

The Longest Yard

Good short putting takes nerve and technique. Learn how to handle the heat

A SHORT PUTT IS INSTANT GRATIFICATION OR instant frustration—in other words, pressure. Sometimes it feels like you're under a spotlight and the whole world is watching. You expect to hit an errant drive or bunker an approach every so often, and you can still recover from those miscues. But a three-footer? It's so easy, it's hard. The key is to de-value the putt, even if it's for a career-low round or to win a match. Think about the process, not the result, and you'll sink more of the short ones when they matter most. ▶

HOW GOOD ARE THE PROS?

It's easy to feel like you should never miss a short putt. But even the best players in the world miss their share, especially from outside three feet. The following are 2004 PGA Tour averages for putts of various distances inside six feet:

PUTTS MADE FROM	
3 feet and in	99.1%
3-4 feet	90.9%
4-5 feet	80.8%
5-6 feet	69.8%

Nervous on short putts? Focus on the process, not the result.

THE BASICS

1 Palm the Putter

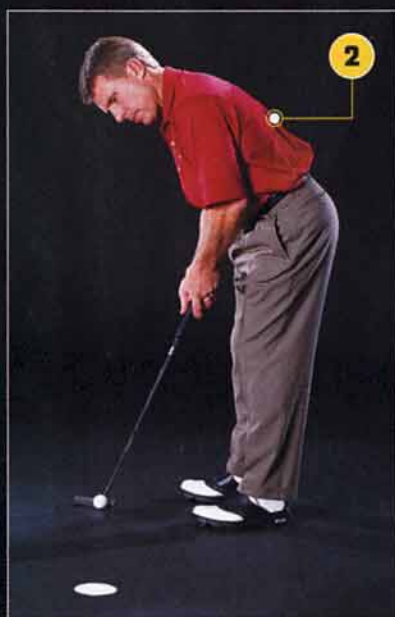
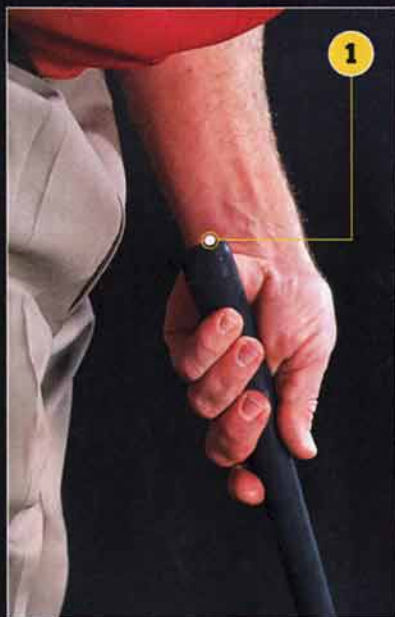
Stable hands mean a stable stroke, especially important for such a short motion. If the putterface fans open or wobbles offline, you'll have a harder time draining putts. You need a secure hold: Make sure the grip sits in your left palm, along your lifeline, rather than in your fingers. When done correctly, the butt end of the putter should point up your left forearm (below). This sets up a consistent, repeatable stroke.

2 Bend From the Hips

There's very little body movement in a short stroke, and you want to feel your weight centered between your toes and heels. Proper posture will get you there, so bend from the hips. Hold the putter in front of you and tilt your upper body forward until the putterhead is behind the ball. Your arms should hang straight down, with your eyes over the ball. When you rotate your head toward the hole before the stroke, keep this posture intact (below, left).

3 Lock Your Head

To keep his head still on short putts, Gary Player would remind himself to "listen, don't look." It's a big temptation to get anxious and look up, but that's a recipe for missing putts. Assuming you set the putter correctly at address, simply return it to that spot at impact. Moving your head affects the putter's path, leaving impact to chance. Pretend your head is clamped in place (below), and just listen for the ball to drop.



THE BASICS

Stay in Sync

Here's my favorite tip for short putts: Always move the grip end of the putter in the same direction as the putterhead. This puts the arms in control, creating a pendulum-like motion for predictable impact. As you swing back, the grip end should move back a proportionally smaller amount than the head. On the through-stroke, the putterhead passes the grip as both move forward (left).

BONUS TIP

When faced with an "easy" short putt, it's natural to rush through your preputt routine. But when amateurs skip steps, they wind up freezing over the ball at address—that's when negative thoughts creep in. Make sure you go through your routine even when you think you don't have to. Take a last look at the hole. The minute your eyes refocus on the ball, start the putter back. ▶

FAULT/FIX

FAULT

A wristy strike • In an effort to accelerate through the stroke, amateurs often flip their wrists. While this lengthens the follow-through, it actually causes deceleration: To avoid putting the ball clear off the green, your muscles adjust and slow the putter down before impact. The result is a lack of distance control.



FIX

The shoe drill • Train your follow-through to end at a shorter, set point and you'll be likely to accelerate. Address the ball, then move your left foot onto the target line and lift your toes off the ground. Hold it there and stroke the putt. You'll accelerate the putter into the shoe, and the ball will go underneath your foot to the hole.

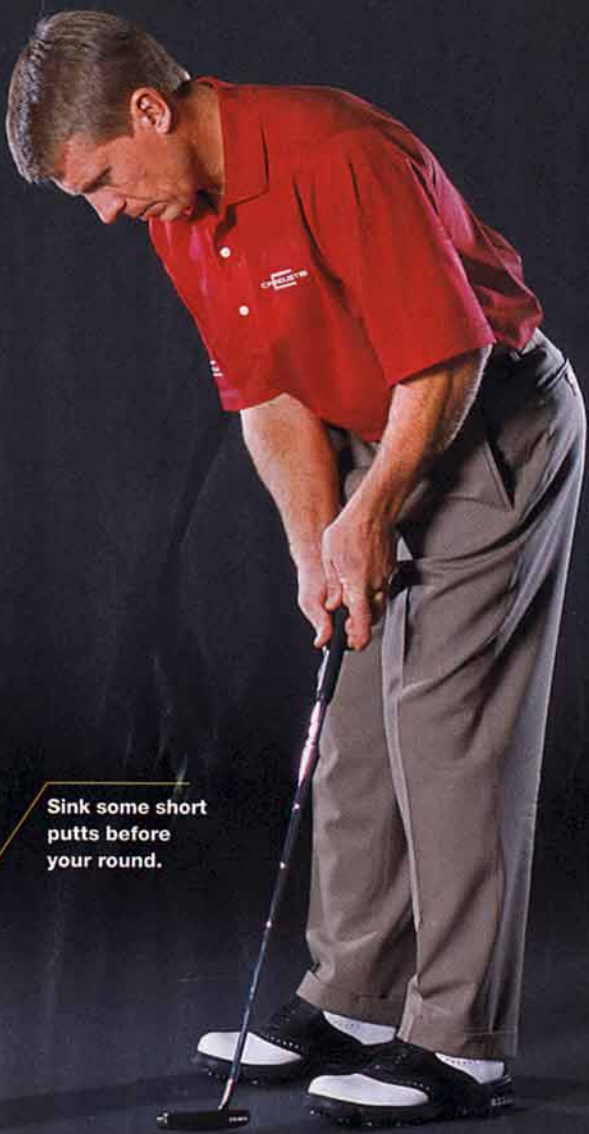




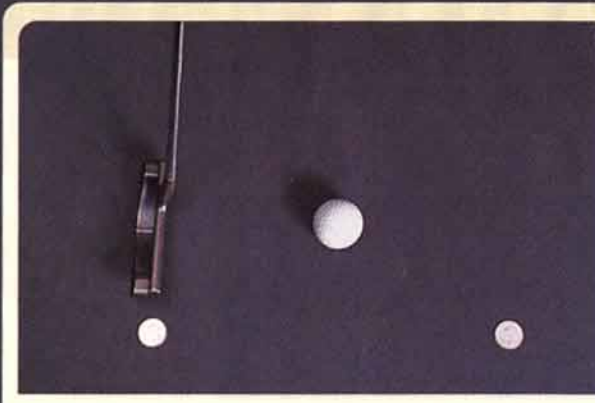
**10 MINUTES LEFT:
GET IN A GROOVE**

Don't wait until you get out on the course to hit your first short putt of the day. Ten minutes before your tee time, head to the practice green for some three-footers. Spread 10 balls in a semi-circle around a hole (below) and go through your routine for each one. After you've sunk the first five, try stroking the last five with your eyes closed (above). This will improve your feel and keep you steady.

GOLF *Todd Sones owns Impact Golf*
MAGAZINE *Schools, based at Whitewater*
TOP 100 TEACHER *Golf Course in Vernon Hills, Illinois.*



Sink some short putts before your round.



PRACTICE: 50-CENT LESSON

DRILL

If you're mired in a stretch of poor short putting, it might take only 50 cents to find your stroke again. Find a flat four-foot putt and spread out two quarters 12 inches apart along your target line. Place the ball in the middle and stroke the putter back to the first quarter, then through to the second quarter. By focusing on the quarters rather than the putterhead, you should be able to regain the pace and rhythm you've been missing.