

ON THE PULSE

A round of golf can be extremely stressful, from worrying about that first tee shot to nerve-tingling short putts. But all that anxiety could soon be a thing of the past. There's a new breathing technique Tour pros are using to calm their nerves. And now their secret is out...

WORDS BY CARLY CUMMINS PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGUS MURRAY, GETTY

When Nick Dougherty took delivery of a special heart rate monitor called the emWave in May this year, little did he know the effect it would have on his career. Dougherty, part of the Brit pack of young European Tour players, had heard that Ian Woosnam had used one to help calm his nerves during his Ryder Cup captaincy, and Dougherty was dying to give it a try.

The 25-year-old, who admits the last 12 months have been dotted with disappointing near misses (he led in both the Singapore Masters and the Italian Open but fell away in the final rounds) wanted a simple solution to help control his nerves under pressure. Woosie assured him the HeartMath technique the emWave uses offered the answer.

Three weeks later Dougherty was the first-round leader of the US Open. When asked how he'd handle the pressures of playing alongside world number one Tiger Woods, he told a Sky Sports commentator: "I feel confident and calm. It's all thanks to HeartMath." Dougherty went on to finish tied seventh – his best ever finish in a Major.

So just how does this mysterious HeartMath technique work? In basic terms it's simply a form of controlled breathing that helps to steady your heart rhythms. Used in conjunction with positive feeling, a steady – or 'coherent' – heartbeat helps to activate the part of the brain responsible for producing the hormones that improve health, well-being and performance. There's plenty of scientific evidence to prove that a state of coherence helps to reduce stressful emotions such as tension, anxiety, irritation and anger. If you can control your heartbeat on the golf course, you'll think sharper, swing better and feel more confident.

"It didn't take me long to learn the technique," Dougherty explains. "It's very simple really. I have a portable heartbeat monitor, which plugs into a

laptop and monitors the beat. I then use a breathing technique to lower my heart rate to a sustainable and steady beat where I feel more focused and confident."

It was Dougherty's manager, Brendan Taylor, who prompted him to try HeartMath after seeing the transformation it had made to Ian Woosnam's lifestyle. "Woosie used to suffer with terrible jet-lag and hadn't had a decent night's sleep in 10 years," recalls Taylor. "After using the emWave, in the space of just a few days he was sleeping like a baby for nine hours a night and seemed to have a renewed confidence in his game. It was amazing."

Taylor believes HeartMath is the best anxiety-busting technique he's ever seen a Tour player test. "The guys are constantly bombarded with people telling them to try this and that, but I've never seen anything quite as effective as HeartMath. Woosie goes into what's called a 'lock-in' four times a week in his hotel room, shutting off all communication and just listening to some relaxing music while doing breathing exercises. It's like going to the gym, except this workout is for the mind. You emerge focused, positive and energised."

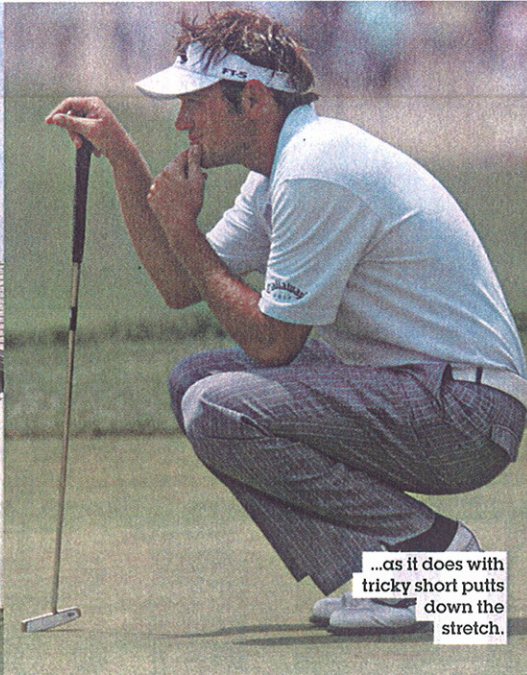
Woosie gave an emWave to each of his European Ryder Cup team players at the K Club and believes the HeartMath technique helped the whole team to stay in a positive frame of mind. "I didn't force it on them, I just said, 'here's a little thing I've been using that works wonders for me, try it if you like,'" he recalls.

"The HeartMath techniques have made a huge difference to me. I am sleeping better and feel calmer in stressful situations. It has been remarkably easy to learn and to put in to practise. Now I can take the pressure out, it helps me get into the zone, as we players say, and sustain the right frame of mind. That gives me the edge. I just wish I had known about HeartMath earlier in my career." »

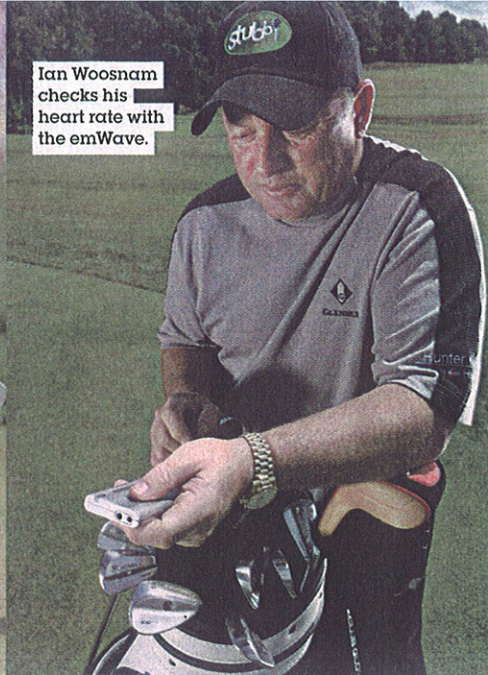
STRESS FACTOR



Adrenaline rush on the first tee sends Nick Dougherty's heart rate soaring...



...as it does with tricky short putts down the stretch.



Ian Woosnam checks his heart rate with the emWave.

Chris Sawicki, managing director of Hunter Kane, the resource management company who introduced HeartMath to the UK in the late 1990s, says the benefits of this simple technique are widespread: "HeartMath is being used in every walk of life – in sport, in business, in education, in the health service – you name it.

"It's all about quality of life. HeartMath helps you sleep better, focus better, reduces stress, enhances energy and generally leaves you feeling good. We all have low levels of positive hormones (DHEA) in our bodies and high levels of the stress hormone (cortisol). HeartMath helps to bring these back into balance.

"It's very much like switching on a computer. You learn a simple breathing technique that, in combination with positive feelings, triggers an electrical signal to be sent from the heart to the brain telling it to release those positive hormones. As the beat becomes rhythmical, the body chemistry changes and you relax."

Sawicki says the techniques have a dual benefit for golfers. "They can be used to counteract the effects of tension or negative emotions on the course, such as the golfer facing a pressure putt," he explains. "They also provide long-term benefits through rebuilding the body's natural energy reserves. This results in substantially

'It's all about quality of life. HeartMath helps you focus better and reduces stress'

enhanced feelings of well-being, energy and confidence, as well as improved personal health throughout the duration of a golfer's career."

The question is, how much difference can the techniques make to a typical golfer like you? To find out, TG's Instruction Editor, Carly Cummins, put HeartMath through its paces...

The test

"I've always been an anxious player, aware of other golfers watching me, worried about the trouble on a hole, tense when I'm putting together a good score and twitchy over those testing short putts. I've had plenty of advice from sports psychologists over the years about how to keep those emotions under wraps – stay in the present and not worry about the outcome of my shots – but when it comes to the crunch, positive thoughts can be pretty hard to put into practice.

"When I heard about the HeartMath technique I was intrigued. Could a few simple breathing exercises really keep those feelings of anxiety under wraps?

HeartMath facts

Improvements in all cases tested

Unlike many services and products making similar claims, HeartMath has a solid scientific basis and has been tested by thousands of different people, including sports men and women, office workers, schoolchildren and hospital patients. In all cases, the HeartMath techniques have been shown to significantly improve performance, reduce stress levels and enhance productivity. Here are just a few of the proven benefits:

Office workers

- ★ Reduction from 53% to 29% in tiredness.
- ★ Reduction from 51% to 10% in sleeplessness.
- ★ Reduction in stress by up to 65%.
- ★ Reduction from 65% to 8% in anxiety.
- ★ 50% improvement in workers' efficiency and productivity.
- ★ Reduction on staff turnover from 28% to 5.9%.

Secondary school pupils

- ★ 52% increase in maths exam passes.
- ★ 77% increase in reading proficiency.
- ★ 20% increase in mental clarity.

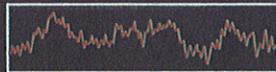
Health benefits

- ★ Reductions in obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's and HIV-related disease progression.

The beat on Tour...

Ever wondered how much stress a round of golf places on your heart? Back in the mid-1990s a team of experts from the European Tour's Red Bull physio unit conducted a study into the heart rates of six European Tour golfers in a tournament pressure situation. The golfing guinea pigs wore Polar Heart rate monitors on their chests. The monitors tracked their heartbeat variations during the course of their game and the data was downloaded at the end of the round.

All the players had a video camera following them to time code activity, so once the data had been downloaded a team of experts could correlate patterns in heart activity to particular instances on the golf course. Jonathan Shrewsbury was one of the experts involved in the post-round analysis of the heart rate data. Here he explains what the results showed.



Stressed: If your mind is in a negative emotional state, your heartbeat pattern will be jagged and irregular.



Relaxed and focused: As your emotions change to positive, your pattern becomes smoother.



On the first tee 110bpm

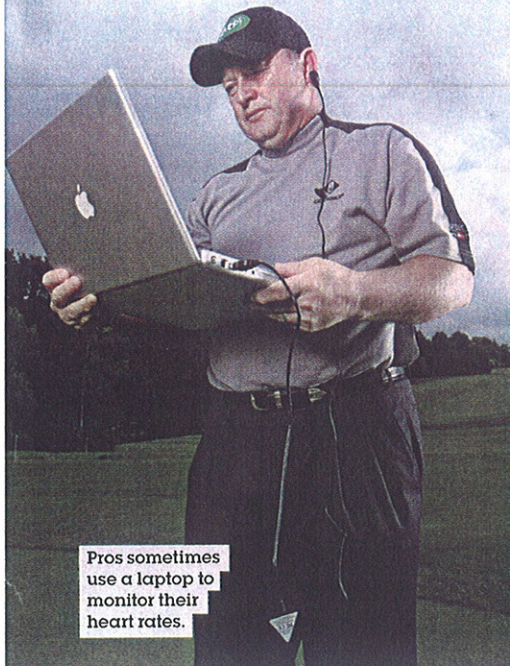
"The first noticeable spike in heart rate occurred as they prepared to hit their first tee shot. The adrenaline rush of walking on to the tee, pulling the driver out of the bag and getting their game under way exerted a lot of pressure on their hearts."

Resting heart rate 70bpm

"Your resting heartbeat range can be anything from as low as 50 in a really fit, young person, to as high as 90 in an unfit person. Our golfers averaged around the 60-70bpm range – the perfect starting point for their game."

Walking between shots 90bpm

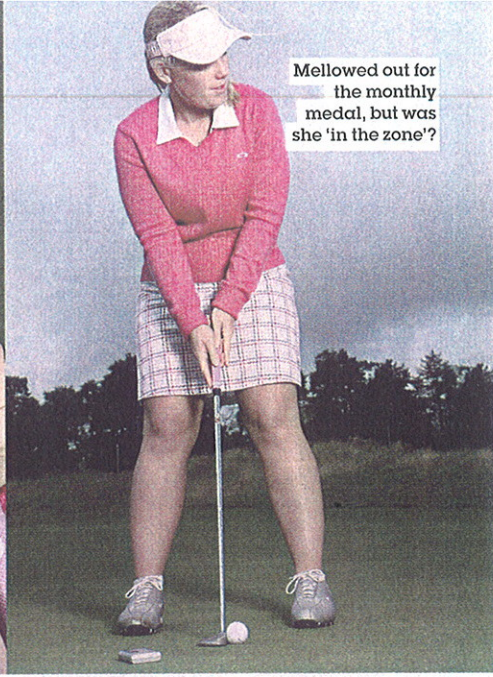
"The heartbeat generally dropped back down to a steady pattern as the players walked between shots. This was a sign that the players were able to put the pressure of the previous shot out of their mind and relax during their round."



Pros sometimes use a laptop to monitor their heart rates.



TG's Carly sets off the breathing pacer in the emWave.



Mellowed out for the monthly medal, but was she 'in the zone'?

"I tested HeartMath at Hunter Kane, the London firm where Ian Woosnam learned the technique. I was asked to attach a small clip-on sensor to my ear lobe. It immediately started to record the pattern of my heartbeat, known as heart rate variability (HRV). The sensor fed data into a computer program, which transformed the information into those jagged little heartbeat lines that scroll endlessly across the screen.

"The next step was to try the HeartMath technique of relaxation – activate a positive feeling while breathing in for five seconds and out for five seconds. When I glanced at the computer screen a few moments later, my jagged heartbeat line had transformed into a smooth, curvy one floating evenly across the monitor with amazing regularity – apparently a sign that my heart was coherent. I felt totally mellowed out, but was I in the zone?

"At first I dismissed the idea of being able to 'retune' your brain through a rhythmic heartbeat as a load of mumbo-jumbo. But when I found myself in horrendous rush-hour traffic on my way home, for the first time ever I didn't get frustrated. Eager to see whether emWave could have the same impact on my golf, I entered a monthly medal. I'd been shown a simple breathing exercise to use on the first tee and during tense situations in a round. The pressure of a scorecard

'Before I knew it I was walking up the 18th in the same focused frame of mind'

in my hands is normally enough to trigger feelings of anxiety, but stood on the first tee, breathing deeply in and out, it didn't bother me. I continued in the same vein for the rest of the round. After a while the strange breathing pattern began to feel less forced and more natural, and I relaxed into the game. Before I knew it, I was walking up the 18th feeling as fresh as a berry and still in the same focused frame of mind.

"So far I haven't noticed any dramatic reductions in my scores, but I've been told that for the technique to be truly effective it needs to become part of your lifestyle, and that means relaxing in a quiet room four times a week, listening to some music and practising the controlled breathing. Watch this space!"

■ emWave personal stress relief system

Price: £125 (handheld), £165 (pc version)

Info: 0118 989 0101, www.HunterKane.com

■ HeartMath TG learned the HeartMath technique at Hunter Kane.

Price: One-day course is £150.

How emWave works

Coloured light monitors your stress levels

- ★ Place your thumb on the sensor. It detects a pulse and a breathing pacer synchronised to your heart rhythm begins.
- ★ Now you start the HeartMath breathing technique – in for five seconds, out for five seconds.
- ★ As your heart rate rhythm settles into a regular pattern, a coloured light indicator at the top of the emWave changes from red, to blue to green, to indicate you are in a stress-free state.



Put your thumb on the sensor and it detects your pulse.

