

Two Dunedin doctors hope to find a cure for the yips, a horrifying affliction for golfers

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Yair Safriel, left, and Nick Dewan, two Dunedin doctors, will use MRI exams in their effort to cure golfers' yips.



DUNEDIN — There are certain words that make golfers cringe.

Shank. Hook. Yips.

The first two can be remedied by a swing coach and hours of practice. The yips, that horrifying affliction that causes even scratch golfers to shake over a 3-foot putt, is still a mystery to most who play and teach the game.

But solving that mystery is the passion of two Dunedin doctors. Neuroradiologist Yair Safriel and Nick Dewan, a psychiatrist specializing in sports and neuropsychiatry, are using their expertise to try to find a cure.

Armed with a powerful magnetic resonance imaging brain scan at Mease Dunedin Hospital, the doctors plan to study 10 area golfers, five with yip symptoms and five without. Each will be told to think about making a short putt while the MRI measures brain activity. Through computer images, the doctors will try to pinpoint the area that triggers the yips.

"Nobody has done a study like this," said Dewan, who has a full-time practice in Dunedin and works as a sports psychiatrist at Saddlebrook Resort in Wesley Chapel. "Our research is the first to take it to this level. That's very exciting for us. And it should help not only the golfer but other athletes as well. The baseball player who is in a slump, the basketball player that can't make a free throw. If we can pinpoint where in the brain these type of things happen, we can make great strides."

One thing the doctors have determined is something coaches have been telling players for years: Don't think so much. Some test studies with scratch golfers and high handicap golfers found that those with less brain activity while thinking about a shot were the better golfers.

"What we know for a fact, a validated fact, is the better you are the less brain you use," said Safriel, who specializes in brain and spine conditions. "Think of it this way: A person who just turned 16 and is learning to drive is thinking about everything that is going on. A more experienced driver just drives and doesn't think about it. It's the same with this."

Simple enough. But telling golfers to think less and have them actually do it are two different things.

"It's a phobia," Dewan said of the yips. "There is a fear there. Anxiety rises when put in those situations. We can try to work with people to lower the anxiety. But if we can also find out what triggers that, we can help a wide variety of athletes."

Safriel and Dewan admit to being no more than weekend golfers. Both claim to be yip-free. They chose golfers as their test case because Tampa Bay is full of golf courses and, therefore, golfers.

They want to limit the study to golfers older than 40 because research has shown more mature golfers tend to suffer from the yips. Dewan said he hopes to find some golfers with severe cases, those who shake at impact on putts of 4 feet or less.

Long term, their hope is to diagnose and resolve through medication or other treatment.

If the Dunedin doctors can treat the yips, they hope to be able to resolve similar problems faced by other athletes.

"Take something like the NFL draft," Safriel said. "If a team is thinking about drafting a player and spending millions, we can analyze him with the MRI, and if it lights up (with activity), then maybe you think twice about drafting him. If a quarterback has 3½ seconds to make a decision, do you really want a player who is thinking too much? They end up flat on their backs most of the time."

Five famous golfers with the yips

Ben Hogan: The yips came late in the nine-time major champion's career. He would stand over short putts for long periods before jabbing and missing. It got so bad, he quit playing professionally.

Sam Snead: He called them "twitches" and worked very hard to correct the flaw. The seven-time major champion said he never took a golf lesson, so he worked on different grips and putting strokes on his own.

Bernhard Langer: In his early days, Langer said, he once four-putted from 3 feet and actually hit one putt twice. The two-time Masters champ said he still battles the yips occasionally.

Tom Watson: He would never call them the yips, but the eight-time major champion struggled mightily for a period during his career. His cure was going back to basics and finding his rhythm.

Tommy Armour: The winner of the 1927 U.S. Open, 1930 PGA Championship and 1931 British Open is credited with coining the phrase "yips." The affliction eventually led to his departure from competitive golf.

FAST FACTS

Tell us your story

A Mayo clinic study concluded that 33-48 percent of experienced golfers have suffered from the yips, also known as *twitches*, *staggers*, *jitters* and *jerks*. Have you experienced the unexplained shaking just before impact that causes the ball to move off line or know someone who has? Because you're unlikely to have unfettered access to an MRI machine like the doctors at Mease Dunedin Hospital, how did you overcome the yips or how do you compensate? Fellow golfers would like to hear your story. E-mail page@sptimes.com, golf@sptimes.com or fax (727) 893-8782.

The yips study

Who: Golfers older than 40 who have a USGA handicap card. The study is looking for five with tremors and five without.

Where: MRI studies at Mease Dunedin Hospital.

The process: Each participant will be screened and undergo a brain scan to determine activity. The doctors will compare the scans of golfers with similar age and handicap in the study.

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