



AUGUSTANATIONAL/MASTERS HISTORIC IMAGERY/GETTY

In 1939, Ralph Guldahl was a giant in the game of golf.

A towering figure on the links, the taciturn Texan seemingly came from nowhere to win successive US Opens in 1937 and 1938, and then the Masters in 1939. But after writing *Groove Your Golf*, a step-by-step guide for beginners, Guldahl never won another championship. “He went from being the being temporarily the best player in the world, to one who couldn’t play at all,” said fellow PGA champion Paul Runyan. The question that has haunted golfers ever since is: did too much thinking derail one of the sport’s greatest talents?

How Ralph lost his groove

“HOW can you hit and think at the same time?” the gnomish American baseball player Yogi Berra once asked. It’s a question that has hung for decades over a forgotten great of golfing: a tall, shy Texan called Ralph Guldahl.

Born in Dallas in 1911 to Norwegian immigrant parents, the young Guldahl began hanging around his local golf course hoping to earn a few cents caddying. He didn’t get much work and instead spent his time watching the players. Then, late in the evening, he would sneak onto the links and imitate what he had seen. When he couldn’t get onto the course, he practised on empty baseball diamonds by chipping balls onto the bases. The self-taught prodigy was soon winning local tournaments, and the course of his career was set.

By 1931 Guldahl had turned pro, joining the PGA tour for some frustrating near-miss finishes, and narrowly coming second at the 1933 US Open. Guldahl’s strangely relaxed manner puzzled even the sedate crowds of golf: he paused to comb his hair before every hole, and he would forestall any suspense by announcing exactly where he intended to plant the ball. He was famously unflappable. “If Guldahl gave someone a blood transfusion,” his rival Sam Snead cracked, “the patient would freeze to death.”

Guldahl’s first years on the tour never quite panned out. After quitting for an ill-fated

attempt at selling cars – by some accounts, his one successful sale was to himself – Guldahl was reduced to selling his clubs to make ends meet. Then he drifted into casual jobs as a film-set carpenter at Warner Brothers and his luck changed. Some actors recognised him and raised enough money to get him back on the tour. This time Guldahl did not disappoint.

Sporting a powerful but eccentric downstroke, Guldahl won three major championships in as many years. After

“When he sat down to write that book - that’s when he lost his game”

witnessing his win at the Masters in 1939, golfing legend Bobby Jones described Guldahl’s playing as the finest he had ever seen. Guldahl was now the top golfer in the world and, one sportswriter declared, “the new synonym for consistency in American golf”.

Along with the usual product endorsements and talk of film cameos, a more unusual offer came Guldahl’s way: a book contract for a guide to golfing. He took two months out from his game to write the extensive accompanying text to *Groove Your Golf*, an innovative “Ciné-Sports” book that used high-speed photography of Guldahl in action on each

page to create flip-book “movies”. After explaining the use of each club, Guldahl left readers with the admission that even experts had to think carefully about their game; that nobody “is so good he never has to consciously be aware of a number of things to keep his swing in the groove”. He then put down his pen and returned to the PGA Tour. He never won another championship.

After a few losing seasons, Guldahl left the circuit. What had happened to golf’s greatest star? It was the book that did it, said some, and over the years that suggestion hardened into received wisdom. “When he sat down to write that book,” Guldahl’s wife Laverne asserted in 1972, “that’s when he lost his game.”

“My mother warned him against doing it,” said his son Ralph junior in an interview with *Golf Digest* in 1999. *Groove Your Golf*, he claimed, had caused his father to overanalyse his own technique and to misunderstand the swings he had learned through dogged trial and error. Ever since, Guldahl’s unravelling has stood as a cautionary tale. But is that really what happened?

The danger that “overthinking” may cause an otherwise talented professional to choke – a notion popularised by Malcolm Gladwell’s bestseller *Blink* – was memorably demonstrated in 2007 when Sian Beilock of the University of Chicago put a group of



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ralph Guldahl won three major championships in as many years, an unheard-of feat at the time

But would this effect really last for years? An examination of the historical record reveals some cracks in the traditional explanation for Guldahl's downfall. Yellowing newspaper sports columns show he hit a slump in 1941, but they also show some strong play, including winning the Milwaukee Open in 1940. Losing a major tournament, after all, is not solely attributable to poor play: it also depends on the strength of the other players. A more objective indicator of performance is in the number of strokes per game.

In a study in 1999, Patrick Larkey of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Scott Berry of Texas A&M University in College Station, examined the stroke averages of the then top 100 golf champions, and came up with a measure of how fast players' performance deteriorated after they hit their career peak. Guldahl clocks in with an unremarkable score of 1.14, which is a little higher than average, but significantly lower than other PGA champions such as Cary Middlecoff (1.88) and Dow Finsterwald (1.97).

If Guldahl's decline was neither so dramatic as popularly believed, nor so clearly attributable to *Groove Your Golf*, then what was it that made him bow out of his professional career in 1942? For that, one must turn to Guldahl himself. Tucked away in an interview in *The New York Times* in 1979 is his own response to tales of him practising shots in front of a mirror while writing, and utterly destroying his talent in the process.

"Nonsense," Guldahl said flatly. "No such thing ever happened." The reason he retired was timing. By 1942 he was tired of life on the road and wanted a more stable home life for his wife and 7-year-old son. With the wartime slowdown in tournaments, the decision to quit was easy. His game soon grew rusty, and he didn't miss it enough to go back to training. "I never did have a tremendous desire to win," he confessed.

Instead, he settled into life as the pro at a plush country club in Tarzana, California, where he happily coached others on their swing, including eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes. Meanwhile, the curse of the *Groove* entered into legend. Guldahl's fate had little to do with overthinking his game, and much to do with the untutored Dallas boy who once loved to play abandoned courses and baseball diamonds alone. Far more than fame, what Ralph Guldahl wanted was a nice, quiet game of golf. **Paul Collins ■**

golfers to the test. Beilock found that distractions, such as recalling a list of random words, affected the performance of novices, but expert golfers were not so easily thrown off – with one critical exception. The way to make an expert golfer miss a shot, Beilock found, was to ask them to explain what they were doing. "Golf is a great game to study choking because it is a complex motor skill that people spend a lot of time practising to perfection," says Beilock. "Even the simplest well-practised shots can go awry."

Once choked, recovery is slow. Last year, psychologists Kristin Flegal of the University of

Michigan in Ann Arbor and Michael Anderson of the University of St Andrews in the UK showed that thinking aloud had a lasting effect: after explaining a successful putt, skilled golfers took twice as many putts to sink their next ball. In fact, explaining at length had the effect of temporarily wiping out all their expertise.

The problem stems from the need to describe movements that have become instinctive, in effect switching the brain from autopilot to manual. To make matters worse, the focus shifts from motor skills to language, and the need to find words to explain something normally done without thinking.