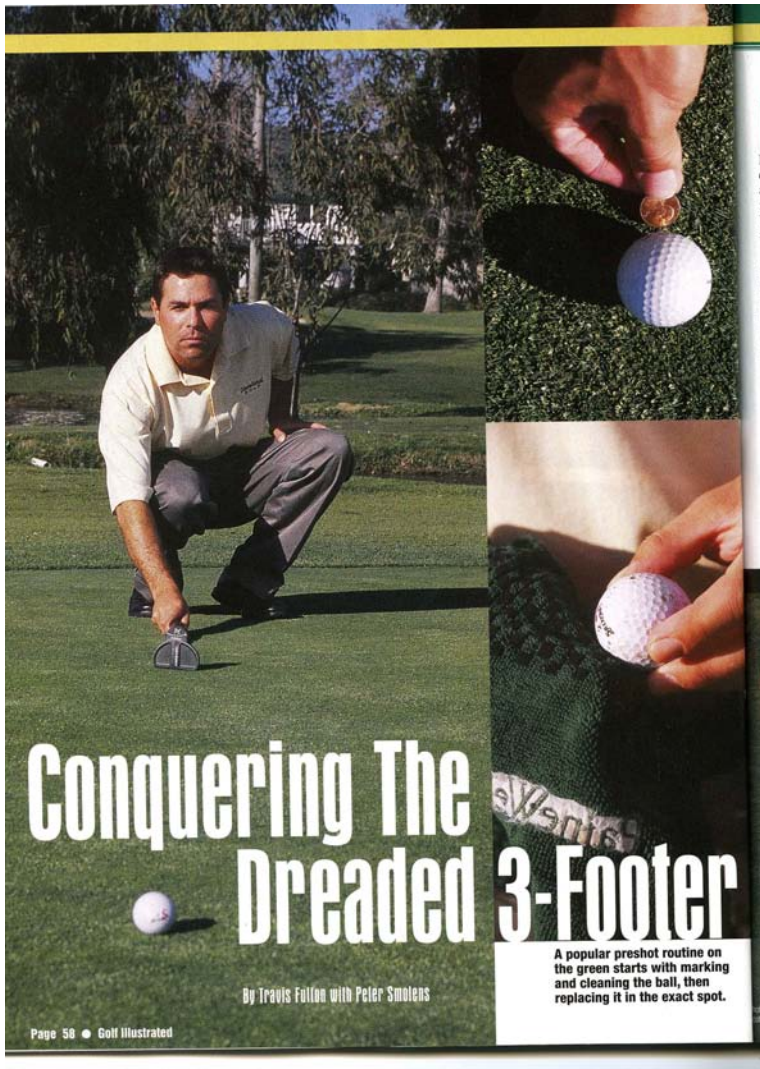


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Conquering The Dreaded 3-Footer

By Travis Fulton with Peter Smolens

A popular preshot routine on the green starts with marking and cleaning the ball, then replacing it in the exact spot.

Page 56 • Golf Illustrated

It seems nothing can ruin a hole faster than missing a short putt of 3 feet or less. It's adding on an unnecessary stroke. Making your short putts is often the difference between a birdie and a par, or a par and a bogey. Missing a short putt early in the round can often turn a good round into a bad one. It is one of the things that drives all of us crazy about this game.

So why does missing a short putt represent the most anxiety in golf? Because it is the only shot you're supposed to make. Think about it. Odds are John Daly hits his drives farther, Ernie Els has a smoother swing, Tiger Woods has better concentration and few people have a short game like Phil Mickelson. But most every golfer should be able to putt a ball into the hole from within 3 feet. There is no other place on the golf course where making a mistake is so obvious as when you miss a short putt. That fact alone creates pressure on any golfer.

Here is an all too common scenario. You're faced with a short putt of about 3 feet or less. You're finishing up the hole and perhaps are the last one to play out. Others are starting to move around. Someone has picked up the flag. They're all waiting for you to complete the hole so they can

put the flag back in and move onto the next tee. Seeing all this commotion around you, you stand up quickly and make a quick swipe at the ball, instead of taking your time and going through your normal preshot routine. The result is often a missed putt.

Making a short putt is as much a mental process as it is a physical stroke. When you miss a short putt, more than likely you were not mentally prepared to make the stroke. Therefore, one of the keys to making short putts is to take your time and go through your normal preshot routine. Think through the shot that is about to be played, then play the correct shot.

Creating a Standard Preshot Routine

A preshot routine is without question one of the most overlooked areas of golf. However, when you watch golf on television, you see tour professionals continue to do the same thing over and over again — even on short putts. Notice how each routine is different in its own way but very structured and noticeable with each player. For example, consider Jim Furyk and his putting routine when he addresses the ball and then backs away to stand behind the ball to rehearse his speed once more.

Your preshot routine will put you in the proper frame of mind for the shot you are about to attempt. Even if the putt is a simple straight-in putt, go through your entire routine. Resist the temptation to hurry through your preshot routine. Take the time and set up properly. Following are some guidelines to get your preshot routine moving in the right direction.

Commit To The Putt

The first step to a routine is getting committed to the putt or the shot at hand. A popular preshot routine on the green starts with marking and cleaning the golf ball. Replace the ball in the exact spot. Do not lift your marker yet. Move to a comfortable distance behind the ball so you can see the slope of the green. Now determine the line and speed of the putt. It is crucial that you look at these two factors together, not independently, as line and speed must work together. If you do this, you will have a better chance to create feel with these short putts.

Of course, commitment is not easy, and

every golfer is guilty of approaching these short ones and second-guessing himself.

Once you have decided on the line and speed, it is time to transition toward approaching the ball. At this point, you may focus near the hole, seeing a spot 6 to 12 inches in front of the ball, or you may see a line or path. Take a few deep breaths to calm your nerves. The purpose of this is to clear your mind from all unwanted distractions and to relax the body.

There should now be only one thing on your mind — making this putt. Some sense of imagery is most likely occurring at this point where you are visualizing the success ahead, but no wishing or praying is involved during this step.

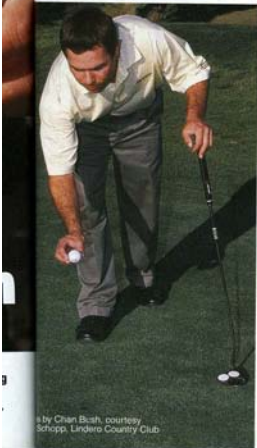
Getting Comfortable With The Setup

Now that you are committed to the line and speed of the putt and have a mental picture of the ball going in, approach the ball with the goal of getting comfortable. This is usually different for everyone. You may feel comfortable doing your practice strokes next to the ball and then addressing the ball. Or you might prefer to make your practice strokes behind the ball and then pick up your marker and get into the address position. This is a common routine for many tour players.

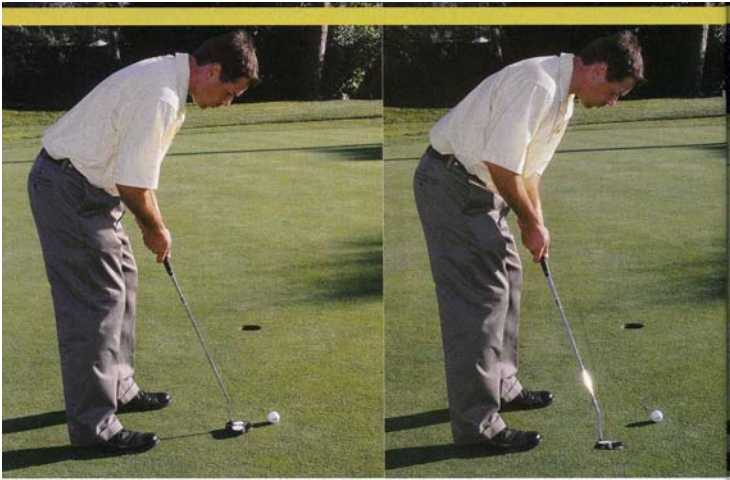
Regardless of your exact approach, you must get comfortable with the setup. My advice for this step is to stay focused on the hole and that picture you committed to with the ball going in the hole. So many mistakes occur at this point. It often becomes too mechanical with not enough concentration on getting comfortable and making the putt. Trust what you have and focus on the routine ahead.

Look And React

Once you are committed, comfortable and ready to go, it's time to look and react. Still focusing on the hole, draw an imaginary line from the hole over the line or path you have selected. Sometimes from this angle your eyes will see something different than what you committed to previously. If there is the slightest bit of confusion, stop. A lack of confidence in the chosen line or speed is the biggest reason for missing short putts. On short putts, you must be 100-percent certain of the line and speed that the ball is to travel. If not, back



By Chan Bosh, courtesy Schopp, Lindero Country Club



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away and start the process over again. With a commitment to the line and speed, draw the eyes back and let it go. What you will react to is what is built into your motor program. These are the stroke mechanics as you know them.

Evaluate The Process

The final step of the preshot routine is to evaluate the process. If you commit yourself to the routine described previously, you will make more short putts. If you miss a few but feel like you committed to your routine and didn't break down, you have done your job. Don't be discouraged. You're now most likely dealing with a mechanical issue. Remember, the mechanics of putting need to be in place so you can react instinctively on the course and focus on the routine.

In looking at putting mechanics, you need

to understand the setup position. By setting up properly, you will ensure that your putting stroke has a greater chance of moving on its natural arc, and therefore achieve a more reliable and trustworthy stroke.

There are three key points during the putting setup that, when memorized on the practice green, will allow you to focus only on the routine and not the actual mechanics of the stroke. The first key is to have your eyes over the ball or slightly behind the ball on the target line. This allows your eyes to work in conjunction with the actual starting line of the putt.

A good technique to use during practice sessions to help keep your eyes over the ball and not moving during the putting stroke is to put a CD on the ground with the shiny side up. Place the ball in the CD's center hole. After getting into your normal putting stance, you should see the reflection of your eyes in the CD. While prac-

ticating your putting, you should see your eyes throughout the entire putting stroke with no head movement.

The second key during the setup is to make sure your hands and arms hang directly under the shoulders and free of the body. If



A good way to help keep your eyes over the ball and not moving during the putting stroke is to place a CD on the ground (shiny side up) with the ball in the CD's center hole. After getting into your normal putting stance, you should see the reflection of your eyes in the CD. While practicing your putting, you should see your eyes throughout the entire putting stroke with no head movement.

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you bend over from the hips, your arms and hands can hang freely under the shoulder line. This will allow the arms to swing freely with no interruption or manipulation.

The final key in the setup is to have your weight distributed over the balls of the feet. One of the most common mistakes at address is players standing too close to the ball with their feet and then countering that by sitting back on their heels. The center of your right hip should be directly over the center of your right heel. In this position, you will be balanced.

Practice Short Putts

One way you can become better at making short putts is to practice hitting them. Many pros actually start their practice putting routine by hitting short

3-foot putts. Making these putts builds confidence for when they move back to attempt longer putts.

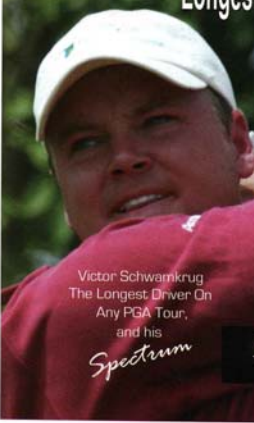
Still, this kind of practice alone will not help you when you're trying to make a putt under pressure. One way to achieve mental pressure when practicing your putting is to create mental scenarios or images in your mind. For example, imagine you're on the 18th hole in the finals of your club championship with this 3-foot putt to win. You can also come up with rewards for making so many putts in a row. These mind tricks will help prepare you for the real moment.

Finishing off a well-played hole by sinking a short 3-foot putt for par will give you confidence. Then, by knowing you're going to make these short putts, you will become bolder on your chip shots and longer putts. With that confidence, your putts will start dropping and so will your scores. **GI**

— *Travis Fulton is a senior master instructor at the PGA Tour Golf Academy at the World Golf Village in St. Augustine, Fla. He is recognized as one of the top teachers in northern Florida.*

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