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## Putting Improvement is a Breath Away

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We all know what it's like to stand over a five foot putt when the pressure is on and the putt really matters: doubt-thoughts tend to sneak in, nervous twitches take over, the hands begin to tremble, and all we're aware of is our heart beating through our chest. How can we increase our chances of successfully coping with the pressure so that we can sink more of these putts?

Most of us are unconscious of our breathing pattern when we stroke a putt. You can ask 10 players of all skill levels where their breath is and they will all give you a puzzled look as if to say, "Who cares about my breath? It's already tough enough thinking about pace and line!" But I contend that the relationship between our breath and stroking a putt really *does* matter.

What I have discovered is that the body tends to relax if the putt is stroked *after an exhalation* of air. Especially on shorter putts, in the range of two to eight feet, you want to eliminate as much nervous body movement as possible and to be completely focused on a smooth stroke. Because short range putts tend to create more doubt-thoughts and anxiety than longer putts, working with the breath is particularly important on these putts.

The first step is simply to become aware of your breathing pattern when you stroke your putts in your usual manner. Many players tend to inhale and hold their breath before taking the putter back and exhale either as they make contact with the ball or after contact. This will only result in making the heart beat faster. Some inhale as they take the putter back. Just notice your own pattern.

The second step is to practice making your stroke from a distance of five feet but without a ball. After you have done your pre-putt routine but just before you take the club back, *consciously exhale through your nose* in a pronounced way to make sure you get all the air out of your lungs. You should make a slightly audible sound as you exhale. This will give you an immediate sensation of "letting go" and a feeling of relaxation. Then, with the lungs empty, make your stroke. *Do not inhale until after the stroke is completed.* Practice this numerous times without a ball to develop a sense of the rhythm of exhaling and then making your stroke.

The third step is to practice with three balls from the same distance. Do not worry about whether the ball drops, as the point is to begin to feel the natural rhythm of this sequence. What this sequence does is give you an anchor — the exhalation and sense of letting go signal readiness to stroke the putt. This routine will counter the common tendency to hold your breath under pressure.

The result of practicing this routine for at least a couple of weeks is that the sequence will gradually become second nature. You will no longer need to consciously think about exhaling before you stroke, as it will occur on its own. Then begin to apply this method to longer putts and watch your putts stay more consistent and pure.