



THE PRESHOT ROUTINE

Why does a consistent mental preparation ritual benefit performance?

Watch any professional athlete perform an action in which the initiation of movement is under his or her control (a self-paced task), such as taking a free throw in basketball, hitting a golf ball, or stroking a cue ball in billiards. What you will see with most athletes is an activity that is repeated the same way, time and again, just prior to each action, called the preshot (or preperformance) routine. Golfers, in particular, have unique preshot routines. In his practice swing, Mike Weir takes the club back about halfway and then returns it to a position behind the ball, just before he takes his full swing. At the moment Jim Furyk looks to be about to take a putting stroke, he backs away to assess the line. Basketball players perform a similar activity at the free throw line. They may bounce the ball a certain number of times or roll it around in their hands, but again, they have their own particular way of preparing. These athletes may not make the putt or sink the free throw every time, but they always start with the same preshot routine, and they try to do it the same way every time.

This type of behavior leads to two questions that seem rather obvious: do preshot routines work, and if so, why? The first question has been addressed in a number of ways. Sport psychologists contend that a consistent preshot routine is one of the most important parts of becoming an elite golfer, and golfers often contend that their performance improved only after they had established a consistent preshot routine.

But how valid and reliable are these anecdotes? Experimental evidence using expert performers is difficult to gather because elite athletes (such as PGA touring professionals) are generally unwilling to depart from their preshot routines, even for a brief experiment. Using an alternative research strategy to investigate the effects of a preshot routine, researchers compared groups of subjects who had never played golf before with groups who played frequently but were not highly skilled. Two groups of golfers from each skill level completed a three-week training program in which they practiced a wedge shot from varying distances either with or without an accompanying preshot routine. Their results from two posttraining tests are illustrated in figure 6.1, along with those of a control group that did not participate in the training program. Clearly, both the golfers and nongolfers benefited from the three weeks of training, because they performed better on the posttests than the control groups did. More important, though, both the golfers and

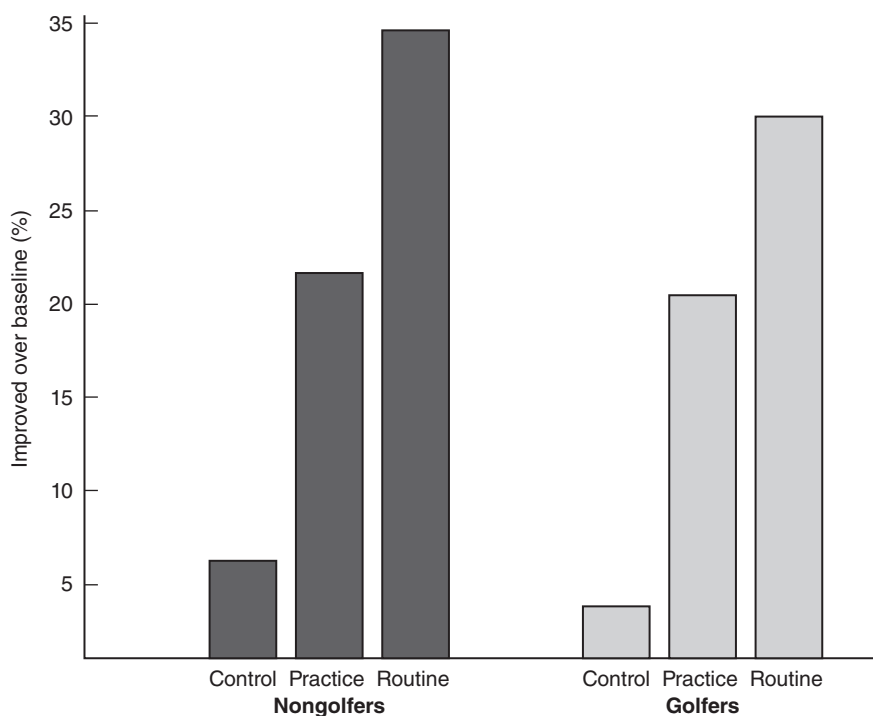


Figure 6.1 Effects of a preshot routine on performance improvement.

Graph prepared from data presented in McCann, Lavallee, and Lavallee (2001).

nongolfers obtained an advantage from using a consistent preshot routine along with their physical practice trials.

The specific reasons a preshot routine would benefit performance could be explained by a variety of theories. One is that a consistent routine instills confidence, and the positive outlook on an upcoming action enhances performance. An alternative suggestion is that the preshot routine helps the athlete to focus attention on the external factors most important to successful performance, such as specific visual cues in the environment. As discussed previously (see “The Toad and the Centipede”), an appropriate focus of attention has a critical impact on movement control.

Still another view relates the preshot routine to a curious finding in the motor control literature called warm-up decrement (see also “Shooting Two From the Line” in chapter 11). This refers to the drop in performance that occurs when a rest or delay period precedes the initiation of movement. The delay period could be relatively short (e.g., minutes), such as the delay between putting on two consecutive golf holes, or much longer, such as between situations in which a sand bunker shot is required (which might be several rounds of golf apart). Some believe that losing a specific mind-set for performing the task in a particular manner is responsible for the warm-up decrement. An appropriate preshot routine might provide an effective

means to overcome this lost mind-set. In so doing, the preshot routine counteracts the negative impact of warm-up decrement.

If distracted at the last moment, Annika Sorenstam (one of the best golfers in the history of the game) was known to stop her preshot routine, back away from the ball, put her club back in the bag, put the head cover back on the club, and then start the preshot routine all over again (Nilsson, Marriott, & Sirak, 2005). Although the research is not entirely clear about why the preshot routine is important in motor skill performance, it is almost certain that a consistent preshot routine has a beneficial impact on performance.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Define the term *preshot* (or *preperformance*) routine in your own words.
2. Describe what a successful preshot routine might entail.
3. Describe a specific pre-free throw routine of any NBA basketball player. Why do you believe he uses this particular routine?
4. Develop an experimental methodology for assessing the effects of a preshot routine. Assume that you could persuade a professional athlete to take part in your experiment.

NOTES

- The golf manufacturer Titleist has a gallery of videos showing the preshot routines of some professional golfers:

www.tinyurl.com/preshotroutines

- The term *warm-up*, as used in the term *warm-up decrement*, does not imply warming up in the sense of being physically ready for action. Rather, it refers to getting into the proper psychological frame of reference. Although not very recent, the following reference remains one of the best reviews of the research on this topic:

Adams, J.A. (1961). The second facet of forgetting: A review of warm-up decrement. *Psychological Bulletin*, 58, 257-273.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Hellström, J. (2009). Psychological hallmarks of skilled golfers. *Sports Medicine*, 39, 845-855.
- McCann, P., Lavalley, D., & Lavalley, R.M. (2001). The effect of pre-shot routines on golf wedge shot performance. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 1(5), 1-10.
- Nilsson, P., Marriott, L., & Sirak, R. (2005). *Every shot must have a purpose*. New York: Gotham Books.