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AUGUST 2007 ISSUE #222

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**CHOKER?**

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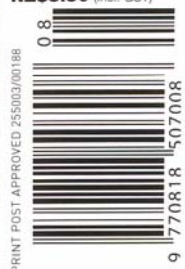
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# Are you a CHOKER?

YOUR MUSCLES TIGHTEN, YOU START TO SWEAT, YOUR HEART SEEMS TO BE BEATING OUT OF YOUR CHEST AND YOUR CONCENTRATION LEVEL DROPS RIGHT OFF. SOUNDS LIKE SOMEONE HAVING A HEART ATTACK BUT IT IS ACTUALLY THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO OF CHOKING UNDER PRESSURE. HERE IS HOW YOU CAN OVERCOME PERFORMANCE PRESSURE TO BECOME A WINNER.

WORDS: DANIEL GUCCIARDI AND DR JAMES DIMMOCK

**P**erformance pressure is an unusual thing. It is said to originate from the desire to perform as well as possible in situations that are perceived as important.

Paradoxically, despite the fact that performance pressure arises from aspirations to perform to one's best, pressure-packed situations are often where poor skill execution, or choking under pressure, is most prevalent. What goes through the mind of a golfer during the swing phase of a shot will greatly influence whether choking will occur.

A considerable amount of scientific research has been conducted in the past decade on the factors that cause choking. Studies investigating the link between performance pressure and suboptimal performance consistently show performance decrements occur when a golfer focuses his or her attention on the mechanics of their technique. Due to the amount of practice better golfers have devoted to their skills, they can perform their swing automatically without conscious effort.

Perceptions of pressure cause golfers to control or monitor their performance by attending to mechanical cues – things that are not normally attended – in a manner that disrupts the automated or procedural processes of execution. In doing so, they focus on individual pieces of complex actions, throwing off their timing, and causing what is commonly termed 'paralysis by analysis'. Ernie

Els once noted that "if you're thinking 'golf swing' thoughts before every shot, you aren't going to play as well as you can".

Our own research with highly skilled golfers, at the University of Western Australia's School of Human Movement and Exercise Science, supports this conclusion.

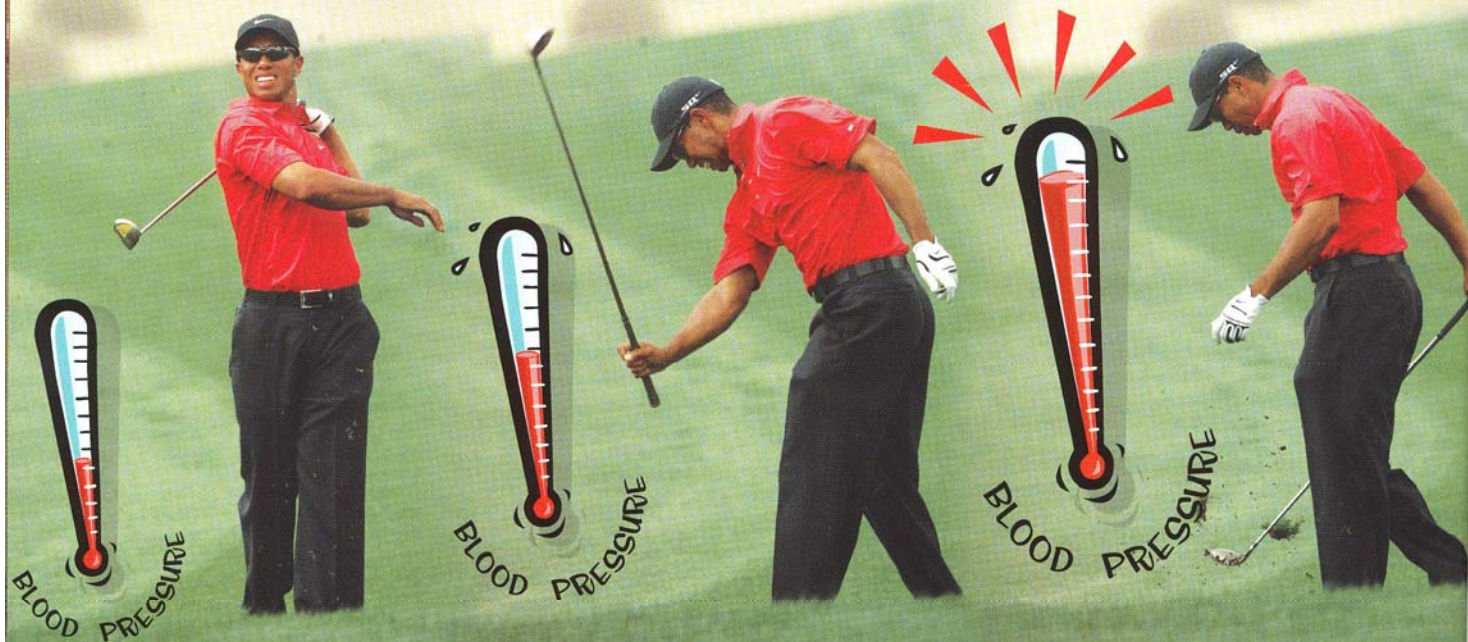
We had participants perform a basic three-metre putt on a level surface while attending separately to three different types of attention cues: three mechanical thoughts (for example, arms, weight, shoulders), three task-irrelevant thoughts (red, blue, green) and a single swing thought designed to capture the mechanical information in a manner that makes little use of specific components of the skill process (for example, smooth, tempo or easy).

Under conditions of heightened pressure we found performance decrements occurred

only when golfers putted while focusing on the three mechanical thoughts. In contrast, performance did not decline when focusing on the three task-irrelevant thoughts and the single swing thought.

By thinking about a motor skill they didn't normally think about, the golfers' motor behaviour became stiff and awkward, changing the timing, and resulting in worse performance. Both the task-irrelevant thoughts and the single swing thought, however, were effective in distracting or preventing the performer from regressing to conscious control strategies designed to gain control over their performance but which actually debilitated it.

**Ernie Els once noted that if you're thinking 'golf swing' thoughts before every shot, you aren't going to play as well as you can.**



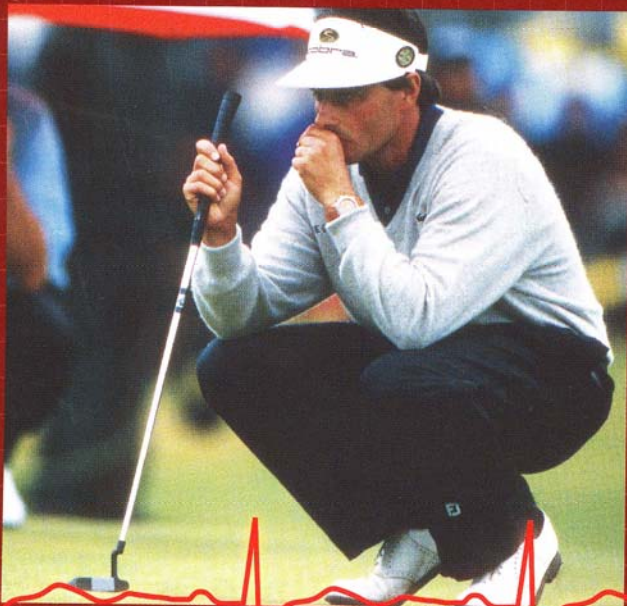
Tiger Woods (above) is known for letting his emotions out, but usually manages them well. Here he takes out his frustration on the turf after a less than perfect shot. Jean van de Velde (below) committed one of golf's most notorious chokes at the 1999 British Open Championship at Carnoustie.

## COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURS

Self-talk is considered the key to cognitive control in athletic performance as it allows the body to act automatically by keeping the mind occupied. It serves two main functions – cognitive and motivational – which enable an individual to learn and execute skills but also 'psych' themselves up, relax, focus and control their arousal.

Almost all of the world-class athletes and other peak performers are visualisers. They see it, they feel it, they do it; they experience it before they actually do it. They begin with the end in mind.

Using imagery in your pre-shot routine, which may involve you visualising the path you want your ball to travel, certainly helps. It may also involve you standing back off your mark and seeing yourself play the shot you want to play.



## EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOURS

Once you lose control of your emotions, it's only a matter of time before your behaviour follows suit. Emotional reactions to pressure-packed situations can drain a golfer's resources and impact negatively on performance if poorly managed.

By managing your attention, you can gain control over unwanted emotions. The key is to identify what emotions you commonly experience when you are in the 'zone' and devise strategies to replicate these emotions during your pre-shot routine.

## PHYSICAL BEHAVIOURS

Most golfers likely have physical behaviours that they perform as part of a pre-shot routine, the most common being a waggle. Like the cognitive and emotional strategies described thus far, the aim is to prepare the body to perform the required shot successfully. Physical behaviours that preview an aspect of your swing are not the only behaviours that can be used. For example, some golfers will use a physical behaviour to initiate their pre-shot routine.

Athletes, performers and others who routinely carry out well-learned skills automatically without any conscious effort have long been plagued by the mysterious phenomenon of choking under pressure.

Research and anecdotal evidence indicates efforts to control well-learned skills by attending to thoughts about the mechanics of the swing, paradoxically, actually cause an interruption in the execution of the skill resulting in a drop in performance.

The development and consistent application of a pre-shot routine will not only help prevent you from choking under pressure but it will aid you in successfully executing the required swing in pressure-packed situations.

On the following page you can do a pre-shot routine exercise we use with golfers of all skill levels to get them thinking about their ideal performance state before, during and after a specific performance (eg. putt, drive and chip).

Essentially, you are trying to become more aware about those

factors (physical, mental, emotional and technical) that will enable you to consistently execute a skill of a high standard. In so doing, you will be better prepared to maintain your focus and perform when under pressure.

Before working through this exercise we usually ask the golfer to think back to a most recent performance when he or she played exceptionally well. We ask them to think about the physical and emotional feelings, and thoughts they experienced before, during, and after that performance.

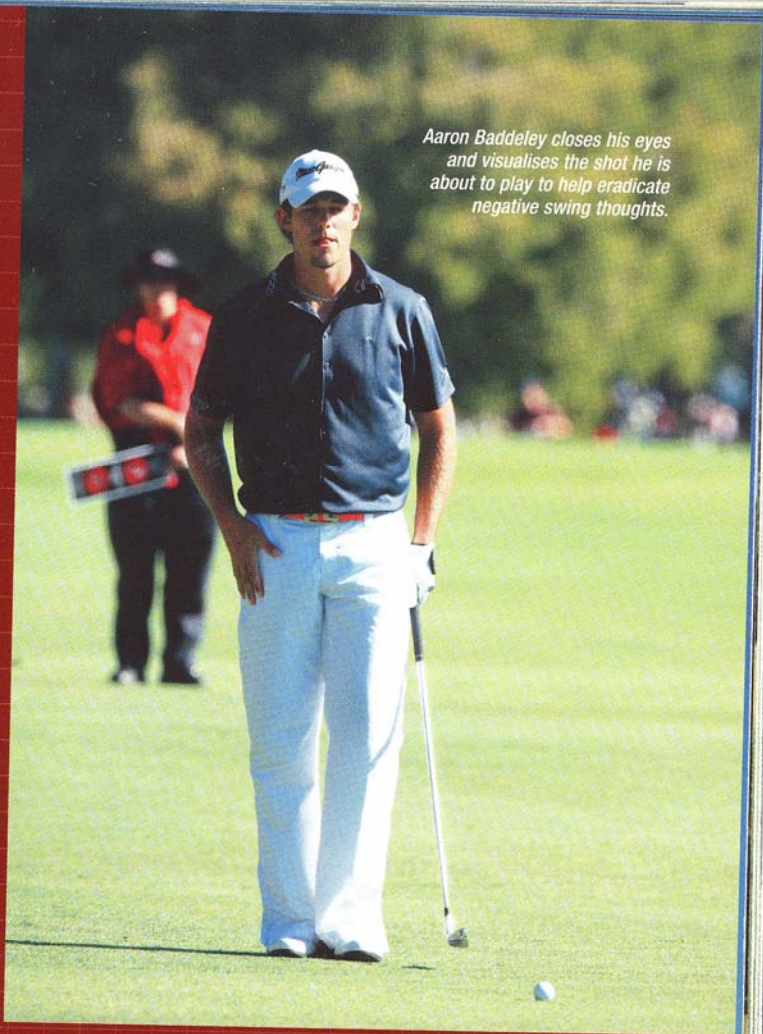
This helps you work through the left-hand side of the column in which you focus on identifying those technical, physical, cognitive and emotional feelings that enable you to effectively execute the skill.

Once you have identified these feelings, the next step is for you to think about certain actions – both overt and covert – that you can implement to help initiate these feelings and thoughts.

Again, we encourage individuals to think back to when they have successfully executed the skill during both practice and competition (or when the importance of performing well is increased).

The final step is for you to practice this routine during training and adjust the routine as you feel necessary. Simulating pressure situations (for example, performing in front of other people) is an excellent method for determining the effectiveness of your routine without compromising your performance during a competition. ●

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Aaron Baddeley closes his eyes and visualises the shot he is about to play to help eradicate negative swing thoughts.

## PRE-SHOT ROUTINE EXERCISE

### GOALS

WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU WANT TO ATTAIN AND MAINTAIN PRE SHOT? 

**TECHNICALLY** – TECHNICAL FEELINGS (eg. smooth, rhythm)

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**PHYSICALLY** – PHYSICAL FEELINGS (eg. relaxed, loose)

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**COGNITIVELY** – THOUGHTS (eg. target, stroke selection, positive)

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**EMOTIONALLY** – EMOTIONS (eg. excited, calm)

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### ACTIONS

WHAT WILL YOU DO? HOW WILL YOU DO IT? 

(eg. self-talk, practice swing)

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(eg. stretch, waggle)

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(eg. visualise stroke, self-talk)

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(eg. self-talk, visualisation)

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