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EAST LANSING, MI - What's your favorite swing thought? I'll take a wild guess that it's not, "Oh please dear Lord, not another slice!" or "Just don't miss it this time!" or "Shank!"

But let's face it, we're all haunted at times by the hobgoblins of golf. And when these wretched seeds of doubt and self-loathing planted in our minds by the mischievous Golf Gods begin to sprout, industrial-strength herbicide won't kill their roots. (Not to mention the fact that herbicide, applied to the brain, really messes up your neurons.)

So what can we do to avoid falling prey to exactly those deadly swings that our swing thoughts seem to foreshadow? Sure, guys like Phil Mickelson and Matt Kuchar swear by "positive imagery," but does it work? Or at least, does mental imagery work for bogey golfers who can't afford to keep our own sports psychologists on staff?

In a recently published article in The Journal of Sports and Exercise Psychology, Michigan State University researchers Sian L. Beilock, James A. Afremow, Amy L. Rabe, and Thomas H. Carr examined the impact of mental imagery on golf putting performance in novice golfers. The findings suggest that frequently entertaining negative images may really screw up performance, and furthermore, that the positive performance consequences of positive imagery, at least for novice golfers who don't consistently practice mental imagery, should be viewed with a certain amount of caution.

In the report of their research, entitled "Don't miss! The Debilitating Effects of Suppressive Imagery on Golf Putting Performance," Beilock, et al. had novice golfers putt balls as close as possible to a target marked on a flat, artificial putting surface. The study participants were divided into different groups with respect to the type of imagery they were instructed to use and the frequency with which they were
were instructed to use and the frequency with which they were supposed to use it. Prior to putting, participants were given specific imagery instructions.

Individuals were given either positive imagery instructions ("Imagine the ball stopping on the target"), negative imagery instructions ("Imagine the ball stopping on the target, but DON'T IMAGINE IT ROLLING BY OR STOPPING SHORT!")), or negative imagery with a positive replacement imagery instruction ("Imagine the ball stopping on the target, but DON'T IMAGINE IT ROLLING BY OR STOPPING SHORT! But, if you do, immediately try to imagine the ball stopping on the target instead."). An additional control group received no imagery instructions prior to putting. Within each of the imagery groups, participants were given imagery instructions before every putt (high-frequency), or before every third putt (low-frequency).

Now, for those of you keeping score at home, which of the groups above would you say you fit into?

Beilock et al.'s findings were mixed but consistent: All of the groups improved their putting accuracy over the course of the five trials, except for the groups given negative imagery instructions prior to each putt - even if this instruction was followed by a positive image. In other words, people who dwelt on negative thoughts actually got worse, and trying to replace bad images with good ones didn't help.

What of the positive imagers? Sure enough, individuals given positive imagery instructions prior to every putt improved the most over the putting trials. So we should all start closing our eyes and fluttering our eyelids before every putt like Matt Kuchar, right? (Was I the only one who thought Kuchar was having a seizure the first time he was shown doing this on TV?)

Actually, in this study, it turned out that groups attempting positive images prior to every putt did not statistically improve performance over the control group receiving no imagery instructions prior to putting, or even those groups receiving negative imagery instructions prior to every third putting attempt. Thus it seems that a few stray "Don't miss!" thoughts won't kill you over time; just don't make a habit out of it.

So, what's the moral? Well, if you can conjure a positive image before every putt or swing, give it a try. ("It's in da hole!") But if you find yourself unable to maintain those positive images, the cost of
suppressing the bad ones or trying to replace them with good ones may be high over time. That is, if you get in the habit of imagining bad results, it may be hard to stop doing so.

Most of all, it seems clear from both this research and previous related research by Beilock and colleagues (Study Explores Golf's Pressure Environment) that trying hard NOT to imagine a bad putt is almost a sure way to interfere with motor skill performance, and trying to replace these bad thoughts with good ones doesn't necessarily help.

So if you cannot consistently imagine positive results, you may not want to try - at least not in clutch situations. Instead, mental imagery, just like those other aspects of your game that you would rather not talk about in public, may be something you want to save to work on in practice.