

BY CAMERON McCORMICK

RAISE YOUR GAME BY DOING NOTHING

HOW THE WEIRD SCIENCE OF MIRROR NEURONS
HELPED JORDAN SPIETH BECOME A CHAMPION

Jordan Spieth hits the ball beautifully and has a terrific short game, but so do a lot of Tour pros.

Much has been made of the idea that he possesses rare mental strength. The things that make Jordan the competitor he is are countless, but there is one habit of his you'd do well to adopt.

Now don't be overwhelmed.

The practice of this habit is thankfully simple, but the thinking behind it comes from a complex frontier in cognitive science.

There's controversy about how exactly we should interpret the discovery of "mirror neurons," but how they can help you play better golf is certain.

Your brain has 100 billion little things called neurons. Whenever you do something, like scrunch your nose or swing a golf club, a bunch of these neurons fire in rapid succession.

Their trail is like a signature. The trail of Jordan's neurons commanding his arms and legs to swing a club doesn't look the same as yours, or Rory's or Dustin's, but it's similar.

In a motor-neuron sense, the pros basically have better penmanship.

When you simply watch someone do something, like scrunch a nose or swing a golf club, the same sequence of neurons in your brain lights up as if you were doing the motion.

Well, at least a portion of these neurons do, usually around 20 percent. These are the mirror neurons. They write the same message, just in fainter ink.

The implications are astounding.

Mirror neurons explain why amputees who suffer from phantom-limb syndrome – a sensation of pain in a foot they no longer have, for example – experience relief when watching someone else massage a foot.

It might also explain why baseball batters have a better chance of getting a hit if they've just watched, from the on-deck circle, their teammate get a hit. On a physical level, it suggests our minds are constantly communicating and learning from each other.

It's as if we have one giant brain separated by our skin.

As Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran, director of the Center for Brain and

Cognition at the University of California, said in a TED Talk, "This, of course, is the basis of much of Eastern philosophy, that there is no real independent self aloof from other human beings... You are, in fact, connected not just via Facebook and the Internet, you're actually quite literally connected by your neurons."

Ramachandran says the rise of culture is because of the uncommon strength of the mirror-neuron system, which let us spread

WHO NEVER TO WATCH & HOW TO PULL IT OFF

THE YIPPY PUTTER

Grab your pitch-mark tool, start hunting for ball marks, even imaginary ones.

2-FAIRWAYS-OVER SLICER

Embark on an exhaustive search in your bag for that candy bar you ate already.

THE TERMINAL SHANKER

Don giant sun goggles and claim a recent cataract surgery for lack of side vision.

THE CHUNKY CHIPPER

Pretend to retie a shoe. Option to go triple knot if the player freezes over the ball.

VIOLENT DUCK-HOOKER

Play the scorecard nerd, rechecking math, stroke holes, calories burned, etc.

newfound knowledge and skills quickly across our population.

So what does this have to do with golf?

For one thing, it explains why most of us tend to play better when paired with better golfers, or worse when we play with people who don't take the game as seriously.

Jordan noticed this as a teenager. We talked about it, and from then on he made a concerted effort to pay keen attention to players who do things well, and to ignore those who didn't.

This might sound like conventional wisdom, but the science that explains it is anything but.

Here's how you can put it into practice for your game.

1 Make use of the time you watch golf on TV.

Identify a player whose tempo resonates with you. Stand up from the couch and make practice swings trying to borrow that tempo.

2 Watch pre-shot routines.

If you're lucky enough to get a game with your club's champion, absorb the sense of purpose that player has before swinging. See if you can pinpoint the moment concentration clicks out of casual conversation and into the shot at hand. Mimic that deliberate focus and intent.

3 Create your own highlight reel.

Mirror neurons and the principle of association also apply to internal thoughts.

If you wallow in self-pity, constantly recollecting the times you've messed up, this increases your probability of failing again. Instead, vividly remember your proudest golf moments. Maintaining a highlight reel for later recall is particularly helpful for those who find it difficult to merely visualize shots.

There's no replacement for the skill acquired through sweat equity on the range, but Jordan was encouraged to know that watching and imagining with a purpose gave him a helping hand along the way. — with Max Adler

Cameron McCormick, who has been teaching Jordan Spieth since 2005, will be director of instruction at Trinity Forest Golf Club near Dallas when the course opens in 2016.

