

NOW FOR A SPORTING *BRAINWAVE*

A new age has dawned in the art of sports psychology and, as **GRAHAM ECCLES** found out, one of its most eminent practitioners, Victoria's Noel Blundell, has been among the first to embrace it.

**Elite Golfers Using the
Peak Achievement Trainer
With Dr. Noel Blundell**

A brainwave, for most part, is usually described as a sudden, clever idea. Some Einstein-like brainwaves have, of course, resulted in fame and fortune for many people.

But these days for talented athletes pursuing higher achievement, it's not a matter of "having a brainwave" but rather having one's brainwaves recorded and analysed by an expert in the ever-evolving field of sports psychology. And that really is a clever idea.

Name any elite sport, from golf to AFL football but even croquet and gliding, believe it or not, and any number of stars and emerging athletes have turned to sports psychologists like Victorian Noel Blundell to lift the vitally important mental side of their game.

A recognised guru in the field of sports psychology and one of its pioneers,

Blundell delved through his records a while back and was surprised to find he has been involved in 44 sports over the last 30 years.

A talented sportsman in his youth and still no slouch as a golfer, with a handicap of three at 62 years of age, he is proud to state that over those three decades he has helped some of the world's best known sportsmen and women, largely using psychological and psycho-motor techniques.

But the science has moved on and today Blundell has gone hi-tech, using brainwaves as an important and exciting tool in detecting and helping overcome an athlete's mental shortcomings. Electrodes, videos and a laptop computer have become his stock in trade in the past year or so, with Victoria's top amateur golfers the first to exploit the innovative technology.

"Over the years we have amassed an enormous amount of data from psychological profiling of sportspeople, particularly world champions, so we know why they perform so well. Now brainwave analysis is adding a whole new aspect to the

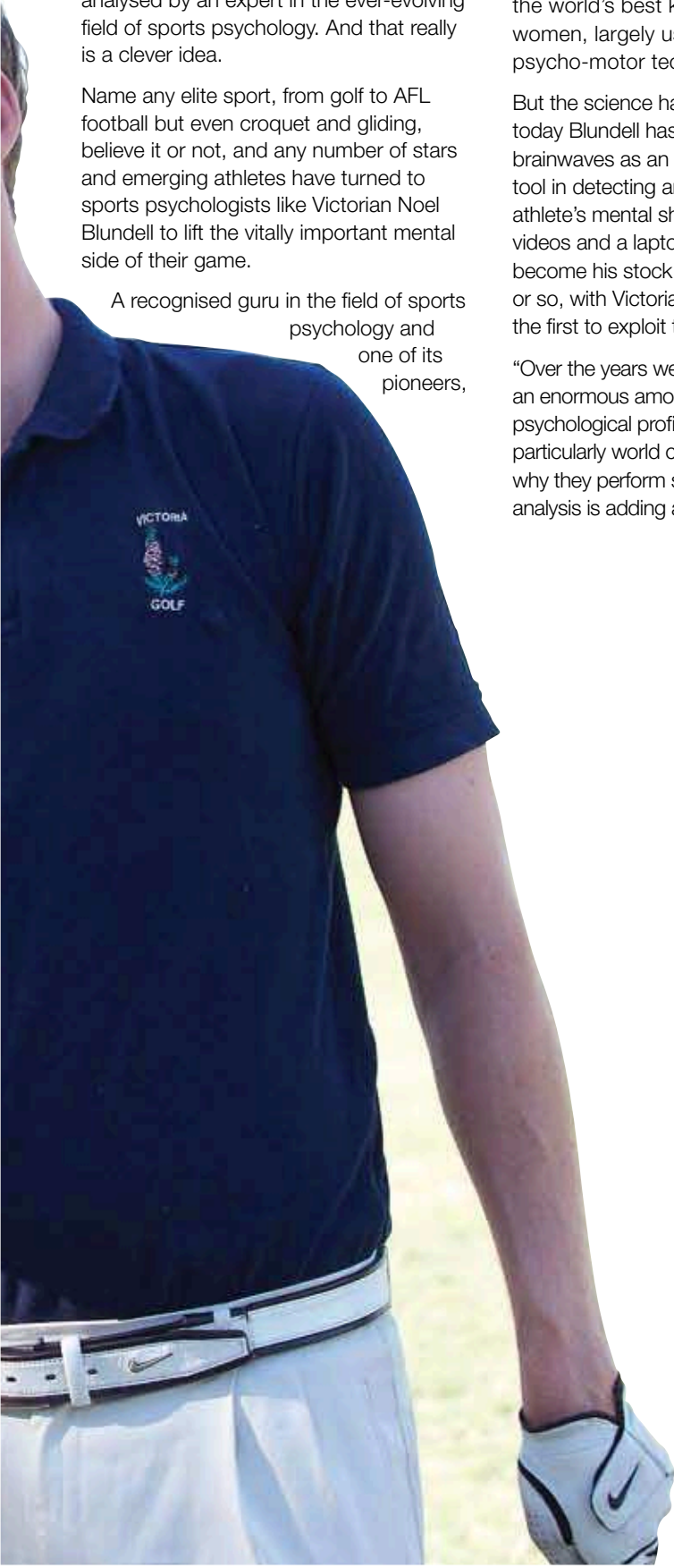
process of accurately determining what may be required to lift performance," he says.

"We applied it for the first time this year with the Victorian Senior and Colts golf teams. The Seniors successfully defended their interstate series title at Peninsula and the Colts won, too." So how does it work?

Blundell, once the head of a Queensland high school physical education department before accepting a scholarship to study sports psychology in the United States, explains that his clients first have an electrode attached to the pre-frontal lobe area in the middle of the forehead which feeds their brain patterns into a computer.

"A sophisticated program converts the information into graphs and other indicators to accurately reveal during a shot routine a player's levels of concentration, emotions, tension such as in neck, shoulders and arms, as well as indicating the amount of mental energy being burned up," he says.

"When the players see their results in full colour on the screen they immediately want to know what they can do to improve in these important areas. ▶



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Blundell explains the player's levels of emotion, concentration, tension and mental energy being burned up.

So from those cold, hard numbers we have a range of techniques for controlling their emotions and helping them tune their concentration in relation to the target and the feel of their shots.

"We can even build in destruction that makes it tougher and tougher for them to sustain concentration under pressure. That was the case with the Victorian State teams and they responded really well to the challenge. We were able to match what was happening physically, with what was going on mentally.

"It was the first time in the world that this has been done and we achieved some really definitive results with it."

Blundell is adamant that whether it is golf, tennis, football or some other high profile, big money sport, competition is now so fierce that athletes need to find an edge wherever possible. If some aren't prepared to look more broadly for an edge that psychology can provide, then others certainly will.

"I am always looking to be ahead of the pack in terms of what is going on internationally in sports psychology," he says. "I am not the only person doing this, but there are not too many working at the elite level in such a wide range of sports as I have been doing. We don't always know what the rest of the world is up to behind closed doors, but I travel between three and six months a year to try and find out."

Over the years, he has helped resurrect the careers of such golfing luminaries as Sandy Lyle and Rodger Davis, when their tour professional days seemed at the crossroads. Davis, who was having a serious bout of the putting yips that threatened to derail his career, was openly sceptical about sports psychology at the time.

Blundell recalls that a week before the Bi-Centennial Classic Davis reluctantly

agreed to discuss his problems with him.

"I could speak his language from a golf perspective and, though he was a tough, hard-nosed competitor, he acknowledged that I knew what I was talking about, so he felt there might be something in it for him.

"From that talk, he committed himself to the task, taking on all I asked him to do – and fast. He played brilliantly in the Classic, beating the American Fred Couples in a playoff. He had a five-foot putt to win and I felt really calm watching him line it up.

"If Rodger was ever going to have an attack of the yips again it would be then, but he was so tuned in to concentrating and remaining calm that he said later he knew he would make it before he took the putter back. It was a great endorsement of what we do to help players.

"Lyle was another client who benefited enormously from similar help. After winning the British Open and US Masters, he felt the need to change his swing, fiddling with it so much that his mind was pretty scrambled out on the golf course. He was so loved in the UK that when he started going downhill the outpouring of emotion was quite amazing.

"He took me into a back room and showed me a massive box two metres square filled with letters of advice from well-meaning people about how to turn his game around. We went out and did some work together on stress management before playing in the British Open at St Andrews. He had to finish one-under or par for the last four five holes to make the cut for the first time in two years and he did it.

"At twilight that evening, we went to the practice fairway where he hit the ball sensationally and the next day he shot up

the leader board. The crowds followed him from hole to hole cheering him on all the way. I have never experienced such a genuine outpouring of affection for an athlete before or since.

"To have given him a small helping hand in becoming a quality player again was really special for me."

In recent weeks, Blundell has experienced similar satisfaction and joy in seeing another client, Melbourne professional, Cameron Percy, finally starting to make his mark internationally.

Watching Percy, a 35 year-old father of two, not only challenging on the last two days of the Australian Masters last month but confidently striding the fairways of Kingston Heath on the final day with the redoubtable Tiger Woods "gave me goose bumps", he says.

Blundell first encountered Percy, a champion amateur, when he was at the Victorian Institute of Sport with the likes of Stuart Appleby, Robert Allenby and Geoff Ogilvy.

"He was equally talented but not ready to take off," Blundell recalls. "He is what I call a right-hemisphered person – he really responds to touch and feel and imagination. When making adjustments to his golf swing, it was from visual imagery and feel.

"But when he tried to consciously control parts of his swing - through the left hemisphere of his brain - he would really struggle. Although he reached the upper echelon, his game stagnated at the maturity level. He clearly lacked the discipline to concentrate at a higher plane and not drop into cruise mode.

"He came to see me about a year ago and we had a very frank conversation about his future in the game. He had just finished 65th on the Nationwide Tour and was considering returning to Q School to try and get his PGA Tour card. But I didn't feel he was ready for the rigours of a PGA Tour – it's not much use flashing a Tour card and being unsuccessful.

"He agreed with that assessment, so from November through to March last year we worked every week on his mental skills, particularly as it applied to his short game. He took on all the challenges I asked of him. I wanted another level of discipline from him and he totally committed himself. The results speak for themselves - he finished eighth on the Nationwide Tour this year, now has his card and is ready for the PGA Tour."

Blundell says that one of the great benefits of brainwave technology is the revelation

that whenever a person's emotional state gets too high three critical events occur. Firstly, tension increases in the neck, shoulders and arms. Then, as the tension increases, rhythm, timing, co-ordination and shot-making accuracy decreases.

Finally, skill levels fall away, concentration goes in all directions and it is impossible to focus on the task at hand. The key is to calm down and rid oneself of tension. But, says Blundell, the athlete first has to understand that relationship and then be taught the skills needed to deal with the problem.

"We have to keep challenging and fine-tuning those skills until they hold up a high percentage of the time. I can't stress enough that the physical part is about 10 per cent and all it achieves is the creation of a structure for the mental processes to be carried out.

"Jana Novotna is a good example of this. Had she known the techniques to overcome her emotions, she most probably would not have self-destructed when on the brink of defeating Steffi Graf in that Wimbledon final some years back." ■

Photography: Wayne Buchner

HELPFUL TIPS FOR THE REST OF US

The vast majority of golfers will never get to see a sports psychiatrist even though most of us would probably benefit from listening to the Blundells of this world. So what would the guru advise free of charge?

"Accept where your golf swing is at, although see your pro for fine-tuning. On the course, get rid of as much tension as possible. Remember that your nerves and anxiety affect tension. So work on softness and fluency, tune in to a target and let your natural instincts flow.

"You will be amazed how close the ball will get to the target. It may not be the flight or shape you want but you will get it in the target range a lot more frequently than trying to consciously control your golf swing." Good luck!

A long-time member at Kingston Heath, he says he rarely plays competitive golf these days because of time constraints, but it's a sure bet he practices what he preaches. And he practices assiduously, according to some of his fellow members.

"Daylight saving is a great release allowing me to practice quite a bit," he says. "It's a really peaceful situation and I can turn off from the rest of the world.

"I'll occasionally have a game at the Heath partnering Jason Stoltenberg against fellow tennis players Scott Draper and Leyton Hewitt, as well as getting into some challenging situations with other athletes I work with, but because of travel I can go three months without touching a club.

"I'm still off three but I reckon I am closer to five at the moment. I wouldn't like to play for a lot of money off three!"



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