

Parker's Shane Bertsch tries to get out of a bunker last week during the Nationwide Tour stop in Raleigh, N.C. He ranks 11th with \$103,275.

Pressure off his putting

Shane Bertsch has new grip on getting back to PGA Tour

By Tom Kensler
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To Shane Bertsch, the putter started to feel like a sledgehammer.

As the Nationwide Tour player can attest, putting yips don't inflict only senior citizens. Bertsch, a Denver native now living in Parker, began jabbing at putts in 1997 during the latter part of a short two-year stay on the PGA Tour only a few years out of college.

"I would start to feel anxiety as I walked up to the green," recalled Bertsch, now 34. "I knew I wouldn't stroke the putt like I wanted. ... I didn't want to face those 4- or 5-footers that you need to make to be successful. My body would just tense up."

There is no guaranteed cure, and Bertsch might joke that he's a recovering yipper. But thanks to switching to an unconventional "saw" putting grip this past winter, Bertsch is off to his best start on the Nationwide Tour. He ranks 11th in official earnings with \$103,275. The top 20 on the final Nationwide Tour money list automatically receive PGA

Tour cards for 2005.

"Your life can change if you have three or four good weeks out here," Bertsch said.

Bertsch played college golf at New Mexico Junior College and Texas A&M and chuckles at the irony of having qualified for the PGA Tour soon after college because putting was his strength.

"I'm not kidding," Bertsch said. "I was a below-average ball-striker in those days. Putting made up for it."

Bertsch said he believes the weekly pressure of trying to beat the best players in the world finally got to him and led to the yips.

"I really thought it might be career-ending," he said, adding that his poor putting "was placing so much pressure on the rest of my game. Everything else had to be almost perfect."

Bertsch steadied himself long enough to win the 1998 Colorado Open, but he knew he had to change his technique. He tried cross-handed putting for five years and used that grip during his first pro victory — the 2000 Upstate Classic when the Nationwide Tour

was called the Buy.com Tour.

But missing a 3-footer in February in New Zealand on the final hole of the Nationwide Tour event in Christchurch convinced Bertsch another change was necessary.

"That 3-foot miss cost me at least \$5,000," said Bertsch, who supports his wife, Monica, and their 2-year-old daughter, Brianna. "I had to do something."

Long putters and belly putters didn't feel comfortable in Bertsch's hands. Neither did the "claw" grip used with success by pro Chris DiMarco. While playing a practice round in Denver, Bertsch was shown the "saw" grip by Greg Shakespeare, a Littleton-based pro.

For a right-handed player, the saw grip entails gripping the putter with the left hand in the conventional manner, but the right hand pinches the shaft between three fingers and the thumb. The saw grip has been popularized by Mark O'Meara, who lost his putting touch after winning the Masters and British Open in 1998.

"The right hand doesn't do much at all," Bertsch said of the saw.

"That really helped me because when I got the yips, it was my right hand that flinched."

Bertsch's ball-striking also has improved, and he shows more patience. Last week at the Nationwide Tour event in Raleigh, N.C., Bertsch recovered from an opening-round, 2-over-par 73 to finish in a tie for 11th with a 7-under 277.

His top efforts this year are a third-place finish at the Rheem Classic in Fort Smith, Ark., and a tie for third at the BMW Charity Pro Am in Greenville, S.C.

"The thing about Shane is, he never hits it out of play so he doesn't put up big numbers," said Nationwide Tour player Scott Petersen of Denver. "If he keeps playing like this, there's a real good chance he'll be on the PGA Tour next year."

Bertsch said he will be better prepared to handle the pressure of the PGA Tour if he makes it back.

"I have more tools," he said. Including the saw.

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