



## Lefty's 63 not a belly breakthrough

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NORTON, Mass. -- In Sunday's third round of the Deutsche Bank Championship at the TPC Boston, Phil Mickelson shot an 8-under 63 to move to 7-under for the tournament and four shots off Bubba Watson's 54-hole lead.

All week the chatter around the 41-year-old Mickelson has been on his new belly putter. How would he play with it after winning 39 times with a mallet or blade-style putter? Would the new flatstick solve the putting woes that have been holding back his game this year?

None of these questions were really answered on Sunday morning. In a bogey-free round that included six birdies and an eagle, Mickelson didn't make a putt longer than 8 feet, missing six putts inside of 16 feet. The eagle came at the 461-yard, par-4 dogleg left 12th hole, where he holed a 7-iron approach from the deep rough.

Jim Rogash/Getty Images In Phil Mickelson's impressive 63 on Sunday at TPC Boston, he didn't make a putt longer than 8 feet.

Overall, Mickelson's round was a tour de force of ball striking, perhaps one of his best efforts of the year.

"I hit some really good irons and I had some really good opportunities," Mickelson said. "But since the British, I've been hitting the ball really well.

"The first two days here I did not obviously, but that was more due to the fact I didn't hit any shots for four days because I spent all my time trying to putt, trying to get the putter down."

Since Friday, many in the world of golf have been copiously studying Mickelson's putting stats to gain unbiased mathematical evidence of his performance

with the long putter. Yet his putter is only a small part of the program.

A golfer doesn't win as much as Mickelson without a strong sense of self-confidence. Obviously, Phil loves to tinker with his clubs, but you don't become one of the most exciting players in the world by making a virtue out of changing your equipment every time you go through struggles. Motorists who have been hit by a tractor-trailer truck don't regain their confidence to drive by buying a bigger car to shield them from the next collision. They learn to drive again by overcoming their fears.

This is where Julie Elion, his mental coach, comes in. Elion, who has been helping players on the PGA Tour for 19 years, is the founder and director of the Center for Athletic Performance and Enhancement in Washington, D.C. The mother of two works with 10 players on the PGA Tour, including J.B. Holmes.

According to her website, Elion prepares her players for success by "focusing on believing in themselves first as a person and second as an athlete."

On Sunday, I met Elion outside of the scorer's tent, where she was waiting for Mickelson to finish signing his scorecard. She is a nice and personable woman with that positive outlook on things that marks a lot of sports psychologists. All week she has been at her player's side and after Mickelson was done with interviews, he had a short chat with her about his round.

It's clear that he leans on her for advice for cues to mental clarity and focus on the golf course. Though Elion wouldn't say on record what they talked about in their sessions, I left convinced from my interaction with her that the belly putter is just a convenient symbol of a larger problem for him. And that while a 400-gram putter might help him psychologically deal with some fears in the short term that he might think are mechanical, the answers to his woes on the greens will probably be solved through his work with his mental coach.

Even Mickelson sounds like he is not convinced that the belly putter is the answer.

"I think there's some things I really like about it and there's some things that are challenging," Mickelson said after the round. "And I'll probably spend some more time with it in the offseason.

"I'm not sure what I'll do at the start of next year, but my curiosity was very high. I may experiment some more with it tomorrow or [in] Chicago, I may not. I'm not sure."

On Sunday, Mickelson shot a 63 because he hit the ball close to the hole, giving him a lot of easy birdie chances on a course that had calm, ideal conditions.

"I don't think my score will be that close by the end of the day," he said.

Yet I'm sure Elion told him that he should be pleased with himself -- not for how he performed with the putter, but for how he performed as a golfer -- one of the best to ever play the game.

