



# Playing with heart

Pebble Beach's top teacher wants to chokeproof your game / by Jaime Diaz

*Article Courtesy of Golf Digest*

**Editor's note:** This article is part of a series on technology in golf covering people and innovations that are changing the game.

> The secret to controlling emotion has been golf's most maddening mystery. The great mass of players is repeatedly undone by the coordination-killing and mind-blanking forces brought on by fear, anger or frustration. The chosen few—invariably the champions—find a way through.

But when asked to explain how, most of these champions have responded with a shrug or the hoariest cliché in the jargon of the athlete: “Heart.”

Now it turns out that the heart might have been the secret to emotional control all along.

According to the Institute of HeartMath, a research organization based in Santa Cruz, Calif., different emotions trigger different heart rhythms, which in turn send different

messages back to the brain. Those messages determine what your brain tells your body to do, from effective performance on one end of the spectrum to choking on the other.

HeartMath during the past 15 years has developed systems that equip professionals in pressure-filled fields

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**Laird Small has his students visualize breathing through their hearts.**

such as law enforcement, health care and the military with the ability to shift from the destructive and jagged heart rhythms brought on by fearful and agitated “stress response” emotions to the positive and smooth rhythms created by emotions like love and appreciation. These good heart rhythms produce the calmness, clarity and coordination associated with peak performance. Golf has always been called a mental game, but the HeartMath philosophy contends that the first reaction occurs in the heart, not in the head. To use the HeartMath motto, “A change of heart changes everything.”

Golf’s most influential advocate of HeartMath is Laird Small, director of the Pebble Beach Golf Academy and the 2003 PGA of America Teacher of the Year. Small has been teaching the system for five years to students ranging from PGA Tour professional Kirk Triplett to the CEO hackers who come to California’s Monterey Peninsula in search of a golf epiphany.

“Almost all golfers get in their own way emotionally,” says Small. “HeartMath shows them exactly how different emotions affect performance, and most importantly, gives them the tools to change a destructive emotion to a productive emotion right on the spot.”

Small says there’s a space in time between stimulus and response, and HeartMath seeks to widen that space, to slow everything down, so the golfer can make a better decision. The first step is for golfers to recognize when a negative emotion is affecting them, then they must work to re-frame it.

“You can’t have two emotions running at the same time,” says Small, “so if a player can replace fear, let’s say, with a more productive emotion, like appreciation, he’ll put himself in a better state for performing.”

HeartMath’s Quick Coherence method shows how. It begins with



**Lynn Marriott and Pia Nilsson, the principals of Vision54, use HeartMath to coach peak performance.**

the subject focusing attention on the middle of the chest, then imagining breathing slowly through the heart. While doing this, the subject concentrates on a positive feeling or attitude like appreciation, care or compassion. According to HeartMath research, the process produces a “coherent” heart-rate pattern that triggers optimum performance potential in the brain.

Take a fearful situation on the golf course, like hitting a lob shot over a bunker. While visualizing breathing through the heart, the golfer should seek to push out fear by introducing compassion or appreciation. He might feel compassionate about a struggling playing partner or appreciative of his own ability to hit the shot. If he can switch emotions, he’ll calm the heart rhythms, send a better message to the brain and clear the way for execution.

Available to quantify the process are two HeartMath measuring devices that display active heart rhythms in real time. The 2.2-ounce emWave Personal Stress Reliever (\$199, [heartmath.com](http://heartmath.com))

is fitted with a series of colored diodes that register low coherence (red), medium coherence (blue) and high coherence (green), and the emWave PC Stress Relief System (\$295) is software that connects to a personal computer and through a fingertip or ear sensor provides feedback. The purpose of both technologies, neither of which can be used in tournament play but which Small’s students often use in practice, is for the user to reduce stress by plotting the heart rate and achieving high coherence.

“It’s like videotape of the swing, the graphs don’t lie,” says golf instructor Lynn Marriott, who with Pia Nilsson has taught HeartMath principles since the late 1990s at their Vision54 schools in Phoenix. “As people get direct feedback, they learn to work these machines like a video game toward a goal. With practice, you can control the state you’re in.”

Small’s favorite go-to emotion on the HeartMath short list is appreciation,

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**Small monitors his heart with the emWave, which Ian Woosnam used to deal with Ryder Cup pressure.**

in part because he considers it Tiger Woods' secret weapon. "By truly appreciating the challenge before him—the course, his fellow competitors, the shot at hand—Tiger takes what other players consider so intimidating about tournament golf and turns it completely around emotionally," Small says.

So far, HeartMath's highest profile success story in golf is Ian Woosnam. Naturally shy and with a history of volatile behavior, Woosnam admitted feeling acute stress from the public demands in the second year of his Ryder Cup captaincy. After his agents put him in contact with HeartMath, Woosnam began working with the hand-held emWave device. Particularly fearful of public speaking, Woosnam handled his Ryder Cup speeches competently and most important was a poised leader during Europe's victory. "I needed to learn how to de-stress myself," says Woosnam, who gave each of his players one of the monitors. "Some might not bother. Others might find it useful. It has amazed me."

The founder of HeartMath, a researcher of stress and performance named Doc Childre, was inspired by the continuum of great thinkers throughout history, from Confucius ("Wheresoever you go, go with all your heart") to Frank Lloyd Wright ("The heart is the chief



## THE APPLICATION

**Learning to control your heart rhythms will let you replace fear and frustration with emotions that boost performance.**

feature of a functioning mind"), who wrote of the heart as the center of power and wisdom. This back-to-the-future concept remains HeartMath's mantra.

"We hope to be a leader in a global shift from head to heart, what we call heart-based living," says performance psychologist and HeartMath spokesperson Dr. Deborah Rozman. "The whole world has been trained to accentuate the mental in order to achieve, emphasizing ambition, focus, stimulation, reason. But the head

does not manage the emotions. They are more powerful than the intellect, and if misunderstood they undermine people's efforts and keep pulling them down."

Golfers, better than anyone, know that a pounding heart can get in the way of success. Now perhaps, they'll learn how to control it. 📌



For more on innovators and technology in golf, go to [golfdigest.com/equipment](http://golfdigest.com/equipment).



## TECH UPDATE

### THE BIG BROTHER OF ALL GOLF CARTS

The Inova system from Uplink Corp. offers GPS distance calculations and hole graphics on a full-color monitor, but a two-way communication system is what really makes it cool. Players can keep in touch with the golf staff to view updated leader boards, send and receive messages (emergencies, weather warnings, etc.), locate carts ahead and behind (great on blind holes),

even summon the beverage girl. These carts are so smart they magically slow down when approaching a dangerous situation, like a lake or steep decline. The downside is, the staff knows where you are at all times and can even replay your movements. More than 200 U.S. courses are using Inova, including the Disney World courses near Orlando and Poppy Hills Golf Course in Pebble Beach.