

# Europe's born-again golfer finds life after the yips

By Lewine Mair

ALL the players will be wishing each other luck on the eve of this Ryder Cup, but Bernhard Langer will be doing more than that. He will be praying.

In Langer's eyes, golfers have a tendency to get things out of perspective, as he felt some did when he missed a six-footer on the last green to cost Europe the 1991 match at Kiawah Island. "It was a chance a golfer only gets once in a lifetime, to hole a putt for the Ryder Cup," he writes in his newly-published autobiography. "I did my best, but in the end it was not good enough."

What he did not say at the time, for fear that it might be construed as an excuse from someone who could not handle the pressure, was that there were a couple of spike marks interfering with his line.

As he was enveloped in the arms of tearful team-mates, Langer wanted to let them know that it was not that serious, but he saw that for some of them it was.

Even today, people will come up and ask him about that putt. But he lives in the future rather than the past. "I did my best and I can live with it and go on," he says.

A Catholic by birth and an altar boy in his youth, Langer only turned to religion in a big way after he had won the 1985 Masters. That was when he needed it most.

"Everyone had told me that if you were a major winner, that would be the greatest thing. It was a thrilling event and I was happy, but it wasn't what I thought it would be. There was still something missing, a feeling of emptiness.

"I thought I had achieved everything, even more than I could have dreamed of... And yet it wasn't enough. It was like, 'Well, where do we go from here?'"

As Bobby Clampett, from the US Tour, steered him towards the Tour's Bible study groups and a body of born-again Christians, Langer realised he had become too wrapped up in himself. "My priorities were golf, golf and more golf, then then I prayed, and finally a little time with my wife. Every now and was miserable and I made everyone around me miserable."

Some, to use Langer's words, may dismiss Christianity as

"a crutch for the weak", but there are others who suspect that it is the player's faith that has had most to do with his survival of the putting yips. They have struck three times, punctuating some otherwise magnificent putting stretches in which he has won more than 60 times around the world.

"It is hard to describe the yips," he says, before giving a perfectly good and daunting account of them. "It is an involuntary and uncontrollable movement of the muscles, resulting in a fast, jerky, uncontrolled putting stroke. It is like a muscle spasm; you hold the putter this way or that way - it doesn't matter - and sometimes you can't take it back. You freeze, you totally freeze - or you just jerk."

Langer says there were times when he would ask God: "Why me?"; Spectators would gather "in the manner of people who go to motor-racing to see a crash". On one occasion, they could have seen him four-putting from three feet, while there were matchplay situations in which opponents would not give him so much as a one-footer.

Technically, he learned that it was better to take the wrists out of the action and work with the shoulders, which are less likely to jerk. Yet, as much as any technical improvement, he puts his recovery down to hard work, character and "the strength of the Lord".

In Langer's eyes, the greater part of his golfing longevity can similarly be put down to his faith. "I gain mental strength through my belief in God. It may be hard for a non-believer to relate to what I am saying and I recognise, too, that this may all sound like a bunch of baloney."

He says that however bad a day he has on the course, it no longer costs him his self-esteem - as it would have done before he joined the ranks of the born-again Christians.

"Before 1985, golf was everything in my life. Now it is just a part of it... For most people, golf is too important. I look at some of my colleagues and I see that they are consumed by the sport. If they cannot perform to the level that they want to they are miserable and their whole lives are in danger of falling apart. That could well have happened to me were it not for my relationship with God."

Bernhard Langer - My Autobiography is published by Hodder and Stoughton, price £17.99.



TOP: RYDER CUP: KIAWAH ISLAND, S.C., 1991. Langer misses a putt to win the Ryder Cup. Middle: Langer celebrates after winning the Ryder Cup. Bottom: Langer in action during the Ryder Cup. Langer won the Ryder Cup 14 times to 13 1/2 points. RYDER CUP: KIAWAH ISLAND, S.C., 1991. Langer misses a putt to win the Ryder Cup. Middle: Langer celebrates after winning the Ryder Cup. Bottom: Langer in action during the Ryder Cup. Langer won the Ryder Cup 14 times to 13 1/2 points.