Beware: too much practice makes imperfect

BY ALEXANDRA FREAN, SOCIAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT

PRACTICE makes perfect, so the saying goes, but rehearsing a process or task too often can lead to mistakes, researchers have found.

“Choking” — performing worse than expected under pressure — can strike the best-rehearsed performers, causing ballerinas to fall over, opening batsmen to be out for a duck, and barristers to lose their train of thought during a closing argument.

Attributed to nerves, “choking” had been considered incurable, but US psychologists have discovered not only what they believe to be its real cause but also an effective remedy. Sian Beilock and Thomas Carr, of Michigan State University, held golf-putting experiments to test their theory that “choking” occurs during well-learnt performances, because participants pay too much attention to the processes of their performance and too little to the final result.

A pool of 54 student golfers, in three groups, were trained to putt. The first group practised under normal conditions, the second learnt while performing a secondary task (listening to words on a tape recording and repeating a target word when they heard it), while the third group were filmed while practising. The third group were told to pay close attention to their performance because golf professionals would be reviewing the videotapes of them.

All three groups performed a simple low-pressure putting test with no distractions. They were then set a high-pressure test in which they were promised cash if they improved their putting.

http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/0,,2-2001581709,00.html
skills. The findings, published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology of the American Psychological Association, showed that the three groups performed equally well on the first test.

On the second test, the first two groups performed more poorly under pressure, while the third (videotaped) group actually improved.

It was deduced that the first two groups faltered because they were paying too much attention to the systematic execution of well-learnt skills. The third group excelled under pressure because they were deliberately paying more attention to their performance than to the complex processes they had been taught. “Adapting to an environment where one is forced to attend to performance from the initial stages of learning may provide immunisation against the negative effects of performance pressure,” Ms Bielock said.