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The Dreaded C Word

It's 'choke,' and players at every level do it. Here's how not to.

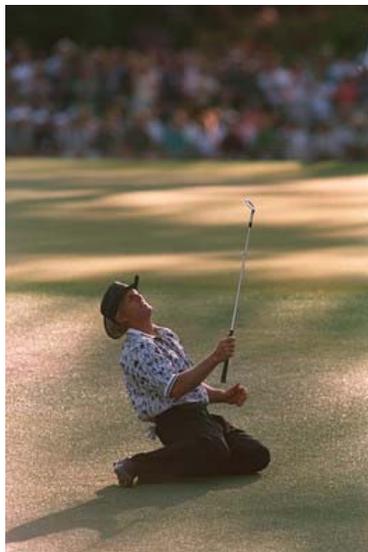
- By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



Golfers tremble before the word "choke" the way characters in the Harry Potter novels tremble before Lord Voldemort, or He Who Must Not Be Named. Harvey Penick, in his classic "Little Red Book," typifies the wary, superstitious attitude many have about the word. He insists that his students "grip down" on a club rather than "choke down" on it. "You should never use the word 'choke' in connection with your golf game," he warns.

Tour pros can be especially testy about the word. Johnny Miller, in the first tournament he announced for NBC in 1990, sized up the shot his friend Peter Jacobsen was facing on the final hole -- 225 yards to the green, from a downhill lie, over water -- and said, "This is absolutely the easiest shot to choke I've ever seen in my life."

Mr. Jacobsen pulled off the shot beautifully and won the tournament, but he was so furious with Mr. Miller for having used the word "choke" in his commentary that the two didn't speak for eight months. Mr. Miller, a former player himself, caught so much additional flak for the remark that he questioned his career move.



ALLSPORT/Getty Images

Greg Norman in the throes of his 1996 Masters collapse.

"The way some Tour players react to the suggestion they choked, you'd think they'd run out of a burning building and left their family behind," he wrote in his 2004 book "I Call the Shots."

"My feeling is, there is a lot to be learned by studying choking."

I agree. Gagging under pressure is painful to watch and miserable to experience. Anyone who shared Greg Norman's pain as he choked away his six-stroke lead over Nick Faldo in the final round of the 1996 Masters knows what I mean. The same holds for viewers of other notorious choke jobs, such as Mark Calcavecchia's shocking slide from five up at the turn to tie his match against Colin Montgomerie at the 1991 Ryder Cup at Kiawah Island, S.C. Or Jean Van de Velde at the 1999 British Open.

Or any number of less epochal collapses by young players vying for their first big win. Last weekend, Michelle Wie choked, although not horribly, at the SBS Open in Hawaii. On the brink of what would have been her first LPGA victory, she blew a three-stroke lead with eight holes to play and finished second behind Angela Stanford.

But these cases, far from being shameful, are an essential part of the game. Scientific research in the last few years has helped us get a better handle on what choking is, and suggests strategies for avoiding it.

Choking occurs when we pay too much conscious attention to a well-rehearsed routine that would play out better on autopilot. It is essentially the opposite of panic, which occurs when sudden, fearful circumstances shut down conscious thought and cause us to revert almost entirely to instinct.

Choking is only natural. At the big moment, with our anxieties high, our thinking mind, which we can control, usurps command of our swing from our nonthinking, instinctual side, which we cannot control. This is unfortunate because for skilled players the fine-tuned, rhythmic action of the swing is almost all instinct. The plodding conscious mind can't hope to keep up.

Sian L. Beilock, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, has been studying performance under pressure for more than a decade. As with most researchers in this field, her interest extends beyond golf to such challenges as taking SAT tests and making crucial presentations to clients. "But golf is a really nice test bed to examine why people fail. The subjects have a highly learned skill, you can introduce simple methods to increase pressure, and a putting green fits easily into the lab," she said.

In an experiment last year, she and her colleagues examined the impact that time pressure had on the putting of novice and skilled golfers. When forced to putt quickly, the low-handicap players performed far better than when they were encouraged to take their time. But for the beginners, the opposite was true. Without deeply learned putting skills to draw on, they putted worse when goaded to do so quickly and better when they had more time to puzzle things out. The takeaway, for experienced players, is to question that old saw about slowing everything down when pressure mounts.

Another study, led by a professor now at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, revealed a dramatic decline in performance when skilled players were asked to spend five minutes explaining their putting technique before they made a stroke. This and a raft of other recent

studies point in the same direction: Under pressure, the goal should be to disengage the conscious mind as much as possible.

That isn't easy, pressure being what it is, but Tom Dorsel, a sport psychologist and author of "Golf: The Mind Game," suggests a half-dozen ways to defend against choking. One is to distract yourself, perhaps by humming a tune or chatting between shots. Another (which seems to show up on every instructional list, no matter the issue) is to develop a rock-solid preshot routine and never vary from it. Yet another is to favor shots, when the heat is on, that are simple and straightforward, while avoiding those that require delicate skills. For example, lay up to full-wedge distance rather than a half-wedge distance.

But certainly the best way to fight choking is to put yourself frequently in choke-inducing situations, including artificially during practice, and monitor your reactions. That's why young Tour pros, in explaining their late-round collapses, are often not as heartbroken as we might expect. "If I keep putting myself in these situations, sooner or later I'll win one," they tell the media, and they are right.

Or, as Mr. Miller writes, you can't beat a choking problem unless you admit you have one in the first place. As almost everyone does.

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