

Y

YIP, YIP HOORAY

You don't have to suffer in silence any more



If an attack of the shanks doesn't get you, the yips just might. In 2016, Ernie Els considered quitting the game when he six-putted the opening hole at Augusta. "I couldn't get the putter back," he said. "I can't explain it."

Not many people can, which is why it largely goes unspoken about in clubhouses and locker rooms around the world. But the carnage the yips can wreck can be overwhelming for any golfer, and is far more widespread than you might think.

The yips famously drove Ben Hogan into a desperate campaign to eliminate putting from golf altogether, with players chipping into nets instead. Tour coach Jim Hardy even quit the game because of the yips, which then made him physically sick when he tried to come back. Even Sam Snead, the most winningest golfer on the PGA Tour, was cornered into developing a completely new putting technique because of it. Bernhard Langer, too. The German felt so helpless that he sought guidance from above, and cited "a lot of perseverance and a lot of prayer" as his cocktail for fending off the yips not once, but four times.

The phrase was first coined by Tommy Armour, who said it was a "brain spasm that impairs the short game". Versions of it have been known by many names: the jerks, freezing, twitching and our favourite, whisky fingers. Scientists use the more technical term focal dystonia, and define it as "a motor control breakdown". Sufferers liken it to putting with a live snake in your hands, but in essence it's an

Ernie Els has battled the yips, but has also proved you can get over them.

involuntary jerk. Mostly associated with impact, it can infect the takeaway and throw your stroke out of whack.

Research from America's Mayo Clinic found that over half of serious players will suffer from the yips at some stage in their golfing lives. Many will consider quitting as a result; others simply won't come back. There is still a lack of conclusive evidence as to what actually causes the yips, though there are ways you can stop it from dominating your game.

Nick Middleton, a tour putting coach, has spent the last three decades working on a cure for what is fast turning into a golfing epidemic, and invented the Zen Oracle putters and Zi Putter Trainer to address the problem head on. Both are housed inside his new indoor Zen Golf studio

'THE PROBLEM WE ALWAYS SEE IS THAT MANY GOLFERS TRY AND TAKE SHORTCUTS, AND THINK BUYING A NEW PUTTER WILL SOLVE THE PROBLEM'

WANT THE ULTIMATE FIX FOR YOUR PUTTING?

Sign up for a putting recovery session at the Zen Golf studio in Sheffield. Keith Davids, a leading expert on Motor Learning, will be running half-day workshops this summer to

help guide you through a 're-directional' process. You can register your interest online at zenoracle.com, and order your own Zi Putter Trainer for £19.79 (+P&P) while you're at it!



in Sheffield, where yippers come in desperate need of some help. Middleton aims to provide them with the tools to relieve the fixations and negativity which are often linked to the problem in the first place.

After undertaking an assessment of their dystonia, its type and severity, Middleton begins by showing them ways to reduce anxiety through guided imagery and acceptance therapy. This, he refers to, as "redirection". He combines psychological reprogramming with a system called Heart Math, which looks at the connection between the heart and brain, and the particular pitch the heart rate needs to be in order to control the release of cortisol. Too much, he explains, can lead to states of anxiety and distress.

"Heart Math is like meditation on steroids," Middleton says, "and it assesses heart rate variability. Really, we are trying to enhance mind-body coherence and achieve an enriched flow state so a student can build a bank of extremely powerful images and memories which help them feel more synergistic and resilient to this black hole we call the yips."

After a psychological intervention and with the player feeling relaxed, the next step is practical self-learning.

"We want the student to become their own teacher, to be motivated and take control of their individual self-organisation process" admits Middleton. "Yipping is most prevalent on shorter putts, so we use a vertical mirror, placed behind the hole, to allow the player to view themselves making the putt so they can make immediate corrections to the visual parallax without thinking about technique. Unless this is properly understood, they will fall into the common trap of thinking they are looking at their intended target, when actually they are looking right or left of the hole at a phenomenon known as a ghost hole. What we try to do is remove this disruption and provide clarity, both physically and mentally."

This is where the Zi Putting Trainer (below) and its clever ball-sized aperture comes in. A younger cousin of the Zen Oracle putter, the Zi simply

ZEN'S YIP-BUSTING STRATEGIES

DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

People who have got the yips fixate over their technique and setup. This causes fear and anxiety, which means they are not in a state of mind that allows their action to flow naturally. A lot of research shows one of the quickest ways to improve is by getting externally focused. Things like looking at the target, not the ball, and not deliberating over the stroke. Dwell time is a killer. The more natural you can feel over the ball, the better.

THINK POSITIVE AND YOU'LL PUTT POSITIVE

Regardless of your skill level, if you can nurture ways to visualise seeing the ball going into the hole, you are 50 per cent more likely to hole that putt. Visualisation is a powerful tool, and so is your mind. There goes the idea that you need to practice a lot; in fact, over-practice can be counter-productive. You just need to do the right things well.

clips onto the face of your putter and effectively acts as your hand by rolling the ball towards the hole. "It's constraints-led learning," explains Middleton. "There's no confusion around technique when you use the Zi because there's no association. A lot of people who have the yips just stop at the ball, but the Zi removes the obstruction at impact and gives them instant relief. That positive affirmation is key, which allows us to redefine the task of putting."

Middleton acknowledges that there's a lot to take in, but is adamant there's no quick fix. "The problem we always see is that many golfers try and take shortcuts, and think buying a new putter will solve the problem. But it won't. The only way you can beat the yips is by tackling it head on; not by running away from it. If you don't accept it or do anything about it, it will keep happening until you can replace the negative connotations which are causing it. And the only way you can do that is by rehabilitating the motor control.

"In other words, you need to replace negative noise with positive noise which becomes more attractive to our sensory system. Yips is a motor control problem caused by a noise level imbalance, hence you need to rewrite the task and movements from new and enriched experiences, to the point where they become a stronger signal than the yipping one – your default signal."

Z

ZEN GREEN STAGE

The first computer-controlled putting green

If you're serious about your putting, you need to get yourself on one of these. Unlike those lightning-quick putting mats in American Golf or the miniature versions from Argos, Zen Green Stage can recreate real-world putts at just the touch of a button. In a matter of seconds, you can tilt the stage to practise breaking and double-breaking putts, and even change the stimp to match the pace of the greens at your local course – or even Augusta National. Sky

Sports have their own, and use it for instruction during their PGA Tour and European Tour coverage. The best part is that the Zen Green Stage is not just for putting, either. You can also chip from or on to the green, and use it for full-swing shots. The technology has convinced many tour pros to train on one, and even buy their own. But unless you're super-rich and don't mind explaining the bill to your other half, we'd recommend you pay as you go by booking a lesson at one of a growing number of sites in the UK that own one. They include Woodhall Spa, Phil Kenyon's Putting School of Excellence at Formby Hall, and the Zen Green HQ in Sheffield, where creator Nick Middleton is based.



It's not just for TV. You can actually buy one yourself. Prices range from £14,000 to £25,000. Father's Day is around the corner, don't forget...

Several tour golfers have bought a Zen Green Stage for their own use. Matt Fitzpatrick is currently getting one built in his house.

When paired with ZenEye, the green can project the 'perfect' line so golfers can see the break and visualise their putts.

The stage can be tilted to recreate uphill, downhill and sloping putts from under 20ft. You can choose what speed the green runs at – 8.5, 10, 12.5 or a lightning 15 on the stimp – and putt to eight hole locations.