

What Causes and Cures the “*Yips*,” Chilly Dips, Bladed Shots, and other Short Game Woes

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Author’s Note: The information contained in this article is perhaps the most important material that I’ve discovered in forty-five years of doing swing research. The majority of golf professionals can move the ball somewhat successfully from the tee. Your ability to score in this game, however, is dependent on what you can do from inside 125 yards. Understanding slack in the spine, and the consequences it has on the short game, is in my opinion, the “missing link” for the development of a great short game. One of the most interesting things that has become apparent to me after many years of study, is that short shots and putts, to be executed at their technically BEST, require an UN-NATURAL posture at address. In my entire golf life, I’ve never heard any player or instructor make that statement, but I can prove to you that it is true.

This is why the short game, especially putting, has baffled golfers for more than half a millennium; doing it correctly is completely counter-intuitive! Whether you consider yourself to have the full blown “yips” or not, if you occasionally miss-hit a chip, pitch, or have distance control issues with these shots or putts, this information can change your golf life. By the way, the “yips” have nothing whatsoever to do with age; they occur when you try to hit delicate shots without a solid “core” connection to your hands. Read on – I’ll tell you why!

In 1971, while playing in the first round of the Texas Open in San Antonio, I stepped up to a *dead-flat* five-footer for par, and “yipped” the putt *fifteen* feet past-the-hole! It was as if I had suddenly contracted some terrible virus that had come from *who-knows-where*, that was affecting my ability to make a smooth, tension free, and under-control stroke with my putter. I was utterly *astounded* and *baffled* by what I had just done! Without *any* hesitation, I turned to my caddie, tossed him the putter, and calmly said “that’ll be all for me today.” It was the *only* time in my life that I ever walked *off* the golf course. At that time, I had already been playing golf for twenty-three years (since I was four), and although I had heard the *dreaded* term “yips” any number of times, I had never experienced the problem *firsthand*. That shocking moment started me on a journey that lasted *forty-three* years before it was *finally* complete. Many times, I believed that I had not only found the *cause*, but the *solution* as well. Some things I tried, worked *okay* for a *while*, but there was *always* a *lingering-doubt* hanging over me, and the *uncomfortable* feeling that the “virus” might *suddenly* return, slept *nervously* in the back of my mind for *years*.

It is said that you *find* whatever you’re *hunting* for, in the *last* place you look (*duh*), and after searching the human body for *longer* than Moses wandered in the desert, in 2015 I *finally* looked in the *right* place. I knew it the instant it happened, as *clearly* as if it were written-in-the-sky! The answer was so *simple* I could hardly believe it – and it wasn’t some *weird* claw-grip or *extended-length-putter* – it was right behind me – in the *backbone!*

The “yips” take a great deal of *fun* out of playing our wonderful game, *especially* if you’re trying to play it for a *living!* Believe me, however, they *can* be cured, and *far more easily* than you could *possibly* imagine. This malady afflicts individuals doing many different things. Athletes suffer in a number of different sports, with *putting* woes being the *most* notorious. To golfers, they are a condition where the hands and wrists *flinch*, involuntarily, just *before* the club comes into contact with the ball during a *putt*, *chip*, *pitch-shot*, or sometimes, even a *tee-shot*. The “yips” have been studied for years by coaches, physicians, and scientists, at institutions around the world, and are generally considered by many to be a *mental* or *neurological* problem. While they may *indeed* work their way into your *psyche*, the conclusion drawn from my years of research, is that they are caused

by **mechanical** issues in the swing involving the **spine**. They occur because the brain senses a **lack** of **connection** between the **core** of the body and the **arms**, right before the moment of impact. When the brain detects “**slack**” between what should be the **primary** power source (the body’s **core**) and the club-head, it will attempt, at the **last** instant before impact, to **eliminate** the **slack** with a **tension-increase** in the **arms, hands, and wrists**. When the **arms, hands, and wrists** tighten **involuntarily**, the energy flow is partially **reversed into** the body, and the player will **sometimes** hit the ball “**fat**,” or feel that it “**explodes**” off the club-face. It feels like getting **zapped** with a “**cattle prod**,” and is a **horrific** feeling when you’re trying to apply a **soft** touch to a putt or chip. This condition afflicts **countless** players, amateurs and professionals alike, and has driven **many great** golfers from the game. **I give you my solemn promise, that you can eliminate this issue from your game, and that you’ll be rid of it for the remainder of your golf life!**

The term “**yips**” is said to have been coined by the great Tommy Armour, and notable individuals that have been stricken by them include Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, Johnny Miller, Bernhard Langer, Vijay Singh, and Ernie Els, to name only a **few**. The inability to set the down-swing into smooth motion, as we’ve seen in “**Sir**” Charles Barkley, or difficulty in **starting** the back-swing, as we have **tortuously endured** watching professionals such as the late Hubert Green, Sergio Garcia, and Kevin Na, are **forms** of the “**yips**.” Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Sam Snead, Gary Player, Lee Trevino, and Chi Chi Rodriguez, have each told me that in their personal opinion, more than 75% of **all** professional golfers have been plagued by the putting “**yips**” at **some** time during their careers.

This is an interesting story and absolutely factual. One day in 1980, I had the opportunity to play golf with the great Gary Player at the then brand-new TPC Stadium Course in Ponte Vedra, Florida, where the **Players Championship** is annually contested. We were walking down the fourteenth fairway, and began talking about various teachers and individuals who we felt **really** understood the game. Gary **emphatically** informed me that without doubt, “**Ben Hogan knew more about the golf swing than any-living-human-being**.” I quickly informed him that he was full of beans (I **cleaned** that up). He jumped right back at me and asked in his wonderful South African dialect – “**why did you say that, mahn?**” My reply was – “**how can a man who hits a #1 iron ten-feet from the flag, time-after-time-after-time, but can’t knock the ball in the hole from three-feet, be an authority on handling a golf club?**” He looked at me in **total** seriousness and said – “**putting is a different game!**” For years I thought he was **crazy** for making such a statement, but I have since come to realize that in **some** respects, we **make** putting a **different** game, even though it **shouldn’t** be, in **any way, shape, or form!**

The **first** thing golfers do **differently** when putting and chipping, is to **countermand** the way our brain **instinctively** and **naturally** makes us **move**. Although we don’t **consciously** think about it, if we are standing (or sitting) and wish to move from **one-place-to-another**, we begin the process by allowing some level of **collapse** or **relaxation** in the **muscles** and **joints** that **support-us**, so that our **core** can move **out-of-vertical**. Once this occurs, **gravity** helps **shift** the body to its **new** position in space, and our limbs move **automatically** to support it there. We don’t **consciously** think about the **extent** to which we **utilize** gravity to improve our **efficiency-of-motion**, but we **do-it nonetheless**. In all probability, the reason we (and many other critters) were created, or evolved, as **upright, top-heavy** animals, instead of being built like “**Jabba the Hut**,” is so that we can **take-advantage** of **gravity** to help move us from **place-to-place**, and thereby **conserve** a **tremendous** amount of **energy**. Golfers that move farther **off-vertical** before they begin the delivery in the down-swing, and **allow** their arms to start down **without** flexing them, take **full-advantage** of **gravity** in the swing. Freddie Couples has always done this **perfectly** in a full swing, but **sadly**, didn’t sense the need to do it with his putter. Properly **utilizing** gravity, helps these players **diminish** the **internal-effort** needed to **start** the core **turning** in the delivery, and allows them to swing with **less** effort than those who stand **solidly** on their feet and physically **force** the forward rotation. This is why we see such **differing** levels of effort in the swings of tour players. Those who swing with **less** effort, are using gravity **more effectively**, and creating far **less stress** on their bodies during the down-swing.

When *putting*, *chipping*, and *pitching*, most players *abandon* this natural and instinctive way of moving and attempt to keep their *core motionless*. This *forces* the *power* for the shot to come from the *shoulders*, *arms*, and *hands*. In a technically *proper* short-shot, just as in the full-swing, power for the delivery *should* come from the *ground up*, with a *turn* of the *core* bringing the arms and club *along-for-the-ride*. *Pushing* or *pulling* the stroke forward with the *upper-body*, starts the delivery from the *top down*. This sends *some* level of energy back *into* the system, creating a *plane-change*, and the *necessity* to *compensate* in *some* manner for the ball to move on the *intended-line*. Athletic movements that are *not* core-driven, may trigger negative sensations in the brain that contribute to the development of the “yips.” In the following paragraphs, I will explain why *slack* in the body, specifically in the *spine*, is the *dominant* factor that causes the issue. I will also explain *how* to *permanently cure* the “yips” by *eliminating* this damaging *slack* in *putts* and *short-shots*.

As any physician knows, the body has a certain degree of *available slack* in many of its joints. The slack *enables independent* movement between our parts, similar to the way couplers do for train-cars. Without slack in the couplers, the engines of a mile-long freight train would have to pull the weight of the entire train from a stopped, or static position. That’s why the train backs up before it goes forwards. Backing it up puts *slack* in the couplers of each car and allows the engines to engage one car at a time as the train gains momentum moving forwards. Depending on your viewpoint, *slack-in-our-joints* is a *marvelous* element of *design* or *evolution* in vertebrates. If we are fortunate enough to have been endowed with decent coordination and a sense of rhythm, joint *slack* allows us to easily do the jitterbug, the jive, and the tango. Without it, we would move around stiffly like Frankenstein. However, when swinging a golf club, *especially* the putter, *slack* becomes a *huge-potential-liability*. In a *properly* executed full swing, the arms are *high* enough to provide *time* during the down-swing, for the *turn* of the body to *remove* slack from our system, and smoothly engage and *sling* the club-head. In a *putt*, however, this is *not* always the case. ***Read the next three sentences carefully – they are very important!*** With a putt, chip, or short pitch, the back-swing is *significantly shorter*. This means there is *less time* for any slack between the *core* and the *arms* to be *removed* before the club-head reaches the ball. If the brain *senses* that the *core* (because of the *slack*) *cannot provide adequate power* in the down-swing for the ball to *easily* reach the hole, it triggers an *involuntary tightening* in the hands, wrists, and arms, to *eliminate* the slack. This is the *flinch* reaction that we call the “yips.”

Medical institutions and universities around the world have been studying the causes of the “yips” for a number of years (personally, I’ve been studying them for more than *forty*). The technical name for the “yips” is *focal dystonia*, and we’ve attached other colloquial terms like “*whiskey fingers*,” etc. Electro-encephalograms detect a *storm* of brain activity when a player “yips” a putt that is generally considered to be a *neurological* issue. My opinion, however, is that *nothing* is wrong with the brain or nerves *whatsoever*. The reasoning for that opinion is that the “yips” have plagued some of the *healthiest* golfers in the history of the game including Sam Snead, Johnny Miller, Ernie Els, Vijay Singh, my good friend Dave Ragan, and *many* others. What I believe that researchers are actually seeing during an encephalogram of the brain, when a player *yips* a putt or chip, is a *reaction* to the *sensing* of a *mechanical-disconnect* (slack) between the *core-of-the-body* and the *limb(s)* it is trying to move – and the brain is *searching frantically* for a *connection!*

Here’s the Solution for Eliminating the “Yips”

These final paragraphs discuss what I consider to be the *true cause* and *cure* for the *yips*, and why short shots and putts require an *un-natural posture*. This information should be studied *very carefully and thoroughly*.

When we’re trying to develop *proper* putting and chipping technique, one of the *most difficult* areas of *slack* to *detect* is in the *spine*. ***Because of its great flexibility, the spine possesses the potential for both vertical and rotary slack.*** When we are *standing-normally*, our spine is *not* at its *full potential length*. There is about a *half to three-fourths of an inch* of *vertical* slack-in-our-spine, just from the weight of our head, shoulders, and arms *pushing down* on it from the force of *gravity* – and *especially* on a *delicate* putt, pitch, or chip, this slack *mechanically* sets us up for a *potential*

“*yip*.” When standing over these short shots, although we are *totally unaware* of it, a natural *relaxed* posture *allows* the *discs* in the spine to be *compressed* like an *accordion* on the *in-stroke*. This *can be extremely problematic* for *proper* core *connection* during the delivery of the club-head to the ball. In the full swing, as I mentioned earlier, there is *time* in the down-swing for the turn to *remove* the slack, but because of the *shortness* of the stroke in delicate, *partial back-swing* shots, we *need* to *remove* the slack when *addressing* the ball. This can be done by *pre-stretching* the spine to its *maximum length* and slightly *turning the thorax* (the chest) *within* the shoulder joints, in the *direction* of the shot, until it *engages* the shoulders. This will *eliminate* the slack *between* the body’s *core* and *arms*. If this two-way *spine-stretch* is *maintained throughout* the stroke, *adequate* power can *easily and delicately* be applied from the body’s *core* to the club-head, and the impulse to “*yip*” the shot will *immediately go-away*. The ball, as it *should*, will be struck both *solidly* and *softly* at the same time. There is *great subtlety* in doing this *properly*, but when it happens, the *purity* of the ball strike is *amazing!* Once a player begins to *feel* how to maintain *slack-free-connection* on short-shots and putts, he/she will quickly gain *total control* over one of golf’s most *dreaded* and *problematic* “*diseases*.”

If you’re thinking that my explanation for curing the “*yips*” sounded *too simple* – it was *not!* Oftentimes, issues that *appear* to be the *most baffling* problems imaginable, carry the *simplest* solutions. Once you understand that *slack* in the *spine* is a *natural state-of-being* in any *standing human*, and *how* it *affects* a putting stroke, you’ll realize that although the *solution* is not readily apparent, it is *far-from-complicated*.

You might find this to be an interesting aside. As people age, they begin to lose the *smoothness* in their handwriting. Being seventy-four years old, I was beginning to notice that phenomenon in *myself* some time back. After *discovering* what caused the “*yips*,” it occurred to me that a *similar* thing might be happening when I was writing longhand. When I tried *pre-stretching* my *spine* prior to using my pen, my handwriting *immediately* smoothed out and looked just as it did when I was twenty. Every day that I live in this body, I am more *amazed* by its *complexity*, and *humbled* by all the things we have yet to learn about it.

If the “*yips*” and other short game issues are taking the fun out of your golf, consider joining us for one of the most informative learning experiences of your life. Our short game schools are two days in length (four hours each day), and will teach you exactly how to practice so that your short game will be the envy of all your golfing associates. *Come see us!*

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