

Stone Cold Putting

by Geoff Mangum

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[ZipTip: DISTANCE CONTROL / TOUCH: Stone Cold Putting](#)

Truly amazing distance control on a consistent basis for putts of any length is pretty easy if you understand that targetting and tempo establish the backstroke length automatically, and this is much better than "touch and feel," "muscle memory," or any sort of "trying" to get the "hit" or "pace" of the putt just so.

Most of putting accuracy and precision begins and ends with distance control. Distance control comes from touch for the given green plus targetting. Once distance control becomes automatic, you never need to worry about it much and can devote almost all your practice, attention, and on-course focus to reading and hitting the correct path into the hole.

The Theory.

Imagine having such exquisite control of the force or weight of your putting that you are not concerned in the least with how hard to stroke the ball to sink a 30-foot putt. For most golfers, looking back upon their personal experience, this sounds odd. But look again at what the pros say happens in their putting over the years. Perhaps Phil Rodgers expressed it most simply: "The most important thing about putting is control of distance. ... Speed and distance are synonymous. ... Good putters have the ball going into the hole at the same rate of speed every time, and from any length."

As you gain control over distance, you spend less and less attention on this aspect of putting, and you devote yourself almost exclusively to seeing the line and sinking the putt. Your "leaves" or "comebacks" are generally so well within your comfort zone that you focus totally on sinking the putt, uncorrupted by worries about "what if" you miss. And, with a consistent speed of entry into the cup, your ability to envision how your putt will roll the ball becomes sharper, more reliable, and more accurate, so reading greens becomes immensely easier. You become much more confident that you can deliver the ball with just the right energy to take the break as it needs to do to drop.

Distance control is enhanced quite a bit by experience, but experience alone is not what makes for optimal control. One also needs consistent physical procedures for each putt that, combined with experience, dials in the distance control. The perceptual and motor programming processes the brain uses to communicate distance assessment to the stroke can be recognized and enhanced for better control and for automatic control.

Getting Distance Control.

Every green has a different speed and the speed changes during the day and from day to day. Hopefully, the speeds of all greens on a course are close, but this is only within a certain range. So distance control inevitably entails some green reading for speed and

some "touch" just for that particular speed. The previous tip on the Core Putt addresses the touch aspect.

Once you have a touch for the particular green speed calibrated, and have taken advantage of your experience and senses to judge speed conditions variation from green to green, distance control is a matter of targeting. By targeting I mean the physical procedures you use to localize the hole or target in relation to your body and your body's action. This is only partly a matter of vision.

The body does not know distance to a target as measurement numbers, but in terms of actions, such as touching, pointing / indicating, throwing at, or walking to. For this reason, it is not especially helpful to try to learn the "feel" of a 15 foot putt and a 20 foot putt, etc., and try to "dial in" this so-called motor memory after figuring the number of feet in a putt.

What really is going on is you are translating the number into paces before you can use the number, and besides the speed of greens differs so one "feel" doesn't produce the same distance on different greens. The same is true for stroke formulas like 1" of backstroke equals 1 foot of putt. All of these methods leave out the matching of touch to the green's speed. But the brain doesn't leave out touch -- it integrates the green speed nicely in the calibration of the stroke's force.

There are a great many perceptual cues to distance control for a given putt in addition to "touch" issues. For example, your brain takes stock of the ball-hole relationship visually and kinetically as you walk up to mark your ball. The changing visual appearance of this relationship as you walk nearer feeds your brain (it's called motion parallax). The body "instinctively" compares your steps to the ball with how many steps you would need to go from the ball to the hole. Other cues include the appearance of the hole as a dark oval depending on how far away you are and the perspective downward depending on the height of your eyes and the slope of the green at the hole. The apparent size of the oval combines with your knowledge of the actual size of the hole (one fist wide, 4.25"), and the shape of the oval (thin, tilted left to right) tells you how far back you are also.

The key to using distance cues is to sequence them so that they combine in time for enhancing the vividness of your sense of distance. The better you localize the hole in a timed sequence with making the stroke, the more accurate and precise your distance control will be. And if you use the same sequenced physical procedures all the time, your distance control becomes automatic and your ability to spot the cues and use them becomes sharper.

[A Recommended Physical Routine.](#)

I recommend a combination and a sequence of physical procedures. First, there is a sense of eagerness and arousal to "get at" the putt and give it your best effort. This arousal level is very positive and helps your perceptions be sharper. Survey the green for spatial relationships of size and distance. For example, don't just look at the flag: know the length of the flag as you look at it. Don't just look at the hole: imagine fitting your hand down in it to retrieve your marvelous putt. Don't try to ascertain distance in terms of a number: just watch attentively how the distance changes as you walk with a consistent, relaxed stride. In other words, focus on the putt's distance in everything you do from the beginning when you approach the green. Walk from the ball to the hole if you like.

[Stand Back to Sight the Line the Same Distance as the Putt.](#) Specifically, once you enter the routine proper, I recommend sighting the line from behind the ball and recommend

that you travel back from the ball a distance you judge equal to the distance from the ball to the hole. Then when you walk back, your body gets a taste of the distance; you see the ball as halfway to the hole; you walk the same distance again as you approach the ball for setup; and the putt looks half as long and twice as easy when you are over the ball taking another look.

Learn to Use the Neck Turn for Distance. Once beside the ball, you have to resettle the brain, since you've just stopped moving. Then focus steadily on the ball and turn your head to carry the gaze along the path on the ground at the speed your experience and touch tells you the ball will likely roll in the perfect putt. It's not the eyes that matter here. It's the pacing and extent of your neck turn. It helps to have the eyes in plane with the putt plane, but the real important cue is what your neck muscles tell your brain about distance. So pretend you really are following the ball to and into the hole.

Focus a Still Gaze on the Hole Itself for at Least 4 Seconds. Once your gaze is at the hole, keep it there at least 4 seconds. Three seconds is not enough because the brain gets bored and wants to get on with it, so you have to override the urge to look away. It takes at least 4 seconds for the brain to form an enduring image and to sort out the distance fully. Also don't let your eyesight jump or wander about. Look steadily at the hole or even some point on the lip or down into the center of the cup. This procedure creates an anchor point as your body assesses direction and distance, and it also creates an image of the apparent shape and size of the hole that your brain uses to assess distance as well. (This aspect of the routine also helps with orienting the body for a stroke on the proper line.) At this time, mentally the only thing you want in your mind is a sense of the "thereness" of the hole: the hole is exactly there, not to the left or right, or nearer or farther, just there.

Scan Along the Line from the Hole Back to the Ball. Then, look from the hole along the path with a smooth neck turn back to the ball. At this time, you have about as vivid a sense of the location of the hole in terms of distance and direction as you are likely to get, and you have an internal mental image of the appearance of the hole. You also have a kinetic, rhythmic sense of the neck turn and a memory of just how far to turn the neck to get back to the hole.

That's It. Just Putt. The actual stroke is automatic from here on. You do not need to think about the force of the stroke, and in fact it probably hurts to do so. Just let the neck turn's pacing and extent work its magic by mimicking this in your stroke's tempo. The length of your stroke will adjust itself without conscious involvement. All you want consciously is the thought: use your athletic ability to "roll the ball into the hole." All the way, at the best speed for capture.

Making This Part of Your Game.

Try this routine on 10 foot putts. Use it with the Core Putt to see how it works. Then try longer putts. Over time, I believe you will find you begin to trust and respect the consistency and accuracy you gain, and these procedures "solve" far more problems than other ways you try. In particular, the still focus on the hole plays a much more pronounced role in getting distance control than one would ever suspect.

Once you have exquisite distance control, you feel liberated to concentrate solely on line and break. All putts start to look very similar, regardless of length. Leaves and comebacks only become a concern when severe down-slope is near the hole on the far side. In a word, you've reduced putting's problem in half and thereby doubled your rate of progress toward excellent putting on a permanent basis.

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