



Golf

AimPoint developer banks on the physics of putting

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Mark Sweeney was just another fan on his couch when he was watching the British Open seven years ago. On one particular hole, some of the best players in the world kept making the wrong read on the same putt. They missed it every time, and this amused Sweeney.

It also gave him the idea that would become a welcome addition to televised golf and a possible revolutionary way to approach one of the game's most confounding disciplines: putting.

Sweeney developed AimPoint, the program that is probably known best as "that line" on the Golf Channel's PGA Tour broadcasts. The line — this year it's green and sponsored by Fidelity — is superimposed over a green to show how much break a golfer needs to read to make a putt.

Since the easy putts wouldn't be fun to show, there is often a wicked bend to the putt, and the player usually misfires, giving us at home the chance to snicker.

Since its debut in 2007, the Emmy Award-winning line has been inserted more than 1,500 times into broadcasts.

"If (the players) curse it, they do it behind my back," Sweeney said with a laugh in a phone conversation last week from his home in Orlando, Fla.

More and more, Sweeney is hearing less skepticism and more questions from pros who are curious about what makes AimPoint so good it can predict the break of putts with about 98 percent accuracy. More and more, the golfers are coming around to Sweeney's

notion that putting is neither magical nor mysterious.

“The funny thing about this is that at about the time I developed AimPoint, the Mars Lander was roving around on Mars,” Sweeney said. “My thought was, ‘If we can have a remote-control robot on Mars, we can figure out how a ball rolls on a semi-flat surface.’

“It’s basic physics,” he added. “It’s a ball rolling on a green. It can’t be that complicated.”

Sweeney, 42, whose computer programming ability has melded nicely with his MBA from Wharton, developed a system that creates a 3-D model of a green and applies physics to predict the amount of break from anywhere on the putting surface. The program’s accuracy surprised even its creator, but even so, it turned out to be an extremely tough sell to the networks, commentators and players.

“I was probably days within giving up on it,” Sweeney said. “I knew it worked; it was a matter of getting the networks to trust it. So many people said I could not possibly predict what a putt does. For people who have been playing the game for 30 or 40 years, there was a big mental component to it. It was hard to accept the fact you can’t fight physics.”

Getting the TV gig was great, but Sweeney realized there was a far more beneficial application for all golfers. So over the past couple of years, he developed an AimPoint teaching method that applies his mathematics to all greens, depending on their Stimpmeter speed and slope.

Sweeney created an AimChart that predicts how much a putt will break depending on where a golfer’s ball sits in relation to the lowest or highest part of the green. For example: On a green with a Stimpmeter reading of 9 and a slope of 3 percent (considered steep), a 10-foot putt will break 14 inches from the 3 or 9 o’clock positions. A 20-foot putt from the same spot will break 33 inches.

Sound complicated? It becomes less so during the three-hour clinics developed by Sweeney and his disciples.

On a recent afternoon at Encinitas Ranch, about a dozen students who paid \$150 each watched as certified AimPoint instructor Jason Goldsmith instructed them on the intricacies of the method, which includes consulting a laminated flip book. It took the group some practice, but as time wore on, the most common comment heard was “Wow, this really does work!”

“The first time I saw it, I knew it was going to change golf; my reaction was that this is absolutely amazing,” said Goldsmith, a San Diegan who has taught more than 35 clinics since January.

Goldsmith, 41, is one of a handful of instructors in the country who teaches AimPoint

while also offering fittings for Edel putters. Using the SAM PuttLab video technology and a cart full of various shafts, hosels, heads and face inserts that are interchangeable within minutes, Goldsmith can fit a player into 30 million combinations of Edel putters, which range from \$375 to \$800.

Goldsmith's goal is not to change a player's basic stroke or vision — because those are difficult to alter — but to provide a putter that allows each individual to aim better.

To make AimPoint a true revolution, Sweeney will need to get big-name tour players on board. He has begun working with three-time major winner Pádraig Harrington, who has ranked near or at the top in putting statistics in his last several starts.

The poster boy for AimPoint's potential is Scott McCarron. The Californian dived headlong into using the system after ranking 156th in total putting on the PGA Tour in 2008. By the end of 2009, McCarron had shot up to 25th.

Still, it's a tough sell for some, who would rather blame poor results on anything but physics.

“It's such a huge, huge part of the game, and people don't have to struggle with it all of their lives,” Sweeney said. “There are a lot of fantastic ball strikers on the tours who can't make a 15-foot putt to save their life. They never get over the hump. Putting can be the easiest thing to get good at, once you figure out it's predictable.”

The next AimPoint/Edel clinic is May 21 at Encinitas Ranch.

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