

YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE
TO THE SCORING BASICS

Breaking 100-90-80

>> For more Breaking 100-90-80 articles
visit GolfDigest.com/instruction

By Todd Sones
with Peter McCleery

*Todd Sones owns and
operates Todd Sones Impact
Golf Center at White Deer Golf
Club in Vernon Hills, Ill.*

Take aim at great putting

Making more putts is a matter of focusing your efforts in the right area. If you're a high-handicapper, start by learning the set-up fundamentals that influence the stroke. As you advance, you need to sharpen your green-reading and refine your stroke mechanics to achieve solid contact every time. Creating a pre-putt routine will help. Better players should work on maximizing "feel" through pressurized practice and target-retention drills. Follow my plan and your putting skills will soar—and your scores will drop.

Pull out and save

Breaking 100

Putting is a simple task. There's no big shoulder turn, no weight shift, no wrist hinge — just an easy motion back and through. This puts extra importance on your setup, because in putting you never get too far from your starting position. Mastering a few basic set-up fundamentals might be the easiest way to take those 100-plus rounds down into the 90s.

Don't move that head

Keeping your head still is fundamental to good putting. You can practice this by taking your setup with the top of your head against a wall, then hitting some putts.



Beat mid-round slumps

When your putting goes sour in the middle of a round, here's how to get the ball rolling into the hole. Step off to the side, close your eyes and swing your arms the way you do on a putt. Is your body balanced at address? Does it stay balanced as you make the stroke? This is a great way to check your setup and tempo and get your putting back on track.

Hand-off drill

Here's a simple check to make sure your arms are hanging under your shoulders: Set up and drop your back hand off the club, letting it hang freely. If your posture is good, your hand will stay in line with the grip, not move away from or toward your body.



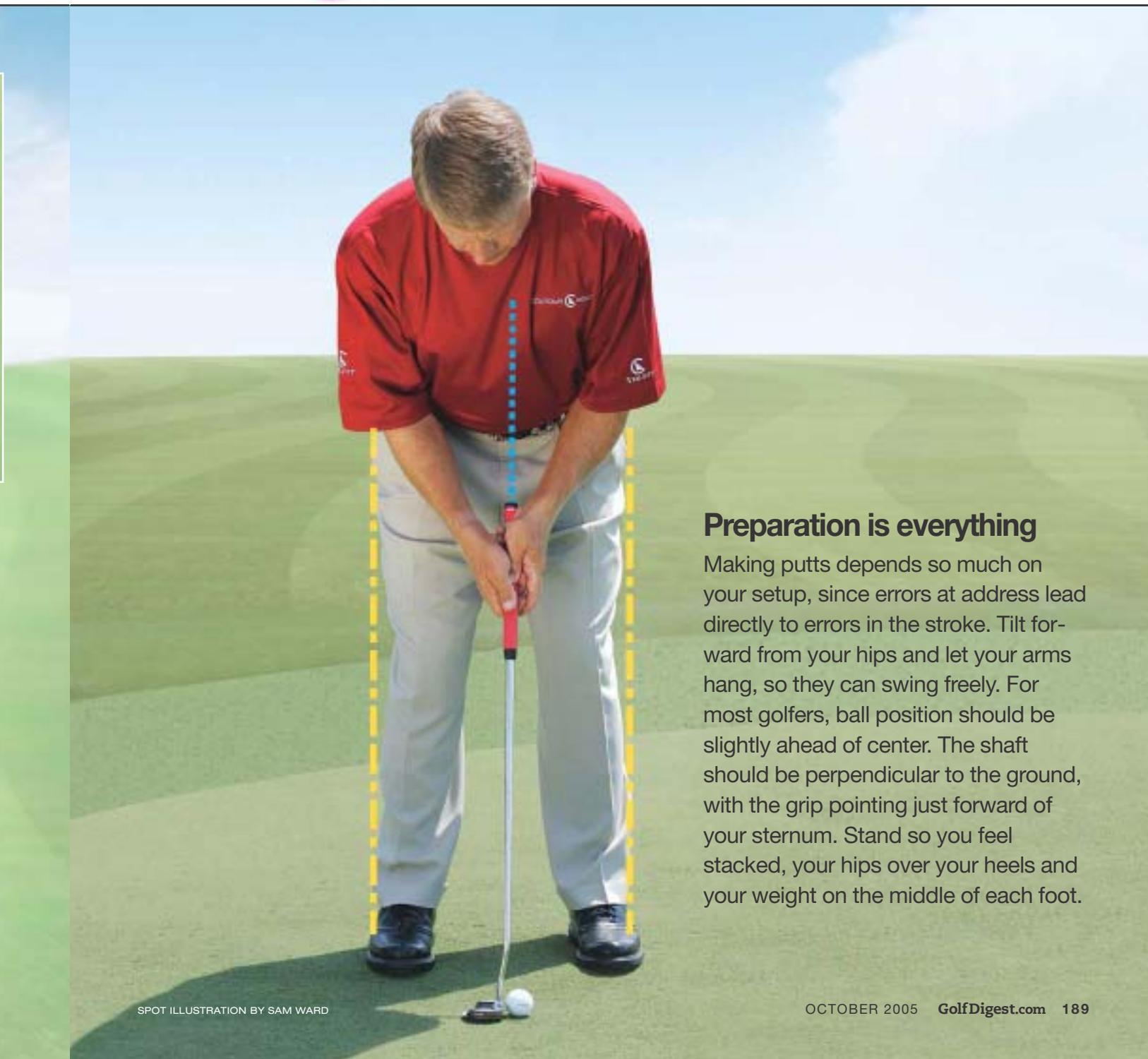
Palm grip



Finger grip

Grip it in your palm

Don't grip the putter in your fingers (*above*), as you do in the full swing. This type of grip promotes wrist hinge, which you don't want when you putt. Set the grip through the palm of your left hand, with the butt end at the inside of your wrist (*left*). There are a lot of acceptable putting grips, from the traditional reverse-overlap to left-hand-low to the modern "claw" grip used by a few tour players, including Chris DiMarco. But the common denominator in all effective styles is gripping in the palm of the top hand.



Preparation is everything

Making putts depends so much on your setup, since errors at address lead directly to errors in the stroke. Tilt forward from your hips and let your arms hang, so they can swing freely. For most golfers, ball position should be slightly ahead of center. The shaft should be perpendicular to the ground, with the grip pointing just forward of your sternum. Stand so you feel stacked, your hips over your heels and your weight on the middle of each foot.

Breaking 90

Once you're consistently shooting in the 90s, you've played enough golf to start thinking about developing feel. Putting feel is an acquired skill. Your brain needs to learn how the length of your stroke relates to distance. This starts with consistently making solid contact with the ball—a result of good fundamentals. Let's look at the basic stroke motion.

Swing longer, not faster

The length of your stroke should change based on the distance to the hole, but your tempo should stay the same. Strive for smooth acceleration through impact. To hit putts of different lengths, many golfers alter their tempo instead of the length of the stroke. Notice here how my backstroke changes for 10-, 20- and 30-foot putts. Focus on swinging back and through the same amount, lengthening your stroke as the putts get longer.



How low can you go?

To feel a low, level stroke, tie a 15-foot piece of string to two pencils, stick one in the ground behind the cup, then stretch the string and plant the other one as shown. Hit putts keeping the putter under the string.

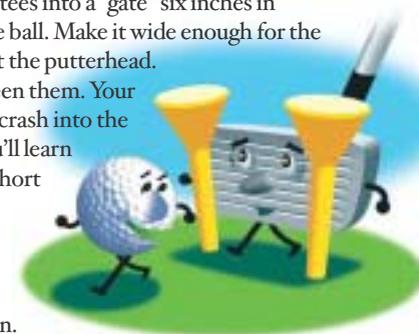


Building an arc

Some players insist that the putterhead swings straight back and through, but we know it moves on an arc (*below*). What gives? These players are more in tune with the feel of how their hands are moving (in a straight line) than how the putterhead is moving (on an arc). This is fine with me, because watching the putterhead is a distraction.

Be a gatecrasher

Set up two tees into a "gate" six inches in front of the ball. Make it wide enough for the ball but not the putterhead. Putt between them. Your putter will crash into the tees, so you'll learn to make a short through-stroke, which promotes acceleration.



Mark your putting arc

The putterhead travels in a slight arc because you stand to the side of the ball with the shaft angled toward your body. If your arms hang freely from your shoulders at address and swing back and through during the stroke, the putterhead automatically moves on the correct arc. Focus on swinging your hands and let the angle of the shaft take care of the path.



Breaking 80

Players approaching the 70s often start making the game too complicated. Remember, putting is a simple task; don't get in your own way. If you're shooting in the low to mid-80s, you're already a skilled player, so trust your instincts. Consistent execution is the key for you, and the best way to ensure that is to adopt a simple pre-putt routine.



Narrow your focus

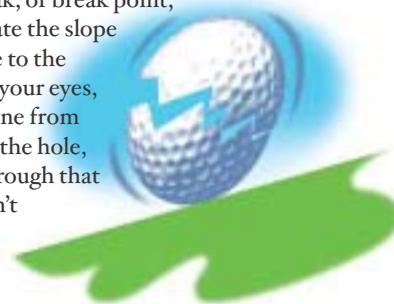
Practice short putts with a scorecard over a third of the hole to learn to zero in on an entry point. Cover the part of the cup that represents the low side. For example, on right-to-left putts, set the scorecard over the left third of the hole.

That hole in your head

Great putters have a keen feel for the putterhead contacting the ball. To develop your feel, set up to a putt, then look at the hole and take a snapshot of it in your mind. Return to the ball, close your eyes, and hit the putt with the target fresh in your mind. Practicing with your eyes closed will help you connect the feel of impact with the distance the ball rolls.

Find the breaking point

On long breakers, try to identify the apex of the break, or break point, and estimate the slope from there to the cup. With your eyes, trace the line from the ball to the hole, passing through that point. Don't just look up at the hole.



1 Define the line (5 seconds)

Your first read is usually best, so resist the urge to look at three different angles. If you need a second look, try the low side. In time you'll see that reading the break from behind the ball almost always gives you all you need.

2 Practice like real (5 seconds)

Take a practice stroke parallel to your line to get a feel for the stroke you'll need to reach the hole. Square the face as you would on an actual putt, and make a true rehearsal stroke. Then slide the putter behind the ball.

3 Commit to the plan (5 seconds)

Aim the putterface down your intended line and settle your feet under your hips, so that you're balanced and your arms hang freely under your shoulders. Trace the path of the putt to the hole with your eyes.

4 Putt without delay (3 seconds)

Don't just stand over the ball doing nothing. It's the worst thing you can do, because it introduces muscle tension and negative thinking. Plus, the longer you wait, the weaker the image of the hole is in your mind's eye.