

MAN ABOUT GOLF

# WHY I LOOK AT THE HOLE WHEN I PUTT

IT WORKS FOR JORDAN SPIETH, TOO

BY DAVID OWEN

In the Golf Channel last spring, longtime Tour pro John Cook demonstrated Jordan Spieth's cross-handed putting technique, and narrowly missed a seven-footer on a practice green on the set. Then Cook discussed what's probably the most talked-about element of Spieth's method: the fact that he sometimes looks at the hole, instead of the ball, as he putts.

"For myself, I don't really understand that," Cook said. But he gave it a go anyway – and sank the seven-footer he'd just missed.

Well, hmmm. I myself started looking at the hole, on all putts, seven or eight years ago, after reading about a study in which a group of amateurs had surprised researchers by putting significantly better that way, despite having been given minimal opportunity to rehearse.

Even more surprising, the improvement was greater on long putts than on short ones. Cameron McCormick, who is Spieth's teacher, told me that one of the benefits is "to eliminate any tendency we have as players to be aware of the movement we are using in executing a task," a tendency that usually leads to trouble.

Ignoring the ball made me a better putter almost immediately – by 20 per cent, according to my friend Tony. Recently, I talked with Dr. Bob Christina, a sport psychologist and an assistant golf coach at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. It was Christina who conducted the study I read about, in collaboration with Eric Alpenfels, the director of golf instruction at Pinehurst. (In 2008, they expanded

their findings into a general theory, in a book called *Instinct Putting*.)

"The bottom line for me is that looking at the target frees you up to stroke

the ball more naturally," Christina said.

Another benefit is that it increases your ability to take advantage of a talent that most golfers don't realise they have. If you've played for even a few years, you've had the experience of watching someone else stroke a long putt and knowing, before the ball has travelled halfway to the hole, that it's going to go in, or stop an inch short, or just miss to the right, or whatever. Somehow, you're able to anticipate the complete trajectory and endpoint of the putt, even though you're standing off to one side and (as far as you knew) not paying that much attention. "That looked good all the way," you say – and it really did.

But how could you tell? The explanation has to be that our brains know much, much more about the physics of moving golf balls than we give them credit for. Golfers who do what putting teachers sometimes tell them to do – keep their head down until they hear the ball hit the bottom of the cup – deprive themselves of their best opportunity to enlarge their ball-behaviour database. Looking at the hole also keeps your internal range finder fully engaged and enables your increasingly well-educated subconscious to intervene, on its own, when it senses something going awry.

Besides, the easiest way to keep your head still is to aim it, at the outset, towards the thing it yearns to peek at.

People who haven't tried it usually assume that consistently making solid contact must take lots of practice, but it doesn't – very little more than clapping your hands with your eyes closed. (For me, it has become so automatic that I sometimes inadvertently chip while looking at the hole, and not necessarily with disastrous results.)

One surprising benefit is that it helps even when you don't do it. Christina and Alpenfels have found that, when golfers try it for a while and then go back to putting conventionally, some of the improvement "transfers" to their old technique. At UNC-Greensboro, Christina uses it as a drill.

Before stars like Spieth and Louis Oosthuizen became known for it, looking at the hole was associated mainly with yippers – for whom it can be highly effective, because it shifts their focus away from their tormentor, the ball. But they're not the only beneficiaries. Dana Rader, who owns a golf school in Charlotte, has been teaching it for about 30 years, and she told me that she seldom has students who don't improve while doing it. "I don't know why everybody doesn't putt this way," she said. 

photo by Dom Furio