

# Putting secrets of a Master

As putting coach to several US tour stars, including 2007 Masters champion Zach Johnson, Pat O'Brien is one of today's leading thinkers on putting instruction. He spoke to **Dominic Pedler** about his technique and the cult SeeMore putter, whose alignment system is integral to his philosophy

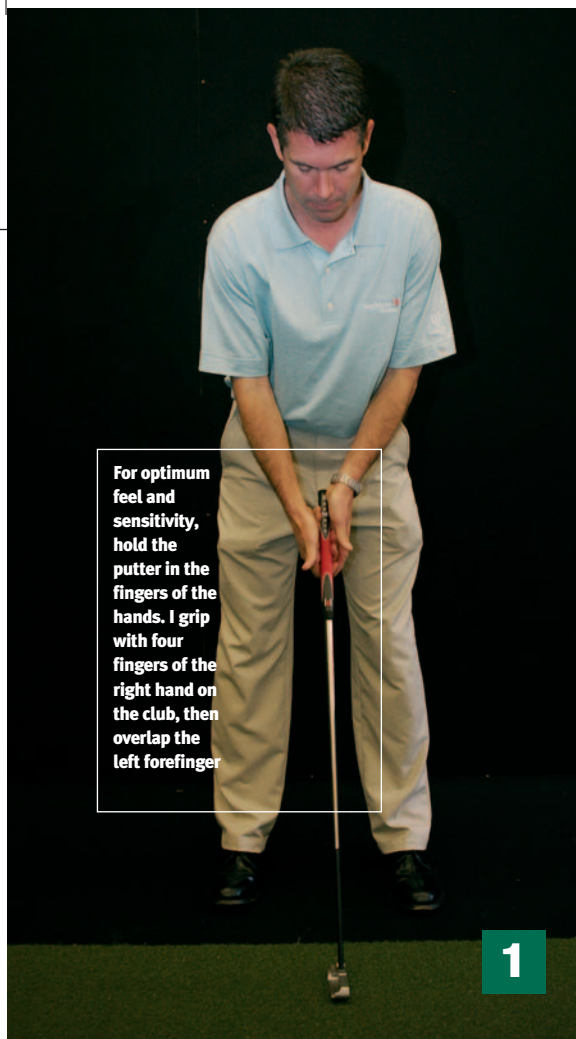


Zach Johnson's exceptional putting on Augusta National's treacherous greens last April was key to keeping Tiger Woods at bay and landing the green jacket. With just 27 putts in the final round – most of them rolling at perfect speed into the middle of the cup – attention soon turned to Johnson's intriguing SeeMore putter and his coach whose philosophy is built around the club's cryptic RifleScope alignment system.

Pat O'Brien had been a "decent" amateur before embarking on his putting mission that began when he became good friends with the late Payne Stewart who switched to the (then unknown) SeeMore putter in 1999.

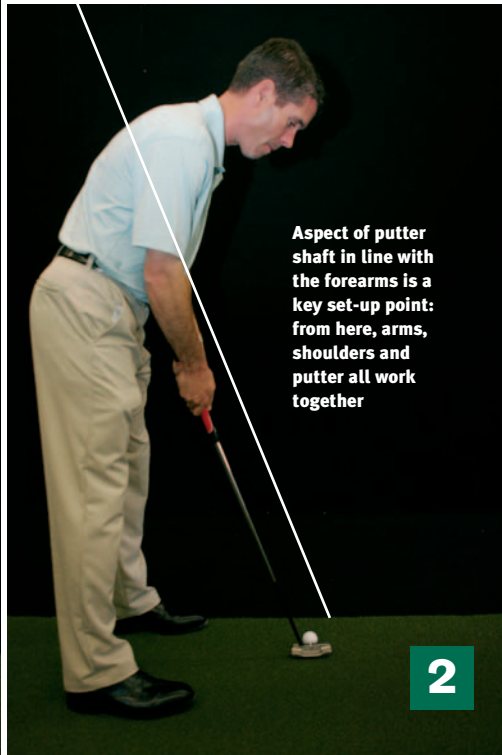
When Stewart promptly won the US Open and rose from 40th to 2nd in the PGA Tour putting stats, O'Brien was converted. He became a rep for SeeMore and spread the gospel of the perfect fundamentals its alignment system encourages to a receptive band of tour pros.

O'Brien has worked with Zach Johnson and Vaughn Taylor since their days on the Nationwide Tour, and today remains a consultant for the company which has been transformed in



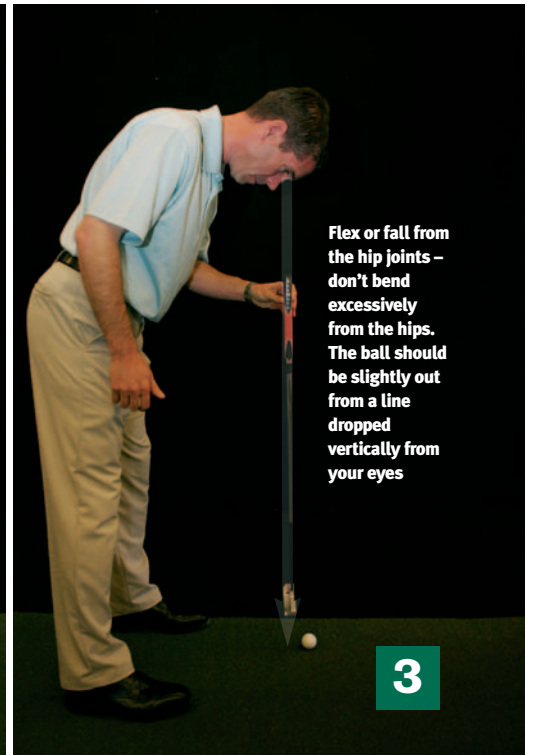
For optimum feel and sensitivity, hold the putter in the fingers of the hands. I grip with four fingers of the right hand on the club, then overlap the left forefinger

1



Aspect of putter shaft in line with the forearms is a key set-up point: from here, arms, shoulders and putter all work together

2



Flex or fall from the hip joints – don't bend excessively from the hips. The ball should be slightly out from a line dropped vertically from your eyes

3

recent years under new owners and which launches an expanded range of putters for 2008 (see page 98).

The SeeMore story is now steadily unfolding in Europe, with Mikko Ilonen playing the m1 model to victory at the Scandinavian Masters, last August, while the latest convert is Raphael Jacquelin, who came close with a SeeMore putter at the Indian Masters in February.

### THE PAT O' BRIEN PUTTING PHILOSOPHY

My basic approach is a belief that the grip, alignment, stance and posture are the four fundamentals of any golf swing – including putting. If these are correct, the putter will return to square at impact without any conscious manipulation of the clubhead during the stroke.

Let's deal with each element in turn.

### THE GRIP

One overriding principle is that the putter grip should be held primarily in the fingers to give you dexterity and feel – as with a surgeon who holds the scalpel in his fingers rather than his palm. It gives you total control of the club while also keeping the elbows and shoulders relaxed, which is vital for a smooth, tension-free stroke.

I grip with the four fingers of my right hand and then slide the last three fingers of my left hand in underneath, making sure the heel pad of the left hand is on top of the grip. My left-hand index finger then extends down the left side and touches the right index at the base of the grip. I demonstrate this (figure 1) with my thumbs are off the shaft to show the fingers. From there I just let the thumbs fall gently on to the club, with the right heel-pad fitting snugly against on the left-hand fingers. In this way I have neutralised the right hand, preventing it from becoming too dominant.

**Forearms:** My grip philosophy also includes the position of the forearms, which, with most golfers, are set either too strong (i.e. on top of the club) or too weak (underneath the club). As a drill, let your arms hang down vertically in front of you: this is the natural orientation that you can almost replicate when gripping the putter, allowing the arms to swing out of the way naturally, rotating on the correct path

and returning to square at impact.

If the forearms are too much on top, the putter will tend to go back outside the correct path, with the face shut, leading to pulled putts or other problems from the manipulation required to compensate.

### POSTURE

Putting posture is often overlooked – especially as regards the shoulders, which in my opinion should be naturally 'back and down' rather than rounded. Watch Tiger Woods when he putts – or even when he walks.

Many of us have rounded shoulders from sitting at computers, creating tension and a massive loss of mobility which forces the hands and arms to do all the work. You do not want that when putting. Small muscles will always break down under pressure. I call this "the inmates running the asylum"!

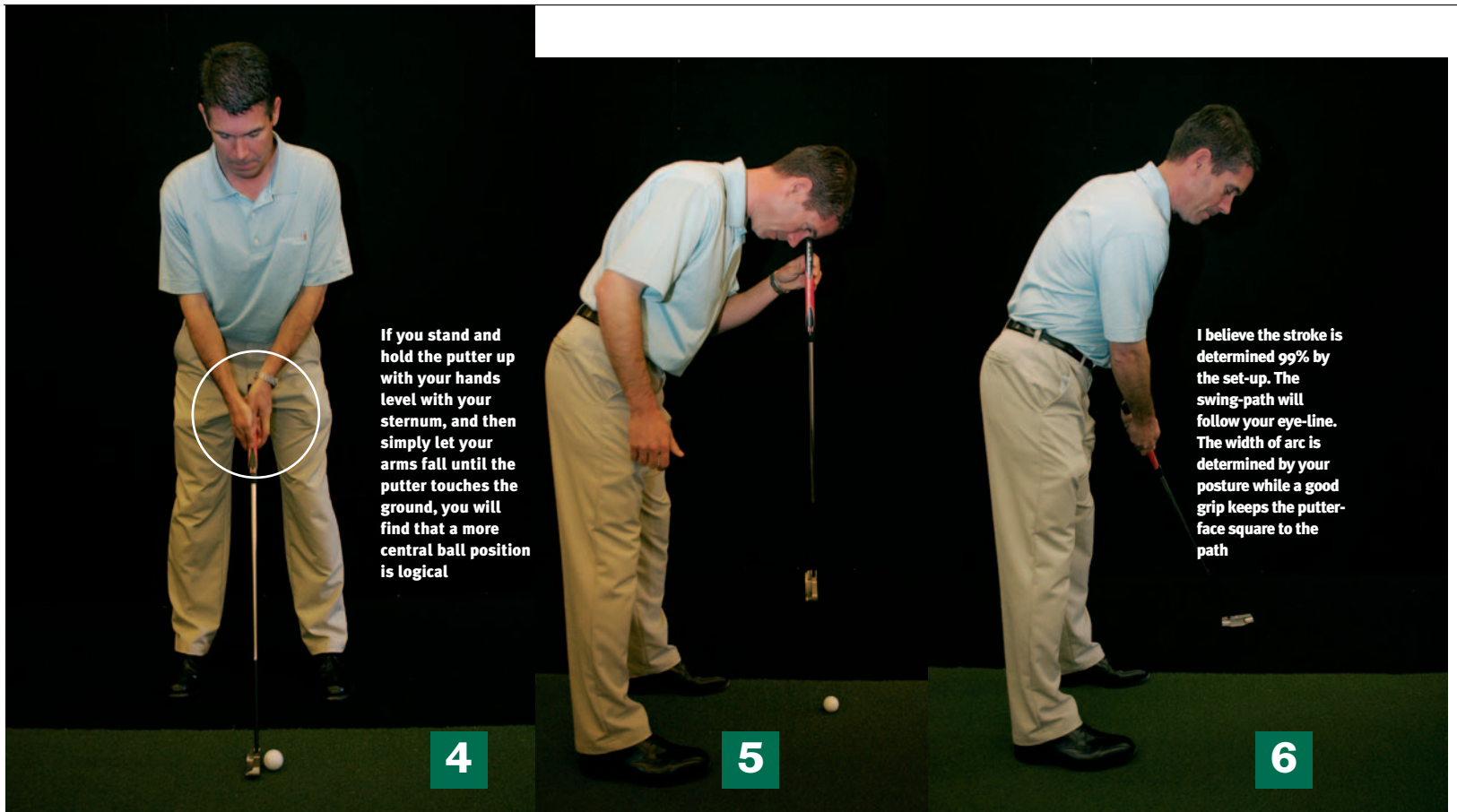
With this in mind, it's time to bend down to the golf ball. Many of us are told to bend from our waist and to get our eyes directly over the golf ball. This is a myth that has been around for too long, as the angles you create prompt the putter to go back steep and shut.

My approach is to flex or 'fall' from the hip joints, effectively pushing the hips back slightly, over the heels in an athletic, balanced posture. The ball should now be slightly out (further away) from the point vertically down from the eyes and this gives your arms much more room to swing freely on a natural arc.

### BALL POSITION

One myth is that the ball should be aligned quite forward in the stance – typically in line with the left heel (assuming the left foot is slightly open), with the head behind the ball (supposedly helping us to look down the path of the putt). I discourage this as, when the hands are ahead, it encourages the shoulders to open, requiring a manipulation to correct at impact.

My ball position is far more central. To envisage it, start by standing straight up and holding the putter out in front of you, at 90 degrees. If your hands are level with your sternum, your shoulders must be square. If you then 'fall' from the hips (as described earlier) the putter touches the ground in the middle of your stance, such that the golf ball itself is only ►



If you stand and hold the putter up with your hands level with your sternum, and then simply let your arms fall until the putter touches the ground, you will find that a more central ball position is logical

I believe the stroke is determined 99% by the set-up. The swing-path will follow your eye-line. The width of arc is determined by your posture while a good grip keeps the putter-face square to the path

slightly to the left of centre, with the grip level with a line just to the left of your trouser zip.

The SeeMore putter, with its Riflescope technology, naturally encourages this set-up and provides the instant feedback to confirm it.

**ALIGNMENT**

Alignment is not just about an efficient set-up, it is also about how you look at the target so that you truly know where you are aiming.

The problem is that most golfers tilt their spine to the right – which may be may good for other golf shots, but not for

putting. When you drop that right shoulder, you look at the target with your head and eyes pointing to the right, encouraging the swingpath to follow that same eyeline. This can be exacerbated for right-eye dominant golfers.

The SeeMore putter encourages you to straighten the spine and to simply 'swivel' your head down the target line. If you have correctly eclipsed the red dot, so that all you see is the shaft directly between the two white lines, it means that your nose is effectively straight down the line of the shaft. Assuming the shaft is vertical, you should then be correctly aligned, having both your eyes and shoulders square to the face of the putter.



After the grip, alignment is the biggest change I make with people. It may feel strange at first, but when you watch yourself on a video it will look fine.

I strongly recommend practising these basic principles away from the golf course – perhaps check your lines on the kitchen floor tiles or in the mirror. This will short-cut the process so that the fundamentals are second nature, allowing you to focus on reading the green and aiming accurately at the target when you get to the golf course.

For more information and details on Pat's DVD, visit: [www.patobrienputting.com](http://www.patobrienputting.com)

#### Q&A

**Golf International:** *How did Payne Stewart transform his putting so effectively – and so quickly – with a SeeMore back in 1999.*

**Pat O'Brien:** At the AT&T National Pro-Am at Pebble Beach that year, he was tested for alignment and found to be consistently aiming the putter some four inches to the right of the target – even for a straight eight-footer – and compensating by pulling the stroke. That caught his attention. He tried the SeeMore which required him to position the ball much further back in his stance. He won the tournament that week and the rest is history.

**GI:** *What are the main things you worked on with Zach Johnson leading up to his 2007 Masters victory?*

**POB:** We started working full time in 2002 on many areas, including his alignment, posture and set-up to the ball. His grip we left alone. This took about a year to implement and since then it has been more maintenance of his body lines – in particular checking his tendency to get too closed. Zach can now fix many things himself and I'm there as confirmation, and for the confidence this provides.

**GI:** *But Zach's seemingly very strong grip is considerably different from the one you recommend. How do you reconcile this?*

**POB:** He is the exception that proves the rule! But actually there is a consistency in the overall set-up. He holds the grip very much in his left palm and gets his right hand very strong and sets his wrist back a bit. It looks very unorthodox but it works for him because, crucially, both his forearms are in the natural position I recommend which allows him to consistently return the putter face to square.

**GI:** *You talk in detail about set-up fundamentals but not much about the actual stroke. Should golfers not focus consciously on their swing path?*

**POB:** I believe 99% of the stroke is taken care of by the set-up. If you have the correct fundamentals you don't need to dwell on the stroke. The swing-path will follow the eye-line, the correct width of the arc is dictated by the posture while the correct grip and forearm position allow the putter-face to stay square to that arc.

**GI:** *Your philosophy seems clearly designed to promote a stroke with a natural arc, rather than a 'straight-back and straight-through' motion.*

**POB:** I definitely believe the putter should swing on an arc – but it is not a manipulated arc; it happens naturally. If we stood on the target line, directly behind the ball, as we do in pool or darts, then 'straight-back-straight-through' works fine. But because we stand at the side, at some point when you take the club back there has to be an arc. Obviously for a three-footer the putter does swing fairly straight back and through. But when you take it straight back on a 30-foot putt, that's manipulation which is not natural. ▶

## PAT'S INSTANT TIPS

During his recent UK visit, Pat O'Brien made a presentation of his putting philosophy to a number of UK club pros and SeeMore putter reps. He also took time-out to present SeeMore putters to each of the *Golf International* competition winners and cast his eye over their technique.

#### KATIE BURMAN, HANDICAP 2, JOHN O'GAUNT, BEDS ▶

Katie has a very good grip and alignment, though needs to work a bit more on her posture. In particular, bending from the hip joints rather than from the waist will let her hands and arms fall more naturally, and provide freedom to release the putter.

#### JUSTIN PHELPS, HANDICAP PLUS 2, RUISLIP, MIDDX ▼

Justin's eyes are directly over the ball at address and I am encouraging him to stand taller and slightly further away from the ball. Softening the forearms will also let them rotate more freely and allow the clubhead to release more fluently.



#### ALISTAIR MOORHOUSE, ▼ HANDICAP 22, BENTON HALL GC, ESSEX

Alistair has been using a cross-hand grip, but I am encouraging him to experiment with my grip. In particular, getting the left hand heel pad on top of the grip will help prevent the face from shutting while also making the grip feel more solid. Standing further away from the ball will help him use the shoulders more for a smoother stroke.

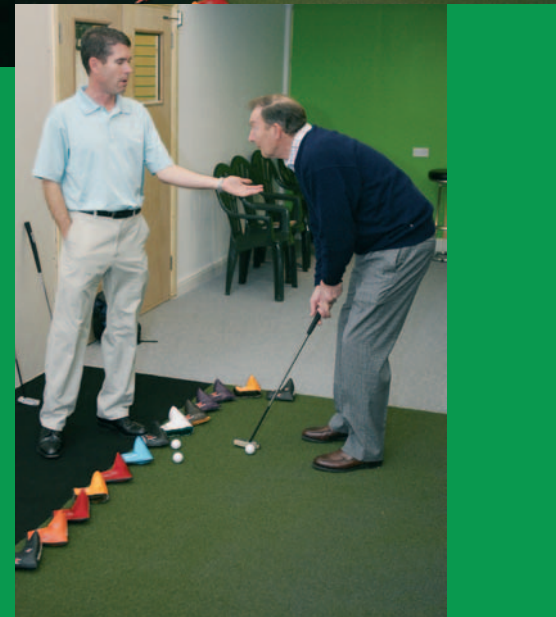


#### FRANK MASON, HANDICAP 20, ▲ FOUR MARKS GC, ALTON, HANTS

Frank's grip is a bit too strong; gripping it more in the fingers will help him feel the weight of the putter-head and reduce the tension in both the hands and the forearms. A lighter, more neutral grip will, in turn, allow the forearms to swing out of the way on the takeaway.

#### ALEC BOWEN, HANDICAP 13, ▶ NORTHAMPTON GC, NORTHANTS

Alec was getting too crouched over the ball which was restricting the freedom of movement of his arms. He needs to work a bit more on his posture: standing taller with more space between his arms and his body to take the wrist- and hand action out of the equation.





**Equipment editor Dominic Pedler picks the brains of the man who helped both Payne Stewart and Zach Johnson become major champions**

**GI:** So presumably you are against face-balanced putters that encourage the heel and toe of the putter to swing in parallel down the target line?

**POB:** Yes. As with irons, I believe a putter should have 'toe hang', which both complements and encourages a natural arc. You don't see really good putters play with a face-balanced – or even a very high-MOI – model.

**GI:** For 2008 SeeMore has the new Whistler 'w' offset option. Surely the purist would say that this compensates for an inappropriate position of the hands relative to the ball at address?

**POB:** It's a way of bringing the SeeMore concept to more golfers, many of whom are used to looking at some sort of offset. I'm OK with it as the hands will only be very slightly ahead. Though, ideally, once these golfers begin to appreciate the philosophy, they will accept the purity of a straight putter.



**SeeMore putters come in a range of head shapes; when the putter-face is correctly aligned, the red dot is not visible to the player.**

**GI:** It is possible to 'cheat' SeeMore's RifleScope system and eclipse the red dot without being in the correct position.

**POB:** Yes, you can drift the head back, and move the hands and ball back in the stance and still cover the red dot. But not if the shaft is truly vertical as it should be. It's important to be aware of that.

**GI:** Zach Johnson starts his takeaway very soon after that final look at the ball. Is this routine part of your philosophy?

**POB:** If you stand over the ball for more than one second, you start thinking and questioning your set-up. Static tension takes over and it's hard to initiate movement. Once you trust your alignment, you don't need to waste time with the fundamentals. But it also fits in with Zach's personality. He's a fast player and a fast walker. Vaughn Taylor takes a bit more time.

**GI:** How about initiating the stroke with a 'forward press'?

**POB:** No, I am very much against the forward press. It changes everything, especially the angle of the hands which then steepens the effective loft. It also tightens up the left side. In subconsciously trying to fix these things, most players typically hit 'up' on the putt too much.

**GI:** Are there any particular custom-fitting implications of your putting philosophy?

**POB:** I would encourage all golfers to get carefully fitted, especially for shaft length and lie angle. I see too many players with shafts that are too short and lies that are too upright. This ties in with my thoughts on posture and having the ball slightly further away from the vertical line down from your eyes. The whole point is to create enough room to swing freely. Most golfers need shafts between 34 and 36 inches long, with lie angles between 68 and 72 degrees. But there are always exceptions. ●



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**MORE FROM SEEMORE**

The SeeMore putter was initially regarded as a training putter due to the defining 'red dot' that is effectively eclipsed behind the shaft when the golfer is in the correct address position, in terms of the shoulders, hands and arms being square to the clubface.

This USP has evolved into the RifleScope system of the latest models, where the red dot is supplemented by a pair of white lines between which the golfer 'frames' the shaft, in conjunction with a traditional alignment marking

down the target line (hence the cross-hair, 'rifle scope' concept).

Initially available in the FGP black blade model made famous by Payne Stewart, the system is now offered in a growing range of 100% milled models. As well as the mFGP, our favourites include the classic-shaped heel-and-toe weighted m1 and m3, and the m3 and m5 flanged mallets.

Guide: £199 for all models.  
Contact: 01432 880510  
www.seemoregolf.co.uk