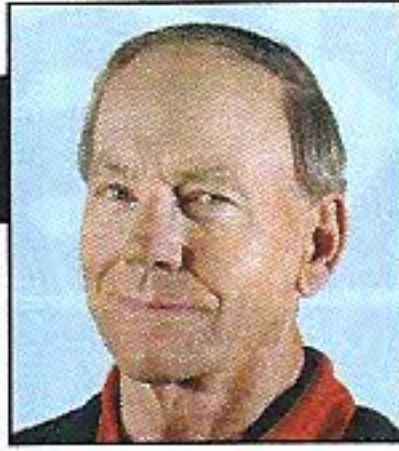


JAMES ACHENBACH

jachenbach@golfweek.com



A scientific approach to putting

Palm Desert, Calif.

Is putting an art or a science?

Maybe both.

Tom Stickney II is a teaching professional who splits his year between The Club at Cordillera near Vail, Colo., and Bighorn Golf Club in the California desert. Stickney is passionate about golf – and putting – so he decided essentially to become a one-man encyclopedia on the art and craft of putting.

In the world according to Stickney, “Golf has always been a blend of art and science, although from now on, it’s probably going to be 80 percent science and 20 percent art.”

It is Stickney’s self-proclaimed mission to analyze and educate his students, relying heavily on science and the resulting measurement devices that are rapidly becoming a pillar of modern golf instruction.

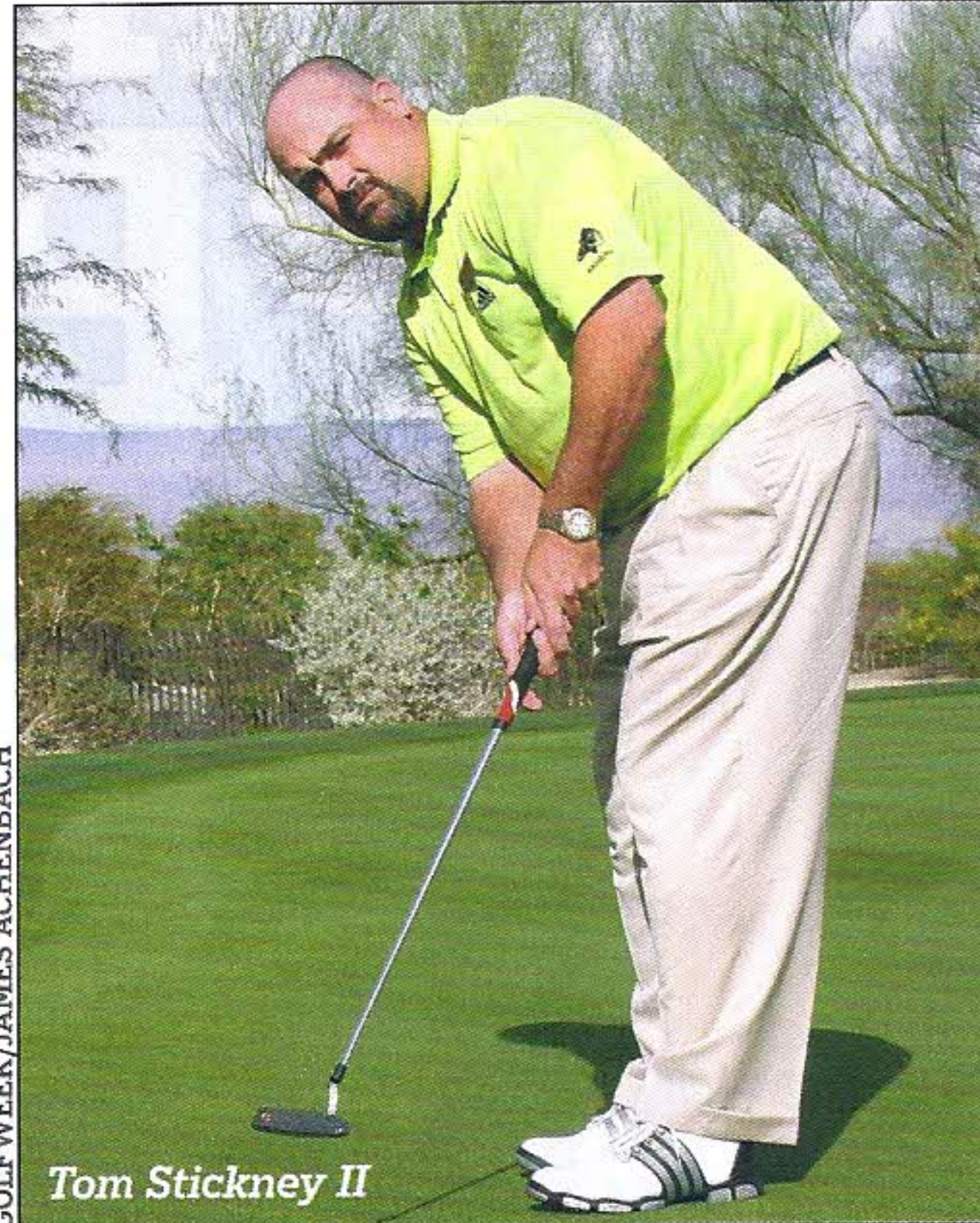
He says, without hesitation, that “99 percent of all golfers have putters that don’t fit. In today’s world, with all the science available, that’s crazy. It’s like begging for three-putts.”

Stickney is a free-wheeling, straight-talking, truth-dealing golf professional.

>> “I love the putting gurus,” Stickney says. “I love Dave Pelz and Stan Utlej and Dave Stockton. They are very confident about putting. They can do things most humans cannot do. They teach instinctually. They teach a model stroke. But my question remains the same: Why trust instinct when there is science available?”

>> “If you follow one of the gurus, you’d better be 100 percent dedicated. You cannot mix and match. You cannot take a little bit of Pelz and a little bit of Utlej. It doesn’t work.”

>> “Every golfer needs to find the right putter to match his or her style of putting. Anybody who believes in square-to-square putting is a candidate for more of a face-balanced putter. Anybody who believes in an open-and-shut stroke should look at putters with



GOLFWEEK/JAMES ACHENBACH

Tom Stickney II

toe hang. Face-balanced putters want to stay square, while toe-hang putters want to slam shut.”

>> “Putters need to be fit to a golfer’s tendencies. Most players who tend to flip at the ball are probably never going to be able to change. Once they get on the course, they always seem to flip at it. They need a putter with less loft, because they increase the effective loft by flipping at it.”

>> “We need to pay more attention to proper balance during the putting stroke. When a putter is too long or too short, for example, the center of gravity starts creeping too much toward the toes or heels. The body will sway one way or the other, because it wants to make sure you don’t fall on your nose. Controlling your (center of gravity) is a huge fundamental, but you never hear anybody talk about it.”

>> “Everybody has idiosyncrasies. Brad Faxon is known as one of the best putters in the world, but he almost always lines up 2.2 degrees to the right. He is more offline at address than most of the Tour pros, but he compensates with his path (during the stroke). When he makes contact, the ball leaves the blade perfectly.

“Stan Utlej sets up his putter with

5 degrees of loft. Why? When we measured him, he delofted the blade 4.7 degrees. He knows what works for him. All of us should allow our idiosyncrasies to work for us.”

>> “Don’t listen to your fellow amateurs. They all have ideas about what you should do to putt better. Invariably they talk about the path of the putter. Yet 83 percent of ball error can be attributed to where the putter points when the ball leaves the blade. The path is only 17 percent.”

To study putting, Stickney (www.tomstickneygolf.com) uses machines that measure body movement, CG positioning, ball roll and performance, and the parameters of the stroke.

Putting-stroke analysis comes from the Science and Motion Lab (SAM), which can be used indoors or outdoors.

“I have my students practice with the SAM,” Stickney says, “because it gives them proper feedback – unlike the putting green, where a miss and a make are not the optimal feedback.”

Tiger Woods has a SAM unit, which costs about \$7,000, although this is supposed to be a secret. (Remember, you didn’t hear it here.)

Former Tour player Howard Twitty has teamed with Dr. Lanny Johnson, a noted orthopedic surgeon in Michigan, to study the putting strokes of touring pros using the SAM lab. The two are collaborating on an upcoming book.

Putting fanatics such as Stickney, Twitty and Johnson have predicted a putting revolution based on science. The SAM unit measures factors such as alignment, overall putter path, approach to the ball, impact location, amount of blade rotation, length of stroke, acceleration, deceleration and tempo.

“Science is no secret,” Stickney says. “Older golfers may not know about it, but it’s starting to make a real impact on younger golfers. And they make more putts because of it.” ○