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FEATURE STORY

University of Chicago professor studies why some golfers choke under pressure

By *Kiel Christianson*,
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Outside factors may bug you, but choking comes from inside, a University of Chicago professor says.

CHICAGO (Jan. 30, 2006) - So why does [Phil Mickelson](#) seem to snap-hook his drive into the water at precisely the wrong time? Why did [Retief Goosen](#) goose that putt on the 72nd hole of the 2001 U.S. Open? And why does Jean Van de Velde do, well, what it is that he does so well?

Do they get distracted? Do they hurry? Do they think too much?

Dr. Sian Beilock, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, suspects the latter.

According to the results of numerous studies using golf and other sports-related tasks, Beilock contends that the reason skilled athletes sometimes choke under pressure is that they over-think well-practiced, highly rehearsed routines in pressure situations. In so doing, they focus on individual pieces of complex actions, throwing off their timing.

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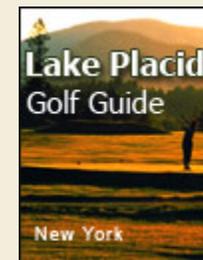
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Beilock, who recently came to Chicago from Miami (Ohio) University, has been using golf putting in particular to [test this hypothesis](#) since 1997. Her lab actually contains a practice putting green, and one of her most infamous experimental devices is the so-called "funny putter" - a flat stick with a number of bends and weights in the shaft.

Choking and golf

According to Beilock, choking - more formally referred to as pressure-induced failure - is all inside, rather than outside, the head. External distractions, although potentially distracting, aren't to blame in most cases (so ease off the cameramen, Stevie!).

"Pressure causes worries about the performance and its outcomes," Beilock said. "For skills that are very working memory intensive, these worries can use up resources necessary for execution - for example, difficult math problem solving - but for skills that run largely outside of working memory - for example, the easy three-foot putt to win the tourney - these worries seems to cause people to try and control or monitor their performance in a manner that disrupts the automated or proceduralized processes of execution that are normally not attended to."

Is choking in golf more of a problem than in other sports, where time pressures might prohibit the athlete from devoting so much ill-spent concentration to mechanics?

"I would argue that the mechanisms of pressure-induced failure are not sport-dependent," Beilock said. "What might make one more ore less prone to choking in one sport versus another, however, may the opportunity to instantiate those mechanisms. So, for example, if you have more time to attend to skill processes that are best left unattended or if there are situations where it is obvious that your performance, and only your performance, will determine the outcome and this prompts you to try and control your performance in ways that may be unproductive, you may be more prone to pressure-induced failure. Both of these seem like highly likely occurrences in golf."

Experts vs. novices

In a 2004 paper published in the *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, Beilock and colleagues reported the results of two experiments comparing the performance of expert putters compared to novices. They asked novice and expert golfers to take a series of putts under "dual-task conditions designed to distract attention from putting and under skill-focused conditions that prompted attention to step-by-step performance."

In the dual-task condition, people putted while monitoring a series of tape-recorded tones and responding "Tone" whenever they heard a specific one. They found that

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"novices performed better under skill-focused than under dual-task conditions. Experts showed the opposite pattern."

In a second experiment, novice and expert golfers putted "under instructions that emphasized either putting accuracy or speed." They found that the novices putted better under accuracy instructions, whereas the experts were more accurate under speed instructions.

In other words, novices would be better off taking more time and concentrating on technique, while experts should speed things up and just do what they're so well-practiced at doing.

But should novices really concentrate more and take longer? (If so, kiss any hope of a four-hour round good-bye!) And how does one define "novice?" What if you've been golfing for 20 years but still have a 20 handicap? Novice or expert? How about someone who's been golfing two years and has a 7 handicap? In other words, how do you know which you are?

To these questions, Beilock offers the following expert advice: "Performance is more important than experience and this can change from situation to situation. So, one might propose that a good golfer (play) faster on a well-learned hole, but take their time in a difficult situation. For example, when we give experts our funny putter, less time leads to worse performance. The idea being that we can change how one performs by making components of the task novel."

Back to Philly Mick, The Goose and The Frog. Mickelson is renowned as one of the most intellectual, most analytical players on Tour. One wonders if he's susceptible to just the sort of over-analysis under pressure that Beilock finds in her experiments.

Goosen is often criticized for his robot-like approach to the game. But chances are, his highly mechanized routine keeps him from taking too much time and over-thinking (or too little time in novel situations). After all, he's made way more pressure putts than he's missed.

And Van de Velde? Well, who knows what's going on in his head? Although yet to be investigated, it could be that skilled players who vary their routines according to the situation and/or their state of mind are more prone to choking due to over analysis in some situations and hurrying in others.

Maybe he should try Beilock's funny putter.

Any opinions expressed above are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the management. The information in this story was accurate at the time of publication. All contact information, directions and prices should be confirmed directly with the golf course or resort before making reservations and/or travel plans.

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