting, I have seen people with the yips for all lengths of putts. And I have known players develop the yips with pitching and bunker shots so I don't share the general opinion that the problem is confined to the low level complexity movement patterns of the short putt.

Other symptoms are also summarised under the notion 'yips'. *Choking* is the general symptom of decreased motor performance in sports due to increased performance anxiety, resulting in a disconnection of the intended movement. *Freezing* describes increased grip pressure or stiffness of a player, the inability to initiate the movement, and cramping during execution.

Some players suffer tremors of hands, wrists or arms throughout the stroke, again inhibiting control of the putter at impact.

In all this, anxiety is held to be the recurring factor in the development of the yips and I would not disagree. But the majority of us are not playing for our livelihoods. So, why do we get anxious?

The answer is that pressure is an individual perception, whether playing on a Saturday morning under the scrutiny of your friends ... or having a 10-foot putt to win The Open.

My background is Sports Bio-mechanics with a dominance in physics and mathematics. Bio-mechanics is 'the science concerned with the internal and external forces acting on a human body and the effects of these forces'. Using that knowledge and with bio-mechanical and high tech equipment it is possible to describe and more importantly to measure the 'mechanics of the yips'.

It is also possible to measure knock-on effects such as club head rotation of the putter. This examination of the occurrence of these involuntary and uncontrollable jerking movements is key to my understanding of the combined physical and mental issues that are the 'yips' phenomenon.

That leads me to conclude that good habits, and a sound understanding of their personal putting action, will protect golfers from the yips, or solve the problem if they are unlucky enough to have developed it, by eliminating major areas of uncertainty which lead to anxiety.

My personal aim when working with golfers has always been to ensure they create a consistent and repeatable putting action that enables them to start the ball on the line that they have read every time and under pressure! Correct alignment of the eyes and the putter-face is vital in the process of developing and repeating the mechanics of a sound putting stroke.

And yet it's no exaggeration to say that upwards of 95 per cent of the top amateurs and PGA professional golfers who I have worked with displayed fundamental flaws in their alignment that demand some sort of compensation during the putting stroke itself.

It is this conflict in hand-eye co-ordination resulting in compensation and manipulation that I believe can start the process of the development of the 'yips'. With the ball in contact with the putter face for

less than half a milli-second (0.0005 seconds), the putter face has to be square and in line prior to and through impact.

It is not feasible for the human brain to react, nor the body to make effective adjustments during that negligible contact time, so any manipulation during the putting action must lead to an imperfect strike. Working with your GEL putting mirror, as explained in last month's article, will avoid the uncertainties of misalignment.

Another crucial area that is part of my coaching is that you, the player, must take responsibility for your own action; you must know your own putting stroke inside out. Without correct understanding of results and accurate feedback, it is hard

to improve. Incorrect feedback is more damaging and leads to a downwards spiral in performance.

For example, if you have an eight-foot putt that you've read as right lip, and the ball misses on the left, what really occurred? Have you made a good stroke? Did you misread the green? Did you hit it too softly and the ball took more borrow as it ran out of pace? Did you misalign your putter face at address? Did you adjust it during the stroke and cause hook spin? Or did a spike mark, grain, or even wind take the ball off line?

Unless you know your stroke well enough to tell the difference between a good stroke and a pull or push or putter misalignment, then you are guessing at the reason why the ball has missed left. Take the analogy a stage further: you actually hole the eight-foot putt to much applause but the putt was left to right, (not the other way as you read it) and you pulled it.

Two errors cancel each other out and result in the ball going into the hole. Everything appears great as you just made birdie and the temptation is to accept that you made a good putt. The inevitable repetition of these errors will lead to manipulation of the putter, inconsistency, missed putts, frustration and anxiety and maybe the start of the yips.

You can improve this area simply by learning to know your own putting action – again as described earlier in this series of articles.

Movement is another problem area. The more the body or parts of it move, the more manipulation of the putter head is encouraged to compensate – and that is another path to inconsistency promoting uncertainty and anxiety. I aim for perfect symmetry and control (reference *A Fine Balancing Act, Asian Golf Monthly, June 2009*), aiming to hit squarely out of the middle of the putter every time (reference *Mirror, Mirror on the Floor, Asian Golf Monthly, September 2009*).

If you use the techniques in my previous articles in this series and perfect your alignment

and stability and know your putting stroke then your perception of a putt and reality will marry, feedback from the putt will be accurate and how you imagined it, and the problem of results being different to expectation will not occur. That is the path to anxiety free putting.

Consistent and correct feedback to your brain will develop the correct motor programme enabling you to improve and fine-tune your putting skill. This upward spiral takes you further away from anxiety. If my methods of creating a sound, repeatable putting stroke are the way to avoid the yips then they are also the cure.



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Dr Paul Hurron is among the world's foremost putting coaches. His passion for golf has led to a specialism in putting analysis and advice, assisting European Tour professionals and holding PGA accredited Putting Clinics. Through his work with Pdraig Harrington, he advised Hi-Tec on the bio-mechanical design dynamics of their new CDT Golf Shoe. For further information, visit http://www.quintic.com/quintic_putting_laboratory.htm or www.paulhurron.com

Paul has recently designed a signature range of putters for GEL Golf. For further details on the GEL Putting Alignment Mirror, visit www.gelgolf.com