

PUTTING FALMOUTH FORCASTER

Scott Mayer, the teaching pro at Nonesuch River Golf Club in Scarborough, offered to give Current Publishing sports reporter and golfing dilettante Tom Minervino a series of lessons this summer on how to improve as a beginning golfer. Mayer's tips on various aspects of golf, along with Minervino's take on the lessons, will run over the next several weeks. The first lesson was on putting.

Mayer's Tips on Putting:

1. When you're putting, there are two main things you need to worry about. One is line and one is distance. Your line is dictated by your set up, and your distance is dictated by the length and pace of your stroke. On long putts, distance is more important than line. As long as you always have perfect distance, you'll only be as far away from the hole as your line is off.
2. There are two types of putts you have to practice: those that are statistically within your ability to make, and those that are not. Statistically on the PGA Tour, the average is only around 30 percent from 10 feet, which means your average will be less. This means you need to practice making short putts inside of 10 feet, and getting longer putts, within the shorter distance you have practiced making.
3. During practice, work on keeping your lower body and your head still. The lower body should feel as though it is cast in cement. To keep your lower body still, place 85 to 90 percent of your weight on your front foot, and keep it there. In order to keep your head still, you've got to keep your eyes still. To do this, look for the grass under the ball till your putter has finished the stroke.
4. Remember your stroke has a starting point, a back swing point and a finish point. Many golfers have rebound, where the putter actually comes back to the moment of contact with the ball. This happens because golfers are ball-bound. They get so focused on hitting the golf ball that the body reacts by returning to where the ball was. You should putt through it, not to it. You have the three points and the ball is merely an object that gets in the way of the stroke.
5. Utilize an intermediary target. An intermediary target is merely something in between the ball and the hole. I always start directly behind the ball, on my target line to get the best perspective of my line. I like to pick a spot close to my ball — like a blade of grass or a blemish — that is directly on my target line. It is much easier to line my putter up to this close intermediary target, than it is with the hole that could be a long ways away.
6. For consistency, always set your putter first, and then build your stance around the face. I have observed many golfers set their feet first, and then their putter. If the face is turned a little bit to the right, you turn your putter back to the left. Every time you set

your feet first and then your putter, you're going to need a different stroke. Every time you set your putter first and then your feet you will have a similar stroke.

7. Stay positive, don't think about missing. I putt best when I putt with disregard for the hole. I pick the line that the ball needs to be rolled on, and I roll it the distance of the hole. The hole just happens to be something out there in the way of the process. If you try to get it into the hole, you're more tied to the result than to the task that is going to create the results. When you're result-oriented, the task often breaks down and the result suffers. When you're task oriented, the task is completed properly and the result takes care of itself.

8. Having your mind in the wrong place at the wrong time causes poor putting. If you are standing over your putt in the middle of your stroke wondering if you're on the right line, then your distance is going to suffer. So during your stroke, distance wants to be your primary focus.

9. To tie it all together develop a good pre-shot routine. Your pre-shot routine is your cocoon that keeps you encompassed in the present moment, and forces you to focus on the task at hand. It's your switch on and off to a good golf shot. In putting you should evaluate the situation, formulate your plan, choose your intermediary target, set your club accordingly, build your stance, and roll your ball for distance. Good luck!

Minervino's Take:

As someone who has golfed only a handful of times – zero of those occurring in the past four years — Scott told me I have an advantage over those who golf regularly who come to him for lessons: I don't have any bad habits that he needs to rid me of.

Once on the green, Mayer had me try four putts from three feet out without giving me any suggestions. After making the first, I missed the next two and made the last one. After advising me on proper stance, pre-shot routine, choosing an intermediary target and following through on my stroke, I tried again. I'd start behind the ball, find a blade of grass in between the ball and the hole to develop my line on, walk up to the ball, set my club, build my stance, look at the hole, line up my putt and complete my stroke. I still found my eyes following the ball, so Mayer held his hat in front of my face to block the hole. This forced me to keep my head down, the sweet "thunk" of the ball landing in the cup working as my only sign that the putt was good. Using Mayer's tips, it only took me five minutes to become deadly from three feet and in.

My newly developed confidence was shattered just a couple moments later. The next drill involved putting for distance. Rather than try to make long putts, Mayer told me simply to putt the ball to a spot the edge of the green, some 35 feet away. I aimed for a blade of grass that I could see on the fringe. I left my first putt a few feet short, then left the second one about 15 feet short. Overcorrecting on the next one, I sent the ball well past my target. The next shot was even worse. I just missed the blade of grass, but the ball ended up over the fringe and down a hill, a much tougher shot than the original putt.

Mayer asked me what I was thinking about when I attempted that horrendous putt. I didn't really know. All kinds of stuff was flowing through my head. Pre-shot routine. Posture. Line. Distance. Don't look up. Don't rebound on the swing. Mostly, I was just trying not miss badly again. He handed me a ball and took several steps away, then said, "Actually, let me have that back." So I tossed him the ball, which landed right in his outstretched hand. Mayer asked me if I was left-handed. I'm not. But I had tossed him the ball with my left hand because I was holding the putter in my right. "What were you thinking when you tossed me the ball?" Mayer asked. My answer: "Nothing. I just threw it to you."

That's the problem, Mayer said. Too many people get all caught up in how they are doing something, rather than in what needs to be done. I took one more putt — this one with a clear head — and landed it pretty close to the fringe. Mayer's lesson was that the act of putting should become a routine — something that is done the exact same way every time. That way, reaching the proper distance is the only thought process. As someone who played basketball as a youngster, this made a lot of sense. Shooting a basketball requires a similar development of proper technique, which can be used from in close or beyond the 3-point line. That putt that went over the fringe and down the hill would have been like launching a jump shot over the backboard and into the stands.

So, after my first lesson, I've learned that golf is a simple game, but one that gets complicated quickly when your brain starts churning. It is crucial to develop a technique for putting in order to develop confidence in your stroke. I'm not going to make a lot of 35-foot putts. But if I can leave my 35-footers within a few feet of the hole — and not down the hill beyond it — I have a much greater chance to two-putt.

Up next week: chipping.

Scott Mayer is the teaching pro at Nonesuch River Golf Club in Scarborough. He was named Maine PGA Golf Teacher of the Year in 2004. He runs Mayer's School of Golf, which offers individual and group lessons to all ages and abilities. For more information, visit www.mayerschoolofgolf.com