

When the unsinkable happens

By Randall Mell | South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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Sometimes the scariest shot in major championship golf looks like the easiest.

Just ask tour pros who have felt their hands shaking over putts of 3 feet or less with a chance to win a major at the final hole.

They know history is waiting to anoint them as champion or choker. It's fame or infamy, exhilaration or humiliation, and usually nothing in between.

That's among the notable story lines with the PGA Championship about to begin this week at Southern Hills in Tulsa, Okla.

The last time a major was played at Southern Hills, closing pressure made some of the world's best players look like the gang that couldn't putt straight.

Southern Hills is where Stewart Cink missed an 18-inch putt at the final hole of the 2001 U.S. Open, then watched Retief Goosen immediately follow with a miss from 2 feet.

Cink's miss cost him a shot at making a U.S. Open playoff. Goosen's miss cost him a chance to win at the 72nd hole. Notably, Goosen is one of the few chokers turned champion at the end of the same major as he rebounded with superior putting to defeat Mark Brooks in the 18-hole Monday playoff.

Cink said in a news conference Wednesday at the WGC-Bridgestone Invitational that he believes he lost his chance to win at Southern Hills with an errant 5-iron into the last hole. That forced him to get up and down for par, which he failed to do. His hurried short miss was actually an attempt to clean up a bogey, which he thought inconsequential after missing a 12-footer for par.

"The little putt that I missed wasn't more than, like 18 inches," Cink said. "It was a tap-in. So it stays with me because it was the one that caused the most scars."

Cink's scars ran so deep, he nearly disappeared as a contender. He plummeted from 10th on the PGA Tour money list to 73rd in a two-year span. He says fear plagued him over short putts, and he credited Hollywood psychoanalyst Preston Waddington with helping him face those fears. He would rebound to lead the PGA Tour in putting in 2004 while winning twice that year.

Few pros have ever acknowledged the demons they face under pressure as openly as Cink has.

"Why is a golfer afraid of a 3-footer when it's really just a ball going into a hole?" Cink said of his therapy with Waddington. "It really boils down to sense-of-self issues."

"Your golf and your self-esteem can be tied into one another." That, Waddington will tell you, is the real reason tour pros miss short putts under pressure.

PGA Tour pros are making 99.07 percent of their putts from 3 feet or less, according to ShotLink, but those putts seem so much

longer with a major on the line.

Neither Cink nor Waddington will reveal the details of their sessions, but Waddington has strong opinions about why players are haunted by their failures under pressure. Waddington isn't a sports psychologist. He's a therapist who specializes in the psychology of shame. His clients include Jason Gore, Tim Clark, Frank Lickliter and Joe Durant.

Waddington calls golf "the most assaultive sport on the sense of self that there is." Bad shots are so easily internalized with no teammate to share the blame. He sees so many tour pros binding their sense of self worth to outcomes in unhealthy fashion.

A short putt for a championship is rarely just a short putt. It's about being a champion or a choker.

So the 36 inches between the putter face and the hole too often become a journey through one's past and into one's future with too little time spent in the moment.

"It's never about technique," Waddington said of short misses. "It's about the moment. Every sports psychologist talks about being in the moment, and then they proceed to take a player out of the moment by getting him to fixate on the target. You set up to a target, but all you can control is your movement."

"What makes tour pros miss is that they get into the future. It's, 'Oh my God, I need to make this to win.' All a golfer can do is make a movement. That's all he can control, making a single movement. Going into the future introduces tension, and that interferes with the hands, the feelings in the hands, and the movement."

"There's a concept called archaic grandiosity. It's about thinking you can control outcomes. Golfers, all of them, get into the habit of thinking they have to make birdie at this hole, or thinking they have to shoot 62, or go low. They set up a set of expectations where they think they can control outcomes. If your sense of self is based on those expectations, how will you feel if you don't live up to them? Like garbage."

Waddington said the simplest truths in golf can be the hardest to understand. "I read how Harry Vardon had a press conference once, where he was supposed to reveal the essence of golf. He stood up in front of all these reporters and said the essence is that you hit the ball, you find it and you hit it again until it goes into the hole. That sounded like the stupidest thing I ever heard in my life, but I couldn't stop thinking about that. After thinking about it a couple days, I decided it was the smartest thing I've ever heard in my life."

"He said he didn't become a champion until he learned that golf wasn't about scoring or competing but playing shots one at a time."

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