

# The Putting Guru

Using equal parts technology and philosophy, Ralph Bauer has a mission to help golfers get the ball in the hole faster. **BY ADAM ELLIOTT SEGAL**

**R**alph Bauer was with Adam Hadwin in Scottsdale, Ariz., a week before the British Open several years ago.

“Do you think I work hard enough?” the Abbotsford, B.C., golfer asked his then-coach.

“I don’t know, Adam,” Bauer replied, “but it’s 5:30 in the morning on an off-week and you’re standing with me on the driving range.”

It is an anecdote first and foremost about a pro golfer’s work ethic, but it’s also a window into the man telling the story. Bauer, now the director of instruction at Hamilton Golf and Country Club, believes catching lightning in a bottle is not about luck. It’s about preparation.

There have been 13 players to break 60 — that mythical score that springboards a player into an exclusive club for time eternal — at golf’s highest levels. To name a few: David Duval, Justin Thomas, Jim Furyk, Annika Sorenstam, Kevin Chappell, Hadwin. The latter two share a link to Bauer. His presence during the week leading up to Hadwin’s 59 at La Quinta Country Club in 2017 and Chappell’s at The Greenbrier

Resort in 2019 helped cement his reputation as a golf whisperer of sorts.

Now, Bauer’s detailed, near-obsessive approach to the game has led him to golf’s final frontier — putting. His latest foray, Tour Read, a training app that reads the slope of a green, is changing the career trajectories of many pros. Mackenzie Hughes, an early beta tester of Tour Read, won the Sanderson Farms Championship last October, his first trophy in five years. Nick Taylor, another user, finished second at the WM Phoenix Open in February, netting \$2.1 million in the first full-field elevated PGA Tour event held.

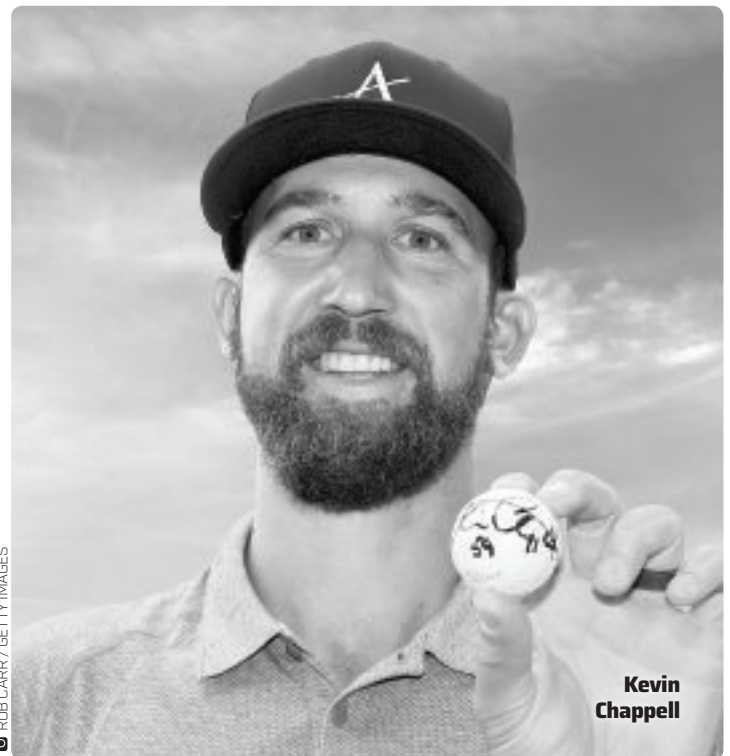
“It’s incredibly accurate,” Taylor, who worked with Bauer on tour for several years, told me.

Most golfers think they are good putters because it’s the easiest of all golf strokes to make. Most golfers, however, are wrong. Long misses and short lip-outs are standard issue for weekend warriors with wonky flatsticks. We blame bad putting rounds on everything but ourselves: the slope of the greens; a shift in the wind; a playing partner whispering about lunch. Something else





© JEFF GROSS / GETTY IMAGES

Adam  
Hadwin

© ROB CARR / GETTY IMAGES

Kevin  
Chappell

## [Ralph Bauer's] presence during the week leading up to Hadwin's 59 at La Quinta Country Club in 2017 and Chappell's at The Greenbrier Resort in 2019 helped cement his reputation as a golf whisperer of sorts.

must surely be causing those five-to-eight-foot knee-knockers to miss.

Bauer has news for all of us — it's because we can't read greens.

It's March and the temperature hovers near zero as I drive into the club where Rory McIlroy levelled the field at the 2019 RBC Canadian Open with a final round 9-under 61. The buzz from the snowplows in Hamilton's parking lot mirrors the sound in Colt's Corner where members, with kids in tow during March Break, are setting up shop at simulators. Bauer waves at me — he is just finishing a lesson. With a smattering of salt-and-pepper hair and an aw-shucks smile, he comes as advertised: affable and intelligent with a mile-a-minute brain that is

constantly puzzle-solving. Today's challenge? Where to set up for a lesson.

We walk outside to the Winter Golf Academy, polar opposite to the hats-off-in-the-clubhouse vibe. Staffers are busy tinkering with equipment; two members take practice swings. An eight-foot putting rug materializes on the ground. Bauer asks me a few questions: How many times do I play per year? What do you think you need to work on?

Weight control, I say. He snaps a photo of my antique putter; he's struck by the Royal Bank mallet my dad won in a charity tournament decades ago that looks more like the pendulum of a grandfather clock than a modern-day Scotty Cameron.

In his early 50s, Bauer is lean and athletic, with a kinetic energy that zips back and forth between thoughts and action, one of those people for whom thinking and doing are one and the same. Our conversation shifts from jocular to serious, playful to technical. He paces around the mat, putter in hand, diagnosing my inefficiencies like a surgeon. He shifts the ball forward toward my front foot and tells me to bend my knees more. Within minutes, he's adjusted my shoulders using what he calls the "engine drill." By keeping my upper body square and fluid, I erase a tendency to move my torso or use my hands, which pushes or pulls the ball. Simple, mechanical adjustments are just the beginning. I'm in the laboratory and the professor is in.

"Do you have a cat?" Bauer asks suddenly.

I am surprised by the question but then Bauer pulls out a laser pointer and explains. "In this scenario, you're going to be the cat," he says, flashing a green light toward the cup and asking me to follow it with my eyes.



Scottie Scheffler

© JARED C. TILTON / GETTY IMAGES



Tom Hoge

© CHRIS CONDON / PGA TOUR VIA GETTY IMAGES

## At this year's Players Championship, where most of the focus was on Scottie Scheffler waxing the field, Bauer's attention was fixed on Tom Hoge, who fired a course-record 62 on Saturday.

"By visualizing the path of the putt in real time, it's easier to have the proper distance when we hit it."

People typically glance at the hole, he continues, a mistake that causes improper speed control, which is my fault. He asks me to turn around and ballpark the distance to a refrigerator at the back of the room. I'm off by five feet.

Bauer's previous affiliation with Nike granted him access to the company's vision training lab and his experiences there, particularly seeing Tiger Woods's results, have stayed with him. Training our eyes to form "smooth pursuits," or how to follow a target, is at the core of Bauer's methodology. Saccadic vision — "ballistic movements of the eyes that abruptly change the point of fixation," according to the National Library of Medicine — creates an undesired effect in golf. Whatever numbers of Woods's he saw in the lab, Bauer isn't revealing. He simply smiles and confirms the expected — the Big Cat's were real and spectacular.

Bauer has come a long way from

working summers at the nine-hole Turkey Point Provincial Park Golf Course in the Ontario town along Lake Erie where he grew up and still lives. In his former life as a full-time coach on the PGA Tour, Bauer built his own proprietary stats system to track his players' results. He's always believed in combining data-driven analytics with the old-fashioned eye test, recently citing Toronto-based Data Golf on his social media feed as a go-to resource. "I started working with a player in Vegas this year who had a 50-round moving average of zero," he posted on Instagram this spring. "In 32 rounds of me helping him with his putting he averaged +64125 Strokes Gained: Putting." That equates to

20.52 shots on the field, 6 shots a round. "It might not sound like much ... but it adds up," he wrote. "I'm just trying to help people at any level make more putts."

Putting. The most mercurial part of the game, a Rubik's Cube of slope and stimp, speed and read that requires a series of mental gymnastics on every surface. *Golf Digest* did a deep dive on putting several years ago and estimated the average golfer takes 34 putts per round compared to 27 for professionals. Cameron Smith tied the PGA Tour record in 2021 when he needed only 18 putts to shoot 62 at the WGC-St. Jude Invitational in Memphis. The record for a four-day tournament is 92, held by David Frost at Harbour

**If someone comes to you for a golf lesson, golf is very important to them. We only have so much free time. So, if you're choosing to spend your free time at golf, that's just as important to me.** RALPH BAUER

Town in 2005. (He finished 38th.) Hadwin needed 21 putts en route to his 59 at La Quinta. Other short game experts have their own methods for mastering green surfaces. Ben Crenshaw has advised not trying to look like anyone else when you putt. Brad Faxon suggests early morning sessions because dew lines offer visual cues on speed control.

Bauer can often be seen flat on his stomach on the practice green or pacing off steps after getting the slope read from the app he designed. After 16 years as coach to a revolving roster of players that included the likes of Chappel, Jhonattan Vegas, Lucas Glover, Gary Woodland and almost every Canadian who played in the big leagues this century, Bauer landed the job at Hamilton, one he first applied for 29 years ago.

"I never really intended to coach my whole life," he says.

So no more life on the road, which some years meant 120 days travelling tournament to tournament. The timing proved impeccable. Bauer met a Hamilton member, an engineer, over

a golf lesson during the pandemic. They discovered iPhones have built-in 360-degree clinometers that read angles of elevation. For golfers, this is an ideal tool to measure a green's slope. With more time on his hands than usual, Bauer got to work. Applying customized software engineering and basic physics, Tour Read which retails for \$100, was born.

Bauer demonstrates his invention by placing his phone on a green with its camera in landscape mode. The science does the work for you, he explains, meaning even those of us with algebra-challenged brains don't need to work very hard. Your job is to pace off the distance between the ball and the pin and apply the break, measured in inches, and manually input green speed depending on the weather conditions. "Tap" the app and 1.9" outside L @ +3" pace might show up on the screen. You can't bust your phone out on the course, obviously, as Tour Read is a training tool only. The app includes 86 putting drills and vision exercises that offer repetitive, results-oriented

training methods to apply to your next round.

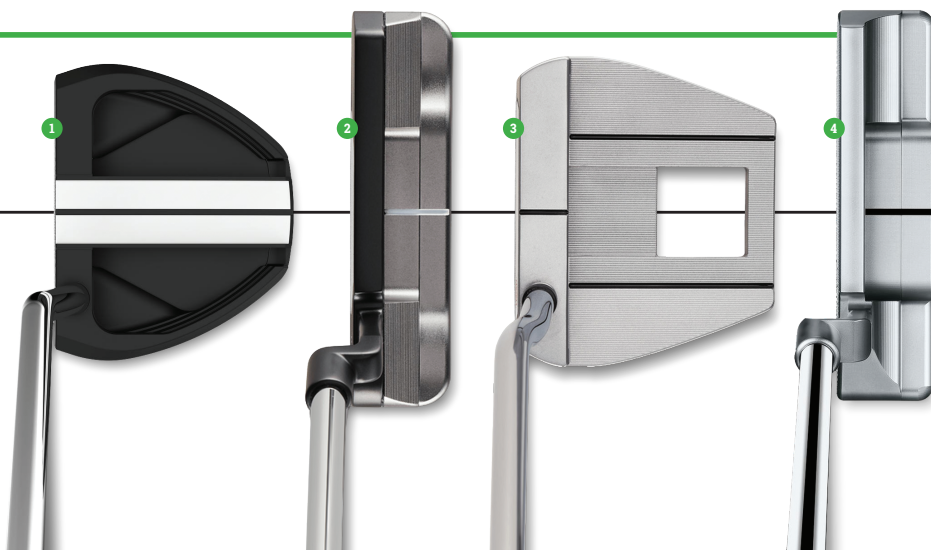
Bauer still travels on occasion for quick instructional sessions. At this year's Players Championship, where most of the focus was on Scottie Scheffler waxing the field, Bauer's attention was fixed on Tom Hoge, who fired a course-record 62 on Saturday and eventually shared third place to net himself \$1475 million.

"Fun watching Tom shoot 62," Bauer wrote on Instagram later. He shared a video he took of Hoge on the practice green and one of the player's par-saving effort on Friday to make the cut. The two putts were mirror images. Since Bauer began working with the North Dakota golfer, Hoge has gone from a fringe PGA Tour player to someone who pops up on leaderboards regularly.

Scheffler, by the way, has benefited from Bauer's brain as well. Last year, Bauer developed an aid called Pure Putt, a polymer clip with a small protrusion that sticks on the face of a putter. It trains the golfer to make centre contact because the ball will pop up or squirt off the face on even the slightest mis-hits when using it. At The Players, Ted Scott, Scheffler's caddie, spent a lunch hour with Bauer perusing Tour Read. Bauer mentioned Pure Putt. Scheffler tried one out, then shelled out \$30 on the spot. Talk about product endorsement.

## Magic Wands

Sure, taking a lesson or becoming better at reading greens are great ways to improve your putting. But sometimes getting fit for a new weapon is what's most in order because there is nothing like a fresh look to build confidence. Here are five best-selling new flatsticks available at **Golf Town**.



It's not just the game's best who are seeing improvements. Thomas Power Horan, a 30-year-old Australian journeyman, was the first golfer Down Under to use Tour Read. Horan finished second on the Australasian Tour's Order of Merit this year, which yielded him DPWorld Tour status and an exemption into the final stage of Korn Ferry Tour Qualifying School this fall.

College golfers using Bauer's app are rising through the ranks with a dozen U.S. schools using his technology, including teams run by fellow Canadians J.C. Deacon at the University of Florida and Brennan Webb at the University of Tennessee. A coach in Dubai saw one player increase +2.7 SG: Putting after just one round using Tour Read. Thornhill's Lauren Zaretsky, a freshman at Texas Tech and a Canadian Women's Amateur champion, uses the app, as does another Canadian amateur on the rise, Ben MacLean. Tour Read user J.J. Spaun drained 32 of 32 putts inside 10 feet to win the 2022 Valero Texas Open. Chappell is seeing a resurgence of late, too, posting back-to-back top 20s in the spring.

"It's fun helping people achieve their dreams," Bauer says.

Having helped Hoge win millions in Florida, isn't it a step down, I ask Bauer, fixing the bad habits of someone like me in the doldrums of winter? He laughs. "If someone comes

to you for a golf lesson, golf is very important to them. We only have so much free time. So, if you're choosing to spend your free time at golf, that's just as important to me."

After getting dusted by the likes of future stars Furyk and Phil Mickelson while playing college golf at the University of Texas at El Paso, Bauer turned to teaching and began by coaching juniors. He was a high-performance coach with Golf Ontario for eight years before joining Golf Canada as an assistant for the men's team. Getting hired by David Hearn led him out on tour, where his reputation and roster of clients grew. Now, he tells me, he wants to mentor the next generation of Canadian instructors.

"I'm lucky. I worked hard to get to this point, and I'd be remiss if I didn't pass on some of the stuff I've learned to younger coaches," Bauer says.

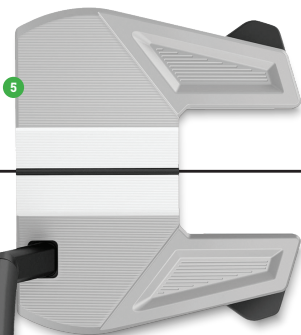
Some of the stuff he's learned came from legends of the game. In a lead-up practice round to Hadwin's 59, Bauer noticed some bad habits had crept into his player. So he cued up a tale from Moe Norman, a regular playing partner of Bauer's in the late 1980s. Bauer had never shared the anecdote before.

"Moe told me that when he didn't like a hole, he wouldn't look at it. He would just pick a spot and aim — he wouldn't look up. Adam was having a bad day, so I thought, 'Okay, well, I'm

going to mix it up and give him something different to think about,'" Bauer says. They tried it out for a few holes. The new perspective worked. "I felt like it turned the corner on the round"

That's Bauer's sorcery — he mixes science and skill development applicable to all handicaps with an ability to find teachable moments for golfers already at the top of their games. He is fascinated by finding that one per cent of untapped talent lying dormant inside a player. Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity, as the adage goes, and it certainly applies to Bauer as his protégés continue winning.

Back at our lesson, I foolishly stare at my backstroke and Bauer catches it. He's slightly perturbed when explaining that the best putters in the world focus on the path of the putt or the ball going in the hole, not their action. It's the harshest slap on the wrist I receive all day from golf's guru on the greens. If I'm to take away one thing, he imparts, it's this routine with my eyes, following the ball as it rolls toward the cup and holding my finish. Soon, I am not thinking about weight or grip or the mechanics of the engine drill. I am envisioning the path of the ball in relation to break, following the line where the light used to be. My putting stroke, for once, feels naturally smooth. 🏌️



**1**  
**Cleveland**  
**Frontline Elite**  
**CERO**

A heavy, yet soft, tungsten face insert pulls the centre of gravity forward, which Cleveland says leads to straighter putts.

**2**  
**Odyssey**  
**Tri-Hot 5K**  
**One**

A sleek blade with front-loaded (and interchangeable) tungsten weights behind the heel and toe portions of the face for improved roll.

**3**  
**Odyssey**  
**White Hot**  
**OG 7 Bird**

This new Odyssey face-balanced mallet is best for golfers with minimal arc and face rotation in their putting strokes.

**4**  
**Scotty Cameron**  
**Super Select**  
**Newport 2**

Iconic Scotty Cameron blade was designed with a new dual-milled face technology to smooth face grooves for enhanced feedback.

**5**  
**TaylorMade**  
**Spider**  
**GT Max**

Two movable weights allow users to adjust putter head's centre of gravity, toe hang and face rotation to correct mishit tendencies.



Scan QR Code to book a club-fitting at your nearest

