

Mental game

Amateurs and pros alike suffer from nerves generated by the dreaded three-footers but they can all be simply exhaled away, explains Golf Monthly's mental coach Gary Leboff

Breathe your way to putting glory

Putting is the greatest leveller in golf. Not everyone can smash a tee shot 300 yards, stiff a wedge or hole out from a bunker. But what everyone CAN do is miss a putt from three feet. One thing that never ceases to astound me, and I work with everyone from touring pros to high handicappers, is that pros and amateurs make precisely the same mistakes on the green.

Summer is drawing near(er) and those eagerly awaited golf days are looming. One of the outlandish claims I make at corporate events is that members of the audience will be holing 30% more putts after just 15 minutes with me on the green. Heads always shake in disbelief at the prospect of doing any such thing. By the time we are finished, heads shake in disbelief that they actually did.

One of the reasons that I am able to make such a claim is almost all short putts are missed for precisely the same reason.

It all starts with a "should" or a "got to". How many times have you heard someone say, "I've got to make more putts"? Or "If I want to play off single figures, I should be making every four-footer"? Thoughts like those cause stress. Stress leads to tension. Tension spreads anxiety. Anxiety sends a message to the subconscious – "I don't fancy this."

Please do this now. Grab a putter if you have one handy. Otherwise, just imagine you are on the 18th green of your home course. It's a big match and you have a four-footer to win. Line up the putt just as if you were there. Now, before you hit the ball, what do you notice?

Not much? I'd be surprised if you did. That's because you've been committing the same error for so long, the ingrained behaviour is completely unconscious. There is one clear, simple distinction between good and bad short putters. At the moment of truth, poor putters are holding their breath. Amazingly, this is just as true among the pros as the amateurs.

Whenever I am working with a client who struggles on the green, the penny drops in seconds. They remember the tension they feel



at the prospect of putting. They recall their windpipe narrowing and gasping for air. By the time they putt, some are not breathing at all.

The solution is frustratingly simple. This one falls squarely into the "why the hell didn't anyone tell me this years ago" category.

The best "breather" on tour is Ernie Els. Everyone loves Ernie. They love his swing, they love his temperament, they love the way he appears to be impervious to pressure and his secret is simple. He breathes deeply, calmly, serenely. The pace of his breathing governs the pace of his swing, his walk and his game.

Sports scientists have discovered a phenomenon that we call "entrainment". The body is in a state of entrainment when everything works in harmony. In order to achieve such harmony, all other muscles must take their lead from the heart.

Many golfers walk onto a green with their hearts racing, thinking about what they "should" or "must" or "have to" do. This is the complete reverse of the optimum state for holing putts, particularly short ones.

A slow heart rhythm is a prerequisite to peak performance. Every time you walk on to a green, use this three-step technique to slow down your metabolism.

- a) BREATHE IN**
through the nose to the count of four
- b) BREATHE OUT**
through the nose to the count of four
- c) Take your putt now**

Watch Ernie next time he's in close-up. Notice how he putts in the "gap" between one outbreath and the next breath in. It is in this gap that our muscles are most relaxed and we function to the best of our ability.

You need never miss a short putt again. Take your lead from Ernie, focus on your breathing and shed your fear of those dreaded three-footers.

Gary's book, *Dare* – a life-coaching book that includes plenty of golf tips – is published by Hodder Mobeus and is on sale for £10.99. You can email him at gary.leboff@virgin.net.