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by Vic Williams
Illustration by Calder Chism



No Problem for Bold Men

It Takes Guts, Vision and Technology To Solve Today's Putting Puzzle

Most of us can commiserate with golf legends like Ben Hogan and Sam Snead. Here were two of the purest ball strikers the game has ever known, whose work ethic (Hogan) or natural skills (Snead) are the envy of generations of swing nerds, even to this day. From tee to green they defined course management,

accuracy and through-the-bag acumen. But once they were on the green, they often became mortal. Hogan in particular struggled with the yips and abandoned his putter altogether in retirement, saying it had no place in the game. Snead experimented with a sidesaddle style and no doubt attributed his many runner-up finishes to a balky wand ...

Suddenly these geniuses were One Of Us, and they had the most-used stick in the bag to blame for it. No club evens the playing field more than the putter. Many a short-hitter makes his bones by dropping 10-footers while the big hitters three-jack their way to a life of frustration. It's enough

settling into a repeatable stroke from the get-go. Two putter-specific companies have invested a lot of bucks, brain power and testing time to reduce the game's smallest yet most frustrating motion to its essence, and put in our trembling hands a wand that works.

twisting effect, no question."

The pros put the brakes on twisting and produce a pronounced "end-over-end" ball motion through countless hours of practice, but average golfers don't have the time or inclination to grind in that kind of mastery. So the G.E.L. goal is to make

"We're all different — long legs, short legs, long or short torso, arms, etc. We can optimize your posture to make your stroke more repeatable. We supply a fitting tool for the product to the pros in the various golf shops that will enable them to fit the putter. That's key — unless you have the correct-fitting putter, it's a lottery."

to drive a guy to take up tennis ... well, let's not go to that extreme ... or at least take an early exit to the 19th hole for a few elbow curls — though, as we all know, the coldest beer or best single malt scotch in the world won't erase the open head wounds of strokes wasted and lives shortened from close range.

So why don't we practice putting more, as our own Headmaster suggests in this very issue? After all, it accounts for 25 to 35 percent of our total score, while the driver — the club most abused on the world's practice tees — sees on-course action 14 times per round max, and should be used a lot less than that by most of the slicing masses.

Well, for one, putting ain't sexy. There's no glitter in a 12-foot, downhill left-to-righter, unless Tiger is standing over it for all the marbles. Heck, no — we want to blast that ball 300 yards down the middle. That's where the action is, and that's where golf manufacturers spend the big bucks convincing you that the next big stick in the pipeline will finally bury those first-tee jitters forever, and you'll be a golden god every time you whale away with 460cc's of thunder. Who needs a buttery stroke on the carpet when you've got a wedge in your hand on every hole?

We do, and we know it. And if we're not willing to do as the Tour pros do and spend hundreds of hours grooving our strokes, it's time we looked to technology for short-shot salvation. When it comes to putting, the biggest leaps are in two areas — creating a true roll off the face as soon as possible and

GROOVIN' WITH G.E.L.

Grooved-faced putters are nothing new. A few showed up even back in the days of hickory, usually in DIY mode — some guy with a pocket knife or perhaps a lathe looking for some grab on the gutta-percha. And a few modern companies such as TaylorMade and Guerin Rife have successfully designed and marketed putters with grooved inserts that produce topspin almost immediately after contact.

Hong Kong-based G.E.L. Golf (Groove Equipment Limited) takes that skid-and-backspin-beating technology into new territory by employing a lightweight aluminum face on its new line of men's and women's wands.

"It's very soft, so the customer will have to take care when putting it in the bag, but the aluminum gives you a very soft feel," says Paul Hurrion, a British biomechanics expert who helped develop the G.E.L. line.

"And it's a lighter material than stainless steel [used in other inserts], so I can reposition the weight of the putter on the periphery. That increases the moment of inertia by double digits on all the putters."

There's that phrase again: moment of inertia. Contrary to popular opinion, that somewhat overused phenomenon, which has to do with the twisting of a clubhead at impact, doesn't just apply to big sticks. In fact, it's even more pronounced with putts of a decent length. "For a three- or four-footer, (MOI) isn't a big deal," Hurrion says.

"But on a 30- or 40-foot putt, and you catch it slightly on the toe, you will have a

every minuscule moment of contact — half a millisecond, Hurrion says — as productive as possible.

"When the groove technology came about, they sped up the time it takes the ball to start top-spinning," adds G.E.L. CEO Alec Pettigrew, who helped Colorado-based Yes! Putters establish their groove technology and market their successful line of putters before starting his own company. "The advantage is twofold. One is that if you hit the ball on line, and it hits something on that line, it will stay on line. It's like a wheel going downhill. If there's sidespin on a putt, the ball can spin off line quickly. The other thing is, your distance control is much better."

After extensive robot research, Hurrion and Pettigrew have placed every G.E.L. model's grooves at an optimum angle and increased the groove pattern; assuming your stroke doesn't vary much from putt to putt, the result is a predictable roll no matter what type of ball is in play. "Any groove technology is superior to flat-faced putters," Pettigrew contends.

The final touch for success comes in the pro shop, where each G.E.L. is fitted to its owner, just like with woods and irons. Hurrion's goal is to fit every putter to its owner's biomechanical makeup.

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key — unless you have the correct-fitting putter, it's a lottery."

No doubt about that. For most people, the putter is strictly an off-the-rack purchase, even though the importance of clubfitting has been drilled into our skulls for years. "You ask even a 9-handicapper what their shaft flex is on the driver and irons, and I'll bet they'll know what it is," Hurrion says. "But if you ask them what the loft and lie is on their putter, they'll look at you and go, 'I don't know.'"

So, as with full-swing flaws, our brains create compensations we're usually not even aware of, and those quirks are fluid. They can metastasize into even worse flaws, and that leads to inconsistency, even though physically we pretty much stay the same over the years. That's why Hurrion says fitting is so important.

"Your body isn't going to change — you won't grow, you won't get shorter. So the putter fitting can stay the same. But when people come in with a half dozen putters of different lofts and lies, they're all searching. In four rounds of medal play, you might get one round where you're streaky, with 24 or 25 putts, and the next round you'll have 34 or 35, and you won't know the difference. That's when you're in trouble. You don't know your stroke well enough. Nine times out of 10, in my opinion, it's because the putter doesn't fit you properly."

G.E.L. putters will be marketed in every segment of the game, from top pros to beginners. "We'll have five models ready for the March-April timeframe, and I'm drawing four more," Hurrion adds, "but from drawings to actual samples, you're talking five or six months. I want to build it up to 24 types of putter."

Pettigrew adds that although G.E.L. can't compete with the big boys in advertising dollars or player contracts, he has an extensive American distribution network ready to go this spring and has managed to get his product into the hands of several pros, one of whom, Bryan Saltus, used it to help propel him to a December win at the Asian Tour's Johnnie Walker Cambodian Open.

"We're adding one new model to the generic line. And introducing a Hurrion Signature line," he says. "For me, the exciting thing about being in the market is we make up only about 5 percent of it right now. Groove technology will be like the

metal drivers; at first traditionalists refused to change, but now they're generic. In time we'll be in the majority. When people try it, they love it."

FINDING 'HEAVY' HEAVEN

The folks at Connecticut-based Heavy Putter can relate with G.E.L.'s small-company predicament. Though they've been around since 2004 and seen Big Show success — a 2006 PGA Tour win and five consecutive Top 5 finishes by Troy Matteson — cementing their stroke-smoothing philosophy among the game's best has been a chore. Again, it's all about scraping away hidebound attitudes.

"They're so ingrained with what they grew up with, they're not gonna make the change," says Steven Bocchieri, Heavy Putter's founder, CEO and chief designer. "But they will. We're easing our way in. Last year, we developed a [Ping] Anser-styled putter, and that got a lot of guys to pick it up. They stroke it and say, 'Oh my God.' When you feel that you have more control over your stroke, why wouldn't you want to have that feeling?"

That's a good question, and the answer

gets a lot clearer after a few long, fluid strokes with the Heavy Putter, which is literally different from anything else out there. First Bocchieri increased the head's mass by 100 to 200 grams, which in itself helps keeps it more stable through impact. Then, to offset any wrist break that added mass engenders, he devised the Weight Management System — 250 grams installed in each putter's grip end that produces a balance point 75 percent higher than conventional putters, which, he contends, are too light.

"Their center of gravity is too low on the shaft, and it takes a tremendous amount of effort to keep the wrists from breaking down. It takes thousands of hours and years of practice to be able to do that."

Again, that's thousands of hours most of us don't have, and if we do, we're committing them to the big weaponry.

"Most golfers are in such fear of the long game that they spend all their time working on it," Bocchieri says. "They don't want to be embarrassed off the tee, whereas if you miss a putt, nobody really notices. So there's very little time, outside of playing, for practicing putting. Guys will hit a few putts before they

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tee off, definitely not like the Tour players who spend three hours rolling the ball."

But as FG testers will attest, a few minutes with the Heavy Putter melts your motion into "buttah" — longer, more languid, with no herky-jerky transitions in sight. "A lot of manufacturers say their putters improve the roll or alignment, but no one has tried to improve the stroke, and that's what we claim the Heavy Putter will do, with the increased weight and high balance point," Boccieri says. "With the ultrasound testing we've done with more than 10,000 players, we show they can develop a more consistent stroke without the thousands of hours of practice."

Today's super-fast greens make the Heavy Putter's promised shortcut to success a godsend.

"It's effective because you're moving this putter at a much slower rate of speed," Boccieri continues.

"With a lighter putter it's much easier to manipulate the stroke, even if you have no wrist breakdown. It might travel anywhere from 3 to 5 miles per hour at impact; the Heavy Putter, with the same length of putt, might only be moving 2 to 3 miles per hour. There's more mass, but the force isn't as great because you're not moving it at the same speed. You can take a longer stroke on a faster green. You don't have to use a short, jerky stroke, with high acceleration. Guys like Gary Player and Nicklaus used to say, 'the faster the greens, the heavier the putter I

want,' because it slows the stroke down."

For his newest Heavy Putter incarnation, Boccieri goes deep, as in "deep face." The new line of "DF" putters sport precision-milled faces that are a full quarter-inch deeper than the modern standard. This, he says, more closely aligns the sweet spot with the equator of the ball.

"A ball is 1.6 inches in diameter; the center is .8 inches off the ground. All putters off the rack are one inch high, so the center of gravity falls about three-eighths of an inch up — almost half an inch away from the 'sweet spot' of the ball. With the DF you don't have to lift the putter that much. The idea is to have about an eighth-inch under the putter; that's easier to do more consistently than trying to lift it a half an inch [every time]."

True enough. Mostly people instinctively raise the putter just enough to avoid the grass underneath, so it follows that the DF's high center of gravity of the head will improve the roll of the ball, with less skidding off the face. "And it will work better if your ball is against the collar of the green, which happens a lot with today's fast greens," Boccieri adds.

"You won't have to chop down on it or try to hit a sand wedge on the equator. You can make the same stroke as if you're on the green."

And how does the Heavy Putter way translate to the women's game? Pretty well, judging from sales of the company new pink-hued ladies' line. "It's a different dynamic completely [from selling men's putters], but we have women's models on our new website, and they're doing phenomenally. They're doing well in Korea and Japan; they're going nuts over the pink putter. Certain big retailers, like PGA Tour Superstores, actually have sections for women's putters now."

Beyond broader consumer sales, Heavy Putter shares the G.E.L. philosophy of continuing to chip away at the pro ranks through the Nationwide Tour, where guys don't have the big endorsement contracts. "We had eight to 10 guys the first week we went out there," Boccieri boasts with an audible smile. "That's the future; we need to get the putter into their hands and they'll take it to the PGA Tour. With Troy, the putter was left out of his deal with Titleist, and he signed with us. He didn't want to give up the putter that had got him there." **FG**

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MALLET MADNESS: A Big-Headed Breakdown

These four brand-new mallet-style putters were tested under identical conditions — 15 putts each from 18 feet, downhill, right-to-left breaker on medium-fast greens, and 15 each from 4 feet uphill. Three brands of ball were used (five putts each): Titleist Pro V1, Maxfli Red Max and Precept Distance iQ 180. All were tested at 34 inches long.



GUERIN RIFE Two-Bar Hybrid

\$200 | www.rifeputter.com

The Story: Florida-based putter company Guerin Rife lays claim to golf's first grooved-face technology. This newest mallet-styled stick's 11 somewhat U-shaped grooves are designed to get the ball rolling as quickly as possible, with minimal skid, while Rife's patented "two bar" alignment and rear weighting system — two steel cylinders separated by a long white painted line — make the entire Rife line very popular on the Champions Tour. You don't need perfect eyesight to achieve square-to-the-target accuracy.

The Look: One of the most pleasing big-headed putters at address, with small openings on either side of the bars, similar to Rife's previous Barbados model.

The Roll: Pure butter. The grooves seem to work as advertised, sending balls of varying hardnesses to their destination on the appointed line every time. And the alignment system is so intuitive, it's nearly impossible to miss the center.

The Feel: Solid and somewhat "sticky" off the face, which is exactly what Rife is looking for. No ping, just a click-like punch.

The Verdict: The most expensive stick in this foursome, but worth the extra outlay, and a serious look for anyone who's looking for a cleaner roll and heavenly alignment qualities. Rife is right on the money.



HEAVY PUTTER D3-DF

\$170 | www.heavyputter.com

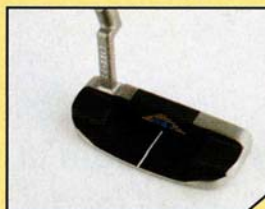
The Story: This year's DF line (for "Deep Face") adds 1/8 inch of depth to the hitting area, which brings its centerpoint in line with the equator of the ball at impact. The D3 model features three adjoining "humps" perpendicular to the back of the face for precise alignment and a rail system to minimize surface contact with the green. We found this feature very effective from the fringe.

The Look: A crescent-shaped setup with one see-through alignment line straight back from the center of the face, the D3 looks a little stubby at address, and its matte finish leaves an "industrial" impression. From the rear, the "humps" are different from anything else out there.

The Roll: Right up there with the Rife, with just a bit more perceptible skid off the face. This putter excels on faster greens since the added grip weight yields a naturally smoother, longer pass at the ball — it simply won't allow a choppy stroke.

The Feel: Amazingly soft off the shallow-grooved milled-steel face, yet reassuringly solid.

The Verdict: FG played this putter on a variety of surfaces, varying weather and course conditions before testing. After a bit of time dialing in longer distances — you tend to come up short at first — we settled into the heavier feel and had more control through impact than with any other wand.



GEL GOLF Sapphire

\$165 | www.gelgolf.com

The Story: While we wait for designer Paul Hurrion's much-anticipated new line of Signature GEL models — which will be priced quite a bit higher than the current line — we put the Sapphire's "groovy" technology through its paces.

The Look: Very classic mallet style at address, with one short center line above the face and two longer alignment lines about an inch apart along the bottom of the wide, tapered, curved back. Rounded edges curl up from the heel and toe to form the club's perimeter weighting system.

The Roll: Outstanding, with close to no backspin or sliding in the first few inches of roll. That's the idea, right?

The Feel: Even stickier than the Rife off the face, with a slight ping at impact. If you like it a little softer, the Rife might be for you, but this club's metallic move sits well with us.

The Verdict: Someday every putter face will display some kind of groove — the technology and desired effect is too advantageous to ignore. GEL seems to be onto something good by going with aluminum, and already their putters have scored a couple of wins on the European Tour. We like this company's future, and we can already tell they'll keep pushing to make better putters that will serve players of all skill levels.



TOUR EDGE Pro Optic P6

\$50 | www.touredge.com

The Story: This putter just hit the market March 1. Illinois-based Tour Edge is known far less for its short sticks than its wide array of booming drivers, cutting-edge hybrids and adjustable wedges, but the Pro Optic is worth noting not only for its pleasing price but its more expensive-seeming look and feel and its obvious fine workmanship. It may be slightly unfair putting it up against the other three franchise-type wands, but it holds its own.

The Look: Broad and sturdy at address, with somewhat large holes flanking an inch-plus-wide center weight notched with a single alignment line. Visually it's closest to the Rife, yet bulkier.

The Roll: Definitely not as solid as the other three putters in this group, with a slightly "hollow" finish and sound. Still, skid level is more than acceptable and the putter releases well.

The Feel: A little on the light side for our taste, particularly in comparison with the other three very heavy-headed models here.

The Verdict: Tour Edge pulls off a pleasing pro-style effect (hence its name) and its alignment qualities are right up there with the others. Even for a company that prides itself on inexpensive excellence, this stick is a great bargain and definitely a good starting point for players saving their money for greens fees. If only the face had grooves.