

THE YIPS - IS THERE ANY HOPE???

If I were to ask you to make a guess as to the highest single hole score in professional golf what would you throw back at me?

If you only managed early double figures, then you are still miles away. The great Tommy Armour playing in the Shawnee Open in 192, a month after he won the US Open, managed to rack up a staggering 23 blows. On that fateful day, a term was used that has haunted golfers ever since. Armour explained away his tragic misfortune as having a severe case of *'the yips'*. Since then, some of the greatest names in golf have fallen foul of this potentially debilitating affliction. If he could have banned putting from the game, the great Ben Hogan would have probably done so, too. Towards the end of his career, his ball striking approached total mastery yet he was often rendered helpless on the greens. The current all-time highest tournament winner on the PGA Tour, Sam Snead, even managed to get a certain style of putting banned (croquet), as he attempted to overcome his own yipping miseries. It would also now seem clear the yips are not just waiting in store for you around the greens. The celebrated former coach of Tiger Woods, Hank Haney, wrote a book called *'Fix Your Yips Forever'* about his twenty year battle with the yips off the tee with the driver. Ian Baker Finch has alluded to a similar problem he had in his fall from one being Open Champion and one of the world's best golfers, to missing 31 consecutive cuts and shooting a horrific 92 at the Open in 1997 at Royal Troon.

So what is the root cause of the yips, what is our current understanding of the problem and, more importantly, is there any hope in fixing them? Is it all in the mind?

The research which is now becoming more readily available from neuro-science and psychology is suggesting the yips are far from just a simple case of *'all in the mind'*.

It would seem there are potentially three possible causes of the yips and one of the causes may be more a physical problem than a mental one. The three *'causes'* can be, of course, interlinked as the *'physical'* problem becomes *'mental'*, but let's look at each one and explore what you **CAN** do to fix the problem.

FOCAL DYSTONIA

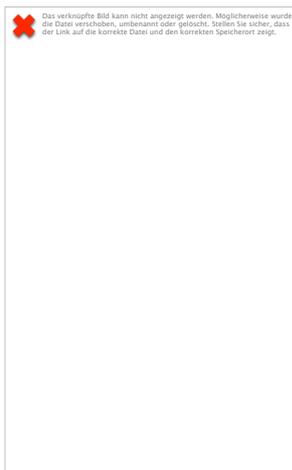
Focal dystonia is a neurological condition which affects a muscle or group of muscles in a specific part of the body causing involuntary muscular contractions. For example, in focal hand dystonia the fingers either curl into the palm or extend outward without control. In high-level musicians, the condition is referred to as musician's dystonia. In golf, we call it the yips.



The cause of dystonia is, at this moment in time, not precisely understood. Misfiring of neurons in the sensorimotor cortex, a thin layer of neural tissue

covering the brain, is thought to be the cause. When the brain tells a given muscle to contract, it simultaneously silences muscles that would oppose the intended movement. In dystonia, it appears the ability of the brain to inhibit the surrounding muscles is impaired, leading to loss of control and feel. Some research suggests this can be made worse by overuse of the action required. It makes sense then when some golfers find that the more they practice, the worse the yips get because, in effect, what they are doing is making this *'impaired'* mind-body connection even worse the more times they try to *'fix'* the problem. In effect, it would be like trying to keep training when you have an injured knee. With a focal dystonia, it makes sense and, in some ways, explains why a **COMPLETELY** new grip or a totally different action **CAN** be a cure. You are in effect recruiting a new set of neurons to perform the task and utilizing a motor programme that is not being impaired by overuse. One of the worst cases of the yips I personally have encountered, was a man in his sixties who couldn't even roll the ball a few feet on the green without an unbelievable twitch **EVEN** when there was no hole involved. In a totally non-pressure situation, he still yipped putts and chips like mad. As we explored options as to how to fix things and get him back playing, it became clear he could putt really well with his left hand only on the club and yet still yipped terribly with his right hand only. We rebuilt his confidence by hitting a lot of single arm left hand shots and then created a grip where he held the club in his left hand and his right hand was placed on his wrist as merely a resting guide. With this, he has begun to function effectively again and be able to still keep playing a game he loves. A game that once looked like he may have to give up, such was the terrible extent to which the yips had impaired his game.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY



Aynsley Smith and her colleagues at the Mayo Sports Medical Centre in Minnesota came to the conclusion that another cause of the yips was down to extreme anxiety which resulted in an increase in self-awareness and attention to the performance itself. In effect, paralysis by analysis. When a physical movement has been learnt, it will function far more efficiently when your focus of attention isn't on **HOW** to perform the movement in a pressure situation. The yips can and will occur under pressure if you become very self-aware and you try to **OVERCONTROL** the movement. You are, in effect, thinking when you should be doing. As far back as the early 1970's, Tim Gallwey wrote the groundbreaking book *'The Inner Game of Golf'* which had such widespread success and gained a huge popular following. One of the suggestions Gallwey made all those years ago, was for a golfer not to focus on turning his hips or hinging his wrists, but to simply call out inside of his head *'Back and Hit'*. At the end of the backswing, he would get you to call out *'BACK'* and the *'HIT'* when striking the ball. This proved very successful in a lot of cases and we now understand why. The **CONSCIOUS** mind had been given a focus that distracted it from paying too much attention to the HOW of the

movement. This conscious distraction then had the effect of allowing the subconscious mind to take over and perform in a way to set the golfer free to play closer to his potential. Tiger Woods has spoken how he feels when he plays his best golf, it is as though *'my body just takes over and I get out of my own way'*.

It has been said that when he played great golf, Sam Snead would often hum a tune inside of his head. This, he felt, helped with the rhythm of his swing but again it would **DISTRACT** the conscious mind from too much interference. Over the years, golfers who I have worked with who felt they had the yips, have benefitted enormously from playing shots whilst focusing their attention on breathing. As you swing back, you focus on the **IN** breath and, as you swing through, you let the breath release. This has **TWO** effects that can be of assistance in fixing the yips. One, the focus on the breath takes your attention off the action itself and, two, any time you focus on breathing, you tend to reduce the amount of tension you are carrying in your body, which I am convinced is a major contributor to the yipping problem. Essentially, with this type of yipping you need to be smart enough to distract your mind in such a way the wisdom of the body is allowed to do its job.

S.E.E. SIGNIFICANT EMOTIONAL EVENT

You are faced with a straightforward chip from just of the edge of the green. You only have to get the ball onto the putting surface and the ball will roll down to the flag and you will have a putt to win the tournament you have treasured for years. You feel tight in your arms and hands and your breathing pattern has become alarmingly shallow. As the club moves into the backswing, you feel a lurch into impact and you hit the ground two inches behind the ball. The crowd that has gathered lets out an audible groan. Another three putts later and you walk off the green absolutely shattered as your moment of glory has slipped agonizingly from your grasp.

Can you imagine the effect this scenario could have on someone's psyche? No matter if the above event was a tour championship or just an ordinary club championship, you have just been subjected to a S.E.E. a significant emotional event.

There is evidence building that highly negative experiences can build up and affect us over a period of time, creating a kind of emotional block that can manifest itself in the physical form of the yips.



There was a recent positive report in the press about the work done by Lynn Francis and her use of a technique called **EFT**.

A coach in France called Mark Walker, who also happens to be a **Certified Master Mind Factor Coach** explained to me the use of **EFT** and his experience of overwhelming success rates with golfers of all levels who had

been suffering terribly with the yips. **EFT** (Emotional Freedom Technique) is a unique form of acupuncture that uses tapping instead of needles to stimulate acupressure points on the head and torso. **EFT** is a simple process that clears these disruptive emotional programs from your mind-body system and, thereby, frees you from the underlying cause of the involuntary movements known as the Yips.

Latest research on **EFT** is indicating that the tapping resets the emotional part of the brain from a flight fight response to a more neutral state.

THE WAY FORWARDS

Hopefully, for this article, you can see all isn't lost if you have been beset by a case of the yips. If you yip in **ALL** circumstances, even if there is no pressure involved, then it may well be you need to look at the possibility you have a focal dystonia and consider with the help of your professional, an alternate method or motion of playing the shot. Whatever you do, don't just keep practicing over and over again and keep wiring the yipping motion deeper and deeper into your system. If you find you yip when there is pressure involved, then it may well be time to look at the root of your performance anxiety and begin to consider if you are '*thinking*' too much about the motion rather than executing the motion. If you can pinpoint some incidents in the past that have had a big psychological effect on you, then it would perhaps be worth looking at the **EFT** treatment. Poor technique could also create a situation where continual failure results in a mental block. At the very least, let your PGA pro take a look at what is going on.

The worse thing is to suffer in silence and try to pretend there is no problem. Golf is too wonderful an activity to let go of and, I know from people who have successfully overcome the yips and play the game again, there is a wonderful sense of achievement in looking the demon in the face and taking action to fix it. Bernhard Langer has successfully overcome the yips a number of times by changing the way that he grips the club and he is probably the best example of mental toughness in the game. To miss a four foot putt to hand the Ryder Cup to the Americans at Kiawah Island in 1991 and then a week later win the German Masters in Stuttgart, shows a man with a will of iron and a capability to keep going **DESPITE** the shadowy presence of the yips.