Feature Story:
Study Explores Golf's Pressure Environment

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You've got a couple of side bets going with your regular foursome, and you will bank some serious scratch if you can sink this final putt. It's straight uphill, a little longer than you wanted-about five feet—but all you have to do is hit it, and it's in.

So you think, "right half of the cup, line it up, lose grip, same distance back and through, don't peek, wrists solid, sweep a coin off the green, hands follow ball down the line." And...

D'oh! All your buddies laugh cruelly, grab their throats, and make choking sounds.

What happened? Why did you—why do so many golfers, amateurs and pros alike—choke? If you knew this, you'd be rich, right? Well, read on....

Sian L. Beilock and Thomas H. Carr, researchers in cognitive psychology at Michigan State University, have been investigating why people choke. The results they obtained from a series of experiments on putting under pressure may well surprise you.

Pressure causes you to divide your attention, right? Your buddies distracted you, didn't they? All the pressure ruined your concentration, and when one of those lousy, cheating bastards moved, you couldn't help but notice it, right?

Alternatively, the pressure didn't in fact cause you to lose focus. Instead, it caused you to focus too much. That's right—"skill-focus" or "explicit monitoring" may be to blame. According to the skill-focus hypothesis, a well-practiced, proceduralized task like putting, normally operates on a mechanized or automated level.

However, when all of those "swing thoughts" start running through your head as a result of a pressure situation, that fluid putting task gets broken up into discrete steps, the timing gets thrown off, and you choke.

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Expert golfers have what Beilock & Carr term "Expertise-Induced Amnesia." Perhaps surprisingly to many, all of the results of the experiments run by Beilock & Carr strongly support the second hypothesis. In particular, they found that novice golfers have detailed episodic memories of the steps involved in individual putts but poor general putting knowledge (because they are not experienced golfers).

On the other hand, expert golfers have a hard time remembering details of the processes involved in the actual execution of specific putts, but possess extremely detailed generic knowledge of putting (what to do when and how).

In some sense then, expert golfers have what Beilock & Carr term "Expertise-Induced Amnesia." Experienced putters can't tell you how they just dropped that curling 20-footer, they just did it.

So it turns out that popular idioms used to describe peak performance such as "in the zone" or "unconscious" are on the mark. And those scratch golfers who always tell you they "putt by feel" aren't just trying to get out of giving you tips: They probably don't have a clue.

How can you get to be one of the "expert" putters? And how can experts learn to avoid the yips? Beilock & Carr examined this as well, and found that novices who practiced under stressful "self-monitoring" conditions became "inoculated" against this tendency-and consequently against the yips-after a relatively short period of time (120 or so putts). So going to the practice green and pretending to be Chevy Chase in "Caddy shack" ("Huh-na-na-na, mah-na-na-na") isn't going to help.

Paying attention to what you're doing in practice may help to correct flaws in performance, but keep in mind that this attention may hurt you in competitive situations on the course.

In fact, some investigators of the choking phenomena have found that when individuals distract THEMSELVES, for example, by counting backwards from 100 or singing a favorite song-anything to get their minds off of their own mechanics-they actually avoid the negative consequences of performance pressure.

So quit whining about distractions: Use those "distractions" to keep your mind off of what will really screw up your performance: your own swing thoughts. And of course, if you really want to get inside someone's head, offer some "friendly" advice about their flying elbow or cupped wrist. That'll get them thinking...and it'll get their wallets to open up farther, too.

(If you would like to read the full research report, look up: "On the Fragility of Skilled Performance: What Governs Choking under Pressure?" by Sian L. Beilock and Thomas H. Carr, to appear in 2001 in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General.)

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