

10 'MUSTS' FOR THE START OF THE GOLFING SEASON

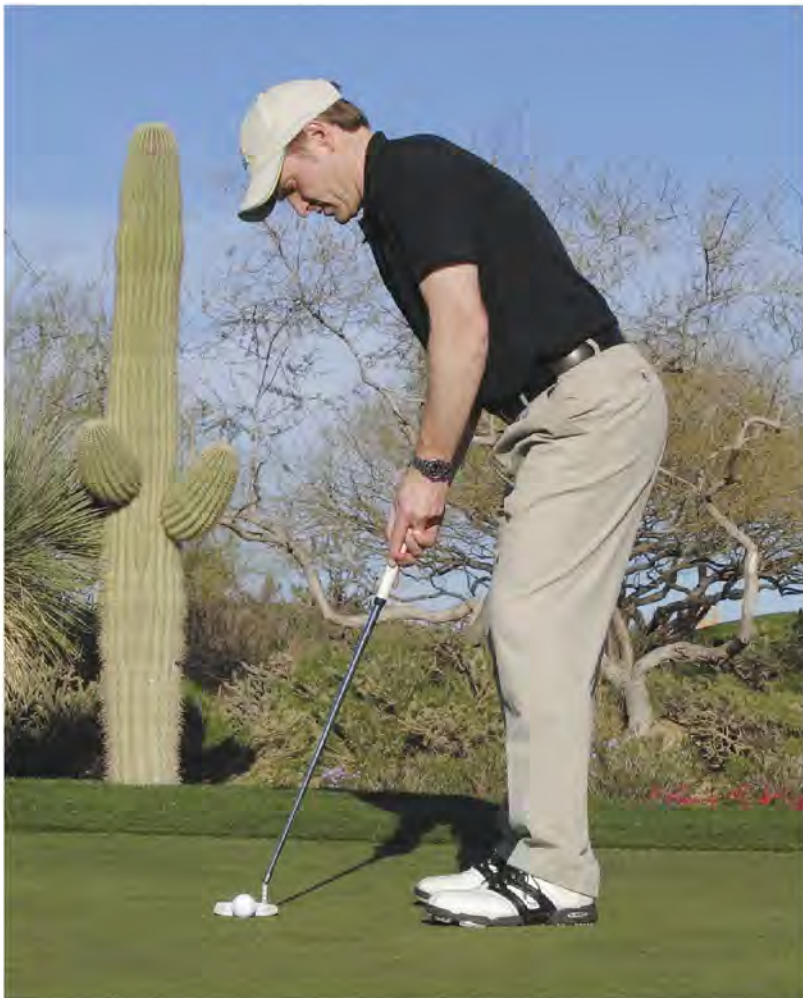
G INSTRUCTION

10 'MUSTS' FOR THE START OF THE GOLFING SEASON... (ASSUMING YOU WANT TO SHOOT LOWER SCORES...)

I have recently returned from Phoenix, Arizona where I presented some of my research on putting at the World Scientific Congress of Golf. Here, I have summarised some of my findings in order to give you what I hope is valuable advice as you look forward to a summer season. Time to put in some quality putting practice – that's if you want to reduce your handicap!

By Dr Paul Hurrion

WWW.QUINTIC.COM / WWW.PAULHURRIION.COM
SHOT ON LOCATION AT DESERT MOUNTAIN, PHOENIX, ARIZONA, USA.
WWW.DESERTMOUNTAIN.COM



1/ POSTURE

Standing correctly to the ball in good posture is at the heart of my putting instruction - get this right and other details fall more easily into place. Your goal at address is to establish a posture that allows your shoulders and torso to rock in a pendulum motion without any need for excess hand action or other compensations (as these won't hold up under pressure). The ability to create a stable posture and 'pivot point' is essential if the putter is to be swung consistently from address, to the extent of the backswing and back squarely through impact.

Looking from the 'Ball to Target Line', the first aim is to have the top of your back flat and horizontal to the ground; it is not a tilt from the hips but more from the mid section of your back. Imagine a DVD case or even a glass of water resting on this top section of your back. This horizontal position allows your shoulders to rock on a 'square to square' path through the impact area.

Your knees should be slightly flexed, with your weight spread evenly between heels and toes. As a result, your body is in a very efficient biomechanical position to create the desired pendulum stroke; your posture is such that it actively encourages the path of the putter to be dictated by the shoulders and not the hands!

Finally, your grip. Check that an imaginary line can be extended from the shaft of the putter all the way up through your forearms. They should be in the same plane. This will ensure that even the slightest wrist break will not cause the putter face to rotate.

2/ NEW PUTTER GRIP

Investment in a new grip can make all the difference in the world. I doubt if many of you regularly change your putter grip. Most amateurs overlook the importance of a fresh grip. So that's my first recommendation.

Then, double check your grip pressure. *Don't strangle the putter.* If you can see the whites of the knuckles when you take your grip, you're already in trouble. Too much pressure in the hands reduces the feel in the forearms and shoulders; you end up with a muscular 'gridlock'. Squeeze the life out of your grip and you effectively squeeze all the feel and rhythm out of your stroke.



3/ GET CUSTOM FIT

The main issue I find with many amateur golfers is that their putter isn't fitted correctly, they may have bought the latest model, borrowed a putter from a friend, found one or even looked through the second hand bin to find the answer to putting success. As a result, the golfer fits his or her posture around the putter, rather than correctly fitting the putter to their posture.

Would you play with irons that were too long or too short? Or with the lie angle too upright or too flat? Custom fitting for putters, in my opinion, is lagging considerably behind that of irons and drivers. This is something I believe you have to get right in order to improve performance on the greens. Check the 'Heel' and 'Toe' are level (as per the example below). Ask your club professional to adjust your putter. It is simple to do, but I guarantee this will fast-track the improvements in your putting stroke and knock shots of your score...



Check the lie angle of your putter – it should sit flush on the ground



hand is on the grip, this is the control hand, so it makes sense to have the whole of the hand in contact with the handle). It's a simple grip, with the benefit of reducing the influence of any unwanted wrist action.

For me, the function of the grip is to monitor the handle of the putter to make sure that your takeaway, transition, downswing, impact and thru-stroke are performed with a smooth tempo without jerkiness, abruptness, or any snatching. If there is any unwanted movement, the handle of the club will twist or move inside your grip (especially if you use a thick grip!). Because I like to use a free-fall gravity stroke by which the "triangle" falls from the top of the backstroke by gravity, the handle has a natural and smooth acceleration downward that peaks right at the bottom of the stroke. There is nothing you should be adding to the speed of the fall by muscle action in the hands or arms or shoulders. The main thought is for your hands to "ride" the handle as it falls so you "feel" absolutely nothing in the hands. The shoulder triangle must however, keep moving through impact and not stop once contact with the ball is made.

In the left-hand low grip (or reverse-handed), the left arm and wrist remain pretty stable throughout the stroke and there is no powering with the left hand, whereas in a traditional reverse overlap grip the right hand has control of the thru-stroke. The powering through of the right hand expresses itself sometimes as left-wrist breakdown. Sometimes the left wrist stays stable and the right hand sends the extra oomph up through the left elbow. The chances of this occurring are significantly reduced with the left-hand low grip. The point of all this is that a 'palms together grip' and a 'left-hand low grip' are a lot closer to a "dead-hands" shoulder stroke than a reverse overlap grip with right-hand power.

Try with palms together, sliding the left hand low, and hit some putts. What differences do you feel? I would encourage all players to have a try at left hand low, especially if you are a junior. I do find that by taking the hands out of the stroke, level shoulders at address, a shoulder motion with 'gravity' accelerating are all preferable for more accuracy and consistency on the putting green. Give it a try...

Experiment with the palms together and left hand low. Hit some putts. Setting up with the level shoulders at address, and then taking the hands out of the stroke, makes for a more consistent action and a natural release of the putter through the ball

4/ PALMS TOGETHER

I believe the hands should "oppose" one another on the grip. So I devised a grip that has the palms opposed and that does not result in one hand being lower than the other. When the right hand is lower than the left, the danger is that the shoulders are skewed into a tilted position and the spine angle sets up as it would if you were playing a 7-iron. I like to see a player set up with the shoulders square to the target line and with shoulder joints approximately the same height and the spine vertical. This grip, which I call, the "Palms Together" grip, is formed by 'sandwiching' the handle with both hands, opening the last three fingers on the right, then placing both hands onto the grip, with the right's last three fingers wrapping over those of the left in the crevices between fingers. (Note: the whole of the LEFT





Creating a 'gate' with a couple of tees makes for a highly effective impact drill

5/ ENERGY TRANSFER

One of the keys to good speed control is the ability to deliver maximum energy from the putter to the ball. It builds consistency. The opposite is a stroke that is too long in the backswing, or too long in the follow through. The maximum energy is therefore usually somewhere other than the impact. The goal is to make an authoritative stroke, hit the ball with maximum energy, and learn to stop the putter from extending too far. Don't cramp yourself, but do keep it compact. This will improve your tempo without trying. Remember, good speed control prevents 3 putts!

6/ THROUGH THE GATE (TIGER DRILL)

Creating a 'gate' with a couple of tee pegs - and then running your putter between them - makes for a terrific practice drill (Tiger is a master at it, holing out 6-footers one after another using just his right hand to control his stroke). The challenge is to return the putter consistently through the gate so that you make solid contact with the ball. Line up a 6-foot putt and repeat the drill ten times. In order to control the pace of the putt it is vital that the ball is struck consistently out of the sweet spot - and this drill will help you to improve that element of your putting.

Creating a gate that is just wide enough for your putter to swing through places the emphasis on the consistency of your stroke; the coin drill, meanwhile, is a test of your focus as you hit putts - the key being to look for and 'see' the edge of the coin immediately after the ball is struck (i.e. no peeking up at the hole!)



7/ COIN DRILL

As per the photos you see here (left), the coin drill sets up a good focus exercise that will help you to keep the head steady through impact. Place a coin on the green just behind the ball, so that when you set up you can just see the edge of the coin protruding beneath the leading edge of the putter face. The challenge is to focus on seeing that coin through impact and after - focus on the writing on the coin or ball marker - only when you have registered that can you allow your eyes to follow the ball to the hole.

8/ PACE CONTROL

Putting to a tee-peg in the green is another very simple exercise that quickly sharpens your feel and control. The goal is to nestle each ball against the tee, or within just a few inches, just like playing 'bowls'. Putting to a tee eliminates the pressure that often comes from being fixated on holing a short putt. You will actually find out what it is like to putt with a good rhythm. Hit ten putts. How many can finish within the 6 inch circle?

9/ PUTT TO THE FRINGE

Putting balls to the fringe of the green invites instinct to take over - how close can you nestle the ball to the fringe without the ball actually touching the edge? Take one ball and putt from all angles across your putting green - by the time you head for the 1st tee you should be totally in-tune with the speed of the greens.



10/ PRACTICE

The more often you go out and practise the drills highlighted in this feature, the better the putter you will become. Just remember that when practising before a tournament or club competition, your focus should be purely on holing out for confidence and speed control to eliminate three-putt greens. It's time to go and play...

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