



# My Swing Hell

JUST BECAUSE WE WORK FOR A GOLF MAG DOESN'T MEAN WE'RE ANY GOOD...

Main pic: Pål Hanssen. Photos: Mark Sumner/Mercury Press

I don't know why it happened, but I can remember where. It was on the hollow-tined greens of Singing Hills GC, West Sussex. Complete meltdown – I had just about as much command of my putter as a baby with a full set of cutlery. I can remember my partners' anxious grimaces as I started chasing my putts around the green like a hockey player dribbles a ball. Three putt, four putt, five...

Let's put this into some kind of context. It's not as if I'm any good at golf. Love the game, the company of friends, the travel, the contours of a course, the phone switched off. It's just that I can't see the point of getting too wrapped up in myself for the sake of one day playing off 18. I've stood next to Paul Casey hitting balls like exocet missiles, while casually enquiring about the health of Breadbin & Crouchy for crying out loud! I know my place.

But there are limits. Since that fateful day at Singing Hills, every meaningful putt has been missed, every excuse in the book has been used. I even putted right-handed for a while, convinced that my brain worked better that way. In desperation, I spent eight months tracking down an old TaylorMade Nubbins putter I'd given a friend. It felt better, but deep down I knew I still didn't have what it takes when it comes down to those crucial five-footers.

Which, in a roundabout way, is why I've embarked on a 600-mile day trip from Brighton to Southport to see Harold Swash, a 74-year-old legend of golf. They call him the miracle man, after he survived emergency surgery when he collapsed at Augusta during the 1998 Masters with a ruptured aortic aneurysm. His eye for detail is phenomenal, spotting the tiniest flaws.

The number plate on his Lexus points to the two occasions he had 18 putts during a round. His disciples are Phillip Kenyon, a former tour pro and sports science expert, and Andy Sumner, Harold's grandson.



Well you'd be better if you hit the bloody thing...



Let Jesus into your life Lestin'



Tzzzz...



ESTYN GEORGE Handicap: 24 Swing Hell? Putting

Normally, Harold, Phil and Andy would see three people at a time, so that each golfer can learn from watching their partners being manipulated into positions. That's how David Howell got started. And there have been plenty of top pros through the door, including Padraig Harrington, Henrik Stenson and Niclas Fasth.

Harold asks me to hit a few putts and has the decency not to sigh or wince. I do what I do best – try to look casual (nobody likes someone who tries hard and is still crap) and weakly feather a few balls in the general direction of the hole. Phil and Andy tape the results, then they get me to strike a half-coloured ball to measure how much spin is imparted on it.

"You've got a slight hinge off the ball then you pivot your shoulders," explains Phil, "then from that point everything opens up and you lag the club to keep the ball from slicing its way left. You're putting a lot of side spin on the ball as well."

"But apart from that, everything's fine?" I reply.

"I could carry on..." he smiles.

Harold shows me some electronic

## IMPROVE YOUR PUTTING



**1** The perfect putting stroke starts from a sound grip. Lay the putter grip along the lifelines of the hand, it helps to keep the putter face square to the target line.



**2** The putting stance is like the base of the Eiffel Tower: wide and stable. Practice standing on two exercise cushions, to make a good stroke you'll have to remove any unwanted body movement.



**3** Have a go with the rail. It might look like a ruler, but it can help groove your stroke. To get a putt rolling to the end it needs to be struck perfectly square, otherwise the side spin will knock it offline.

**TUITION PROVIDED BY HAROLD SWASH**  
Royal Clifton Hotel, Southport  
[www.haroldswashputting.co.uk](http://www.haroldswashputting.co.uk)  
Tuition £300 per person for a day, based on groups of three or four.  
Tel: 07743 072801



footprints of him standing on a pressure mat. Then he shows me the same set up with Padraig Harrington, when he first came to see Harold. The distribution of weight is nowhere near as consistent and there's a nasty squiggle indicating a significant movement of his body.

"Padraig asked me: 'How am I going to get out of it?'" recalls Harold. "Widen your stance, I told him. 'Are you serious?' he said. 'This is how I set up to hit my driver.'

"Two weeks later he played at The Belfry and the commentators said, 'He's been working with Harold Swash, I'm sure he'll be back to his normal stance soon.' That was five years ago."

"So," I say, eager to appear the eager student, "What you're suggesting is...?"

"I'm not suggesting," interrupts Harold, "I'm telling you that you need to stop all that body movement. The same goes for 90 per cent of the people I see for the first time. Stability is key."

Phil sticks me on a couple of exercise cushions and asks me to make a putting stroke. He stands by to prevent me from destroying all that nice expensive video equipment.

It's unbelievably hard, every muscle and sinew struggles to keep the body still. Even on dry land it's so alien it feels as if I've never picked up a putter before. I've got a new grip, my knees are flexed, my backside's stuck out and the distribution of weight is on the balls of my feet. Harold then sticks a brand new Yes! Tracy II putter, cut down by Andy to 32 inches, in my hand. It looks like a toy, but it feels right.

Everything else feels completely unnatural. Phil has to readjust the grip, make sure my shoulders are square to the target and my hips remain stable, but the results are almost instantaneous – the ball starts going straight!

To illustrate the point, Phil records the new improved stroke for posterity. Then we have a go on The Rail, a training aid that came to Harold at 5.30am during the 2000 US Open at Pebble Beach. Padraig Harrington holds the record for hitting the ball 22 times in a row all the way down the narrow strip. I start with three on the bounce and short of a high-five, even Harold seems impressed.

It took five hours to drive up here and after two hours with Harold I can feel the blood flowing in my veins for the first time as I stand 6ft from the hole, putter in hand.

"We don't take bookings from mothers, fathers, mates, girlfriends or boyfriends," reflects Harold. "We want the golfers themselves to call, we want them to tell us they want to be the second-best putter in the world. I used to be, but I'm a has-been now. My son is Number One."

I'm struck by a flood of guilt. I shouldn't have ever been standing here really; I was too cool for school, I didn't want it enough. But as I break my Nubbins putter over my knee and embark on a newer, greener life, I'm bloody glad I came. 🏌️