

Anyone Know the Heimlich?

By: Nathan Crace Date: November 18, 2002

In case you haven't seen the December 2002 issue of *Golf Magazine* yet, be sure to pick up a copy. There's a very interesting article in there about choking: why we do it and how to stop. It comes complete with a bunch of helpful lists such as "Most Common Chokes," "How to Spot a Choke," and "How to Chokeproof Your Game." My favorite part, however, is the list of the "Top 10 Chokes in Majors." Not to be sadistic, but these folks will never live these down if they live to be 237. So since we're not telling them anything their grandchildren won't, let's take a closer look, shall we?

One of the first things I noticed about the list was that half of them occurred since 1989 and all except two were since the 1961 Masters. We'll let Sam Snead slide for his triple bogey on the final hole of the 1939 U.S. Open. He only needed par to win, but let's be honest: it was 63 years ago! He didn't have the benefit of electronic scoreboards throughout the course and, consequently, not knowing where he stood he gambled on the final hole. So that leaves us with nine to go. Of course, any list of choking and/or just plain bad luck in Majors has the obligatory Norman factor. And Greg's collapse in the 1996 Masters is indeed on their list—number one in fact. But Norman's curse in Majors is well documented and, in my opinion, played out. So let's cut the guy a break and take a look at the others. In the interest of time, I'll touch on my favorites from the list, in no particular order.

In the unfortunate circumstance that earned him the unfair nickname Scott "Choke," we have Scott Hoch's brain cramp on the first playoff hole of the 1989 Masters. I still remember seeing it live on television and just sitting there, waiting for him to reach over with his putter, rake the ball back to him and getting a "do-over." Did that just happen? From two feet? Twenty-four inches? How many people in your foursome would even make you putt one from that close? No one will ever forget that putt unless Hoch wins 23 Majors in the remainder of his career. Who are we kidding—he'll always be haunted by it.

Another putting nightmare: Retief Goosen's debacle on the final hole of the 2001 U.S. Open. Three putts from 12 feet on the final hole of regulation dropped the South African into a playoff—one he eventually went on the win. Otherwise his career would be forever seen in a different light (see Scott Hoch above). But what was sooooo scary about Goosen's choke was that after two putts from 12 feet, he still had to hole one from a hair over three feet to make the playoff! Talk about unnerving. But let's not forget about Stewart Cink. He didn't make *Golf Magazine's* list, but in hindsight, his 15-footer on 18 that day would have won him his first Major. Instead, he left himself a two-footer; which he consequently stabbed by the hole and carded a three putt himself to miss the playoff between Goosen and Mark Brooks on Monday. In the end, Goosen got what amounted to the Mother of all mulligans and won the Open in an 18-hole playoff with a round of 70 and, to his credit, some hot putting.

T.C. "Two Chip" Chen. This was another one of those things you see on television and think to yourself, "Did I just see what I saw?" Who can forget the ball—in mid air—careening off his wedge for a second time from just off the edge of the green in the 1985 U.S. Open? How many of you tried to do it yourself on the practice green at your course the next day? It's hard enough to do it when you try to do it, let alone a guy good enough to be winning the Open by four strokes on Sunday. His eventual meltdown would be pretty much the last we heard of Mr. Chen.

That brings us to my all-time "favorite." Jean Van de Velde and the 1999 British Open. It seems like only yesterday the Frenchman was standing up to his shins in the cold water of the hazard that crisscrosses the 72nd hole at Carnoustie. It was painful to watch as the throngs of spectators—both on the course and at home—begged him to stop and just make a double! It was almost as painful as watching hip replacement surgery on the Discovery Channel. The type of thing you don't really want to watch, but your animal instincts get the better of you and you watch it anyway. Hip replacement surgery seems to me to be more akin to carpentry than surgery, and Van de Velde's trials and tribulations at the 1999 British Open were more like a root canal or the torture technique where they stick bamboo shoots under your fingernails. Personally, I blame Jean's caddy to some degree. When your player needs nothing more than a double to win the British Open, throw away the driver. For that matter, throw away everything except a 7-iron and a putter. He could've easily made a bogey with that and probably a par. Of course, if it were that easy to avoid, there probably wouldn't be an article about it in *Golf Magazine*.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect/land planner and a freelance writer whose "Lipouts" column is based, in part, on topics submitted to the author by readers. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.