

# Putting Practice Pointers

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[ZipTip: PRACTICE: Putting Practice Pointers](#)

The difference between swatting balls across a practice green and sharpening your putting skills is mostly working on something specific in your putting, whether it be targeting, reading, setup, routine, stroke mechanics, or something purely psychological.

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Whoever said "practice makes perfect" must not have been a golfer. This is especially the case with putting. You have to know WHAT to practice and why, or else you just create habits of no particular usefulness. And what to practice and why depends very much on your skill level. The more you learn, the more there is to practice -- at least, what you practice becomes more regularized. Here are some suggestions.

## A Bit of Theory.

The psychology of learning makes a couple of points:

First, pay attention to what you are trying to learn and practice specific aspects of putting. Most golfers think just putting six-footers or moving around the putting green from hole to hole is about all that is needed for improving. If your hope is to master a skill and commit it to memory, either intellectually or physically, you should make a conscious effort to understand the procedures of competence for the skill. With this conscious awareness of what you are working to learn, you greatly enhance your focus for relevant cues in performing the skill. With an explicit focus on the procedures of the skill, combined with the intention to "learn" through practice, the procedures get committed to long-term memory faster and in a more secure form.

In putting, there are many specific procedures, including sighting with the dominant eye, reading break, adopting a square setup, assuming your grip, placing and aiming the putterface, targeting, picking spots, initiating the stroke, keeping a good tempo, etc. Most "drills" are ill-suited to help you focus on these sorts of essential aspects of putting, because they are designed to "get you a result" without letting you work out how to get the result. Most putting drills are like giving someone a fish to eat rather than teaching them HOW to fish for themselves. It's a lot better to think about how good putting is done and then work on specific aspects.

Second, realize that as you practice, you will build up a resistance to maintaining focus, so you need to take breaks to stay sharp and keep the learning process from breaking down. People who persist too long in practice without a break to clear the mind and freshen up start to quit paying attention, lose focus, and find themselves just going through the motions for periodic stretches of the session. If you want to putt for two hours straight, you probably need at least one ten minute break somewhere around the end of the first hour.

Third, habits are not necessarily good, and bad habits have to be gotten rid of before good habits can function properly. Practicing indifferently creates indifferent habits, whereas practicing either specific aspects or practicing intently as if on the course seeking to score creates useful habits. If you find yourself wondering what specifically you should be working on in putting, you could probably use a professional's teaching guidance.

Fourth, your motivational drive to do well can create problems. The more difficult a task (at your current skill level), the less you can tolerate arousal. For these difficult tasks, your optimal arousal level should stay pretty low-key, as this helps you focus on the precise aspect of performance. As the task gets easier or more "automatic," a higher level of arousal is not as disruptive to performance. And drive can override your precise movement intention and summon forth instead a dreaded habit. This is why overtrying causes problems sometimes: the trying activates a latent habit that takes over the performance, thus short-circuiting the precise skilled movement you were intending to make. For most of putting practice, you don't want a lot of drive; just a calm, contemplative agreeableness.

### [What to Practice.](#)

To score well, you ought to emphasize the most common situations you face in the game. Putting strokes account for nearly one half of all strokes in a round, and yet hardly any golfers (pros included) spend half of their practice time on putting. Many, many short-knockers have shown that keeping the drive in the fairway and getting the approach somewhere on the green is frequently sufficient to keep pace with the long-knockers who don't have the same skill with the putter. This is certainly the case with Bobby Locke a generation ago, and with Loren Roberts and others today.

In the same vein, you should practice the length of putts that matter most. A typical first putt when you reach the green in regulation is 20 to 30 feet. A typical first putt when you chip on is 3 to 8 feet. Any second putt from either of these ranges ought to be a gimme tap-in, so those are irrelevant. Accordingly, many pros advise practicing from 8 feet in and some long ones, and forget the middle-range putts. In addition, long putts are much better for teaching distance control and line precision, so it probably would not hurt to tilt the balance of putt lengths to the long range. You should never miss any putt inside of 3 feet, so if you do, you should hit lots and lots of very short putts for confidence and competence under pressure.

Aside from these general parameters, you should always intend to sink every putt you practice. If you feel it takes too much focus to keep at this with the same level of concentration, than you need a break, as you have fallen into the involuntary resistance-to-learning phase of your session.

I personally believe you should continuously be monitoring your routine for targeting and stroking. This makes you watch the different perceptual cues so you become habituated to expecting certain "looks" and "feels" during some good putting. Knowing these cues, and when you are "on" and when you are "off," is a wonderful way to deal with pressure: you have to stay calm enough to know whether you are perceiving the cues in the routine fashion, and going about the "routine job" is perhaps the greatest antidote to pressure.

For this reason, I recommend practicing the routine of the putt itself, and checking along the sequence of behaviors and perceptual cues in an attempt to make the putt come together successfully. If the putt misses, you should know why because you are paying attention to the routine way you know best to make any putt, and something in the routine didn't work correctly. But while it is necessary to spot what you did wrong, you should

also find something in a missed putt to congratulate yourself about, and then get right back to sinking the next putt.

### How to Practice.

If your experience is like mine, you really can't putt well even in practice until you adjust your psychic speed down a notch to your "putting feel." So the first task in a practice session is to gear down, and this takes at least ten to twenty minutes. Don't expect much during this beginning phase. It probably would be a good idea to stroke a few putts away from a hole at the start, focusing on tempo instead of sink.

During the session, I agree with Dave Stockton that you should not use more than two practice balls, that the balls should be identical and the same every time, and that you should vary the putts constantly. With three balls (or more), golfers "putt and rake," focusing almost totally on whether the putt goes in or gets closer than the last, instead of watching how the targeting and stroking is going. And of course you learn too much from the first putt to really count the second and third tries much as real practice.

Some teachers, notably Harvey Penick, say that every putt should be holed out, as this makes you less likely over time to miss by much. While I agree that "finishing your business" is absolutely important, I personally include that with my short-putt practice. For long-putt practice, I treat short comebacks and finishing putts with extreme casualness, partly because I don't want to spend concentration on them while concentrating on long putts, but also because I won't to maintain my confidence about these short putts (even if I miss them!). Either way is probably okay, but you should make a conscious choice about these short leaves and then be consistent during your practice sessions.

If you have a schedule to adhere to, you probably find that as the end of the time for practice draws near, you start to rush your putting and can't stay in the moment. Still, you have to end on a positive note, so start watching for your quitting point, when you sink two monsters in a row. And if you can't quite get two monsters to drop, well, sink two ten footers and get out of Dodge.

### How Often.

Beginning golfers should probably spend as much time on long and short putting practice as they do on all other aspects of the game. More accomplished golfers ought to practice probably twice a week for at least an hour, and for one two-hour session in advance of any important game or tournament. Serious putters practice daily, or very nearly so, for anywhere from one to three hours.

### Make This Part of Your Game.

Aside from rare chip-ins or two-putt birdies on par 5s, the only way to score is with the putter. It is surprising how little golfers practice putting compared to time spent on the other clubs. A sound practice regimine should be a staple for any golfer trying to improve scoring. Knowing a little about how to learn, and hence how to practice, ought to make the job a little easier and bring success quicker. At least that's the theory!

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