The Yips: A Phenomenological Investigation into the Experience of a Lost Movement

Patrick O'Brien

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THE YIPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF A LOST MOVEMENT

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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By
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May 2019
THE YIPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF A LOST MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

THE YIPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF A LOST MOVEMENT

By

Patrick O’Brien

May 2019

Dissertation supervised by Eva-Maria Simms, PhD.

This dissertation investigates the experience of the yips, a phenomenon in athletics in which individuals lose the ability to perform a basic, habitual movement of their sports. There is a growing body of research which frames the yips as a movement disorder with possible physical or psychological etiologies, or with components of both. This study centers on the experiences of athletes with the yips, seeking to understand the nature and meaning of the relationship between yips-experienced individuals and their yips, as well as what these meanings reveal about the yips in general. A qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with four participants with experiences with the yips. Two participants experienced the yips in golf and two in baseball. Interviews were analyzed according to hermeneutic phenomenological methods and five primary themes were identified and described: the yips are an experience of the ‘anonymous body;’ the yips are revealed in social relationships; the yips phenomenon is
distributed in time; the yips shows itself as a whole-person contraction within the phenomenal field; and expansive experiences help athletes regain their lost movement. This study suggests that the yips phenomenon exists in a complex matrix of personal history, social relationships, and embodied activity, and that probing this dynamic interplay of personal factors can contribute to our overall understanding of the yips phenomenon. Additionally, these findings support recent research that emphasizes psychological factors in the genesis of the yips.
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Introduction

“That’s what happens when you have the heebie jeebies…that’s it, ya know. You can’t explain it; if you don’t feel it, you wouldn’t know what I’m talking about….it’s like snakes in my brain”
—Ernie Els, 04/07/2016—

Ernie Els was speaking to reporters after his first round at the 2016 Master’s Tournament, one of professional golf’s biggest championships. Els is a seasoned professional who, like his peers at the Master’s, has honed his game through years of practice. That training allowed him to win four Major Championships, 67 tournaments overall, and at one time rank as the top golfer in the world. Yet on the first hole of competition in this year’s tournament, Els was unable to perform the most elementary of putting skills, one that most amateurs have mastered. Three feet from the hole with a relatively straight putting surface, Els missed, his ball running two feet past the hole. He walked over and struck the ball again, and again missed by two feet. He shrugged his shoulders and hit again, with the same result. In total Els needed six putts, finishing with a nine for the hole, the worst performance by any golfer on the first hole in the history of The Masters.

Els’ performance would not be as notable if he had simply been playing poorly. Yet the story, with both video of his putting and an interview after the round, got significant traction in the sporting world as commentators were quick to attribute Els’ performance issues to a specific and dreaded phenomenon known as the yips. The yips phenomenon is the focus of this study.
The Yips as Phenomenon

The term ‘yips’ originally comes from the golfing world, where it was coined by Tommy Armour, describing his inability to make shorts putts that were previously automatic, of the sort Els missed (Lobinger, Klämpfl, & Altenmüller, 2014). He described the yips as “a brain spasm that impairs the short game” (Owen, 2014, p. 28). Golfers have many other names for the phenomenon, and insist it is not confined to putting strokes, but can affect whole swings. The phenomenon has been called “the waggles,” “the staggers,” “the jerks,” and “whiskey fingers.”

These names speak to how the yips are often experienced in golf: as a jerking motion in the hands and wrists that results in a wayward ball. Players often report experiencing muscle contractions that interrupt their normal swing (Philippen & Lobinger, 2012). And yet the yips phenomenon extends beyond golf. In darts it is known as dartitis and in archery as target panic. Cricket, tennis, petanque, and baseball players have all reported yips-like experiences, even though the phenomenon manifests differently in these various sports (Clarke, Akehurst, & Sheffield, 2015). Whereas golfers report twitches and muscle contractions, darts players report an involuntary and excessive gripping of the dart that makes them unable to release it at the right moment (Bawden & Maynard, 2001). Comparisons have been made between the yips and lost movement syndrome, a phenomenon in sports like diving, trampoline, and gymnastics, that results in the failed execution of a routine movement (Bennett, Hays, Lindsay, Olusoga, & Maynard, 2015).

These names demonstrate the variety of presentations of the yips as well as the strangeness of the phenomenon. They can sound silly and informal, and for good reason – most names for the phenomenon come from the idiosyncratic labels given by athletes with the experience. That the most cited name for the experience is still “yips” is in large part due to the
lack of consensus about the nature of the phenomenon. Something about the yips resists typical interdisciplinary efforts to articulate etiologies through multiple forms of analysis.

And yet the yips has been called many things by researchers. Smith et al. (2003) described the yips as a “motor phenomenon of involuntary movements affecting golfers.” Bennett et al. (2015) pointed out that the yips is most associated with golf and cricket, hypothesizing that it is a “psychological disorder of control” which manifests in the somatic symptoms of freezing, jerks, tremors, and spasms. Marquardt (2009) outlined the yips as “the inability to execute a regular putting stroke, in particular the occurrence of involuntary or uncontrollable jerking of the hand or the wrist.” Jensen and Fisher (2012) defined the yips simply, as the inability to perform a learned skill; however it should be noted that they were investigating the yips in tennis and were speaking of athletic skills requiring fine motor control. Other definitions rightly point out that these abilities or interruptions in skill have a detrimental effect on performance (Lobinger et al., 2014). In all yips experiences, the planned movement and subsequent athletic action go other than intended, “sending the ball to an unpredictable destination” (Philippen & Lobinger, 2012). Finally, several investigators note that the movement that is interrupted in the yips is typically an ‘automatic’ one, in that it has been executed as intended many times before and does not require conscious thought of the components of the movement (Bawden & Maynard, 2001; Papineau, 2015).

The yips has also been categorized as a subset of ‘choking,’ which is a form of performance interruption caused by intense anxiety in high-pressure contexts. Choking can occur in a variety of activities that extend beyond sports, like public speaking and test-taking, and as such is a better-known type of inhibited performance. The relationship between the yips and choking is discussed in the literature review below. For now, note that the physical
manifestations of the yips—involuntary spasms or twitches—seem to distinguish the yips from other experiences of choking.

With such variety in the presentations of the yips, it is reasonable to question whether these experiences represent the same phenomenon. Though researchers are increasingly differentiating amongst themselves in their conceptualizations of the yips, there remains a sense that all the investigations are generally pointing to a unified phenomenon (Clarke et al., 2015). Here I offer an initial discussion of a definition for the yips that bounds it as a single phenomenon for the purposes of this study.

First, I use the term ‘yips’ to denote the phenomenon under investigation. Though it emerged from the golf world, it has gained enough traction in other athletic endeavors and remains the most widely recognized label (Bennett et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2015; Lobinger et al., 2014). A consensus definition for the yips is hard to come by. Complicating the issue is the fact that many yips definitions rely on assumptions about etiology—such as a “psycho-neuromuscular impediment affecting the execution of fine motor skills during sporting performance”—though researchers readily acknowledge that the ultimate cause of the yips is unclear (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 177). In this study I focus on aspects of the lived experience of individuals with the yips. As such, I approach the yips as a whole, experiential phenomenon without presumptions of causes. Therefore what is important in a definition for my purposes is that it bounds the phenomenon as a discrete phenomenon. The best way to achieve this is to focus on functional and experiential descriptions of the yips. While the instantiations of the yips vary across sports, they are bound together as a particular experience of the body in space as it functions within a competitive athletic context. Surveying the range of yips definitions in the literature helps to further define this boundedness.
I distill from the above descriptions the aspects that seem essential for a workable yips definition, adding a few elements which are tacitly present in the these definitions. An inclusive definition for the yips based on function alone is: the inability to perform an athletic movement that requires fine motor control like throwing or striking (as in golf) a ball or projectile toward an intended destination. This is a learned, planned, habitualized movement that had previously been performed as intended. It is also a movement before which there is a pause or slowing-down in game play. The athletic result of a yips experience is undesired and unpredictable – the ball does not go where the athlete intended it to go.

And yet this definition alone leaves out a crucial experiential component of the yips phenomenon, a component well represented in Ernie Els’ quote above and in Bawden and Maynard (2001) on yips experiences in cricketers: the experience of the yips is fundamentally different than the regular experience of performing poorly. Every athlete has ‘off’ days and poor performances. Every athlete knows what it is like to miss a key shot or throw, or to fall ‘out of rhythm.’ When an individual yips, however, they experience it as a different kind of poor performance. It stands out. Els references this distinction when answering a reporter’s question about his struggles: “…if you don’t feel it, you wouldn’t know what I’m talking about.” Cricketers have asserted something similar, that there is a type of regular poor athletic performance, and then there is the yips, and the two should not be confused (Bawden & Maynard, 2001). Including this experiential factor in the definition of the yips helps in bounding the yips phenomenon by allowing individuals who experience the yips to distinguish yip from non-yip. The above definition also delimits a narrow enough range of athletic activities so as to only include the sort that have already been studied within the yips literature.
My Interest in the Yips

Play has been a central feature of my life. I like it, and have spent my life engaging with different forms of play. When I was younger it was the free and spontaneous play of children. As I grew up, I channeled this energy into organized sports, and for most of my life I have been an athlete, playing football, hockey, baseball, tennis, golf, as well as a variety of less formal or ritualized games, like throwing a frisbee in a large field, which is one of my favorite activities. It gives me a sense of openness, grace, and fluidity. And like an engaging conversation, a good throwing session acquires a rhythm to it while allowing space for each partner to experiment with different cadences and throwing styles. This is a general element of athletics – a foundation of practiced routines interrupted by embodied creativity and spontaneity. Sports can cultivate excitement and awe—even moments of ecstasy—when they recruit bodies into movements and outcomes that defy expectation: “oh my gosh! How did they do that?!”

Yet such thrills only happen when our expectations are surpassed, when the goal or intention of a movement or sporting action is achieved in some unexpected, remarkable fashion. No one feels awe for the yips. No one, not the individual who yipped or any bystanders, feels a spark of wonder at seeing an athlete miss a shot, even if the miss comes in wild, spectacular, unpredictable fashion. In fact the opposite usually happens – people turn away. This is true for affected athletes and observers. The yips are uncomfortable and they inspire active avoidance. They generate an instinctive urge to shield or protect oneself from having the experience, seeing the experience, or even discussing the phenomenon. A friend of mine who is an accomplished golfer relayed an anecdote from a conference he attended that immediately preceded an important golf tournament. At the end of one talk, the speaker transitioned to discussing the yips, and about a quarter of the audience stood up and walked out, not wanting anything to do with the
yips before their performance. The phenomenon has a contagious quality to it. And yet here in this study I am turning toward the topic, believing it holds something of value.

I took academic interest in the yips after having several experiences with the phenomenon. The yips have impacted me in at least two athletic contexts – throwing a frisbee and playing tennis. I say ‘at least’ because, with a looser definition of the yips, as in ‘choking,’ or allowing for more subtle manifestations of the yips, I believe my yips have showed up in a variety of athletic and non-athletic contexts. Regardless, I have experienced the ‘proper’ yips several times and certainly have a relationship to the phenomenon. The first instance happened about ten years ago when I was casually throwing a frisbee with a new acquaintance. My tosses began well, in that I was able to throw it where I intended, at a distance of about 50 feet. However, after a few minutes I began missing wildly. My throws were not just causing my partner to move in order to catch the disc—instead they were uncatchable, forcing him to slowly jog to the Frisbee and retrieve it from the ground. I had no idea what was happening, but had a sense that my efforts to ignore the issue and push through it were not going to work. Eventually my throwing partner suggested we stop. A year or so later a similar thing happened when I was playing tennis. The affected shots were the first hits of any playing sequence – either a simple ‘feed’ shot to initiate a practice exchange, or a ‘serve’ that began game play.

Including the first one, I have had a total of six notable yips experiences in the past ten years, all occurring in tennis and frisbee. It does feel different than the normal experience of poor performance and certainly is something I desired to ignore and dismiss as random, chance events that would not recur. When, a few years ago, I learned that the experience had a name and that people were actively researching it, I felt a strong urge to know more.
In looking back at my notes at the start of this project, I can see that I was excited and wanted to learn more, and perhaps that I was even driven by an urgency to get to the bottom of this. I imagined that if I delved deeply enough into the yips phenomenon—my experiences, the stories from others, and the growing body of yips research—that I could discover some singular, core essence of the yips, and that perhaps this knowledge would give me power and control over an experience which leaves people feeling the opposite. However, like most research, the study that emerged unfolded in ways I could not have predicted. I return to a discussion of my yips and how they were impacted by this research in the conclusion.

The research question that emerged for me centers on the experience of the yips by athletes and its complex relationship between the body, the situation, and the psychological reality of the athlete. In the following we will look at the research literature about the yips, which is followed by a description of my method of investigating the experience of the yips and the results and discussion of my qualitative research. This project is guided by the research question: “what is the nature and meaning of the relationship between yips-experienced individuals and their yips, and what does this reveal about the yips in general?”
Literature Review

Research on the yips phenomenon expanded in recent years. While a few studies from the late 1980s and early 1990s were influential in beginning the academic and scientific exploration of the yips and laying the foundation for the major paradigms of research that exist today, the majority of the published work has been conducted in the last 18 years. The systematic review by Clarke et al. (2015) is, to date, the most thorough combined analysis, as it brings together twenty-five yips investigations and offers a top down perspective of the state of this research. Only three of these studies occurred before 2000, an indication that academic yips literature is relatively new, but is gaining traction. The “academic” qualifier is necessary as there exists a significant amount of unpublished, anecdotal, or interventional accounts and research on the yips, both on the internet and in the minds and practices of sports psychologists and golf coaches. In this review I focus on published works.

There are trends in the yips literature. Most of the work has been done with and about golfers, which makes sense given the term “yips” comes from the golfing world and the putting yips remain the most recognizable and discussed instance of the phenomenon. This focus is shifting, however, both as researchers show interest in the yips in other sports like baseball, softball, tennis, and volleyball, and as the lost abilities that characterize the yips are recognized and researched in other activities, like gymnastics and competitive trampolining (Bennett et al., 2015; Jensen & Fisher, 2012; Mayer, Topka, Boone, Horstmann, & Dickhuth, 1999).

Most yips literature is quantitative, either through surveys and psychological assessments intended to correlate personality traits with the presence of the yips, or through physiological and neurological measures that focus on the physical symptoms of the yips. A few case studies have
been conducted to research potential yips interventions. Four qualitative studies have been published.

Three other larger order trends permeate the yips literature. Most, if not all, of the published research focuses on what I refer to as the athletic moment of the yips. This is the actual instance of poor performance, the moment of disrupted movement or action on the athletic field. Studies of the psychological forces influencing the yips focus on anxiety that leads people into aberrant performances, or on the thoughts, feelings, and attention of individuals immediately before, during, and after a yips moment. Physiological and neurological research attends to various measures of muscle and nerve functioning, and increasingly measures this while athletes are performing the movement affected by the yips. That the research makes this yips moment the central focus of study makes intuitive sense, though it tends to ignore other contextual factors that may be important in the emergence of the yips.

The last two larger order trends include, first, the attempt to discover an etiology for the yips and, second, the urge to place this etiology in either the mind or the body – this binary owing to the literature’s basis in Western approaches to medicine, pathology, and psychology. As I show below, this leads to a familiar refrain in most studies: the exact etiology of the yips remains unclear, but further research should be conducted to develop effective interventions (Bennett et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2003). Again, this makes intuitive sense and generally follows the analytic method of the natural and social sciences, especially for how these disciplines investigate phenomena that affect both the mind and the body. Researchers of the yips continue to attempt breaking the phenomenon into smaller factors and variables that can be isolated and tested for their role in the precipitation of the yips. Yet I make the case below that this move to etiology and intervention is being sought after too soon and too narrowly, and that
our understanding of the yips would benefit greatly from more qualitative work that engages the individual and his or her environment, a pulling back of the investigatory gaze so that we can catch sight of how the yip phenomenon moves with and through the person, the environment, and time.

**Early Research**

We begin this survey of the yips literature with a detailed look at two early works, as they are good examples of the central tendencies of current yips research. McDaniel, Cummings, and Shain (1989) were two physicians and a biostatistician conducting research in neurology and psychiatry departments. The authors took interest in the yips in part due to a patient seen under their care, an individual with the yips who requested a neurological evaluation. The study gives the details of this case followed by the particulars of their survey of the yips, a 69-item questionnaire sent out to 800 male golfers to gather descriptions of yips presentation and to aggregate population data regarding the rates of affected golfers. This study hypothesized the yips as a focal dystonia—a type of movement disorder—continuing the work of a previous investigator, Foster (1977), who a decade earlier first linked the yips to other ‘occupational dystonias.’

The authors’ case report is interesting for our purposes here. They describe a 35-year-old golfer with the yips, who complained of involuntary “jerks” and “pulling” in his hands when putting. He was a competitive golfer whose performance suffered significantly due to the yips. He tried changing his grip of the club without success and had taken the beta blocker propranolol without benefit. The authors noted that the yips affected the individual during tournament play but not in practice or less competitive rounds, and that the golfer reported that anxiety
exacerbated his yips. In addition to conducting a full neurological examination with no remarkable findings, the authors tried to induce the yips: “Various provocative maneuvers, including having the patient putt, were unsuccessful in eliciting any abnormal movements or postures” (McDaniel et al., 1989, p. 192). The authors made no comment about the context in which these putts were conducted, but we can at least assume they did not occur during tournament play, and most likely happened in a medical setting isolated from the in vivo context of this individual’s yips.

The rest of the paper outlines the scope, intent, and results of the questionnaire. Approximately the first 27 of 69 questions related to the demographics, psychiatric symptoms, and medical, athletic, and family history of participants. The rest of the survey centered on the presentation of the yips itself, especially the location, description, and severity of physical manifestations of the yips, as well as the history of dysfunction and any attempted treatments. Results suggested that the yips are more common than the authors assumed. Of 335 questionnaires returned and analyzed, 28% of respondents reported experiences with the yips. Even if the prevalence of the yips was zero for individuals that did not return their questionnaire, the overall rate of the yips in the sample would be 12%. The authors concluded an overall yips prevalence in competitive golfers of between 12% and 28%.

Other results included that most yips experiences happened during putting as opposed to other shots, and that the primary physical descriptors of the yips endorsed by golfers from the list supplied by the authors were “jerks” and “tremors.” All participants stated that these yips sensations began in one hand and progressed to the other within four years of their first yips experience. The most common affected shots were those within one to four feet of the hole. While about half those with the yips experienced them during practice, three-quarters of the
sample reported the yips were worse with anxiety, and 99% experienced the yips during tournament play. Just over half of participants with yips used what the authors referred to as “trick movements,”—like altered hand- or head-positions, different equipment, or changing the focus of their eyes—that mitigated the yips. 20% of affected golfers had tried medication, mostly in the benzodiazepine class of anxiolytics.

When results were analyzed for trends to distinguish the group of yips-affected golfers from the rest, the only significant predictive items were years of golf experience—those with the yips had golfed for longer overall—and one question related to obsessional thinking: those with the yips were more likely than unaffected golfers to endorse “It’s hard to concentrate because of unwanted thoughts or images that come into my mind and won’t go away” (McDaniel et al., 1989, p. 193).

At the time of this study there was already research that seemed relevant to the physical presentations and scopes of dysfunction. The authors stated, “The motor characteristics of the yips are similar to those reported in other occupational dystonias, and apparently no skill is immune to affliction by an occupational dystonia. It has been recorded in instrumental musicians, sportsmen of all types, writers, telegraphers, and craftsmen” (McDaniel et al., 1989, p. 194). Connecting the yips to these occupational dystonias had a significant impact on subsequent research, encouraging later studies to follow the same reasoning.

The authors outlined relevant data from occupational dystonias, specifically the sub-class of “focal, task-specific movement disorders” (McDaniel et al., 1989, p. 194). They noted that studies about writer’s cramp, telegrapher’s cramp, and instrumental dystonia for musicians produced results consistent with those from the golfer sample. Prevalence rates, use of
compensatory strategies, physical descriptions of the impairment, and correlations between years of activity and affliction were similar between the golf sample and this other published work.

Additionally, McDaniel et al. (1989) noted, in both the case report that began the article and the results from their survey, that the presence of anxiety appears to be correlated with instances of the yips. However, the authors argued against anxiety being a primary cause of the phenomenon. It was noted that a question from the survey about performance anxiety was endorsed in equal amounts by both the yips and non-yips groups. Furthermore, affected golfers who took anxiolytics did not experience reprieve from the yips. The authors concluded that the yips is not primarily a phenomenon of anxiety but that the condition is exacerbated by anxiety. They finished the paper by describing what was known about the pathophysiology of dystonia at the time, suggesting that abnormalities in the basal ganglia or thalamus play a role in disrupting neuronal signal output to the motor cortex.

The assumptions that framed this study, along with the questionnaire and the conclusions gleaned from it, make good sense when understanding the theoretical and clinical setting from which this research emerged. These were investigators steeped in a medical and neurological understanding of phenomena, and when presented with a case of functional impairment with no clear explanation, they turned to the literature to find links to dystonia. Note how the findings of the study are ultimately inconclusive but already privilege a bodily and medical account of the yips phenomenon, an account wherein the phenomenon is contained or even produced in the body—the basal ganglia or thalamus. This is where the abnormality or pathology is ‘located.’ Anxiety is treated as something secondary to the primary etiology. Though a significant percentage of athletes with the yips reported the impact of anxiety, the authors suggested an order of operations – that some unknown bodily precipitating factor occurs first, which then
induces anxiety, exacerbating the yips phenomenon. However, even if the measure used in the questionnaires and assessments of the psychological construct ‘trait anxiety’ did not distinguish between those with and without the yips, it would be overstated to conclude that a psychological or emotional impetus was not involved in the yips.

Additionally, the authors did not account for the impact of environmental factors on the yips. The initial case description already demonstrated that instances of the yips can be highly contingent on a particular social or competitive context. While the movements and physical demands may be similar between putting in practice and putting in a competitive tournament, the latter is more likely to precipitate first experiences of the yips. McDaniel et al. (1989) did not describe how contextual factors might interact with a dystonia account of the yips.

Again, while these lines of reasoning are understandable given the study’s origins, I explicitly note them here to guide our review of the rest of the yips literature. This helps account for how we arrived at the current state of yips research, which typically frames the yips as either an impairment of the body, or of the mind, or of some interaction of the two.

Another early, prominent work that contributed to the bodily account of the yips came from Sachev (1992), who conducted research on “golfer’s cramp” – naming it thus already indicating a link between the yips and writer’s cramp, which had previously been named a focal dystonia, following from McDaniel et al. (1989). Sachdev began by laying out the primary mind-body dilemma in yips research at the time, noting that while occupational dystonia was originally conceptualized as an organic disorder, for much of the 20th century the yips and associated impairments were thought to be psychogenic. He mentioned contemporary research which theorized focal dystonias as a mix of organic and psychogenic factors, and then moved on to the body of his work, which argued against a psychological etiology of the yips.
Sachdev continued the basic reasoning and methodology from McDaniel et al. (1989). The study used 20 golfers who identified as having the yips. Additional criteria included having played golf for at least five years with one of those years being at a competitive level. In-depth medical, personal, and family histories were conducted. Participants then completed nine psychological assessment batteries probing for the following constructs: general health, anxiety, obsessional thinking, general personality traits, depression, somatization, and phobia. Additionally, participants reported their overall perceived level of anxiety on a scale of zero to ten, and were administered neuropsychological tests of mental and motor speed, as well as visuomotor coordination.

The descriptions of yips experiences were similar for this group when compared to McDaniel’s and most other individuals with the yips. The problem occurred more often with easier putts, occasionally and randomly remitted for small periods of time, was mitigated with trick strategies, and, importantly, the first yips experience occurred during a tournament with a high amount of pressure for 85% of participants.

Regarding the psychological outcomes, no participants met criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis at the time of interview. Sachdev stated, “The clinical assessment and the self-report measures used in this study were sufficiently robust to evaluate clinical psychiatric diagnoses as well as anxiety traits, obsessionality, depression, phobic anxiety, Type A behaviour, and separation anxiety in childhood, and demonstrated that the yips is unlikely to be an anxiety disorder or a neurosis, (Sachdev, 1992, p. 330).”

He described the other findings: that yips-affected golfers differed little from the unaffected golfers on most indices. While the most severely impacted golfers rated themselves the most anxious, their ratings did not differ significantly from mildly affected golfers. Additionally,
Sachdev argued against the suggestion that golfers with the yips tend to somatize their anxiety into jerks and tremors, as there was no difference in the somatization scale between the yips and non-yips group.

Sachdev further argued that, while anxiety seems to play a role in the yips experiences of many golfers, it is likely a facilitative rather than a causal role. He rightly stated that some movement disorders and dystonias are known to have environmental stressors as precipitating factors, and suggested that something similar happens with the yips: high levels of anxiety and arousal are necessary but insufficient factors in manifesting the yips, which instead stems from “an underlying organic abnormality” (Sachdev, 1992, p. 331). While the exact nature of this abnormality is unknown, Sachdev concluded that the focus of psychologists and sports psychologists on psychogenic factors is due to an artifact stemming from that fact that the yips manifests in high pressure situations during easy strokes and without any other visible abnormality. While it makes intuitive sense to speculate about psychological factors, the real cause is physical, likely neurological.

Again – note here the failure of reasoning. Even allowing that the study’s findings would generalize to the larger population of golfers and other athletes, it does not hold that because the yips phenomenon fails to correlate with known psychological measures of psychopathology and anxiety that it must be an organic disorder of the body. While Sachdev does not say this directly, his conclusions suggest a binary between dystonia and anxiety, with each being stand-ins for ‘in-the-body’ and ‘in-the-mind.’
**Focal Dystonia**

Here we expand the definition and characterization of focal dystonia to help account for the tendency within yips research to use dystonia as a framework for conceptualizing the yips. Task-specific focal dystonia (TSFD) is one type of dystonia among many. As a broader category, dystonia has a variety of presentations, ranging from genetic disorders like Parkinson’s and Lesch-Nyhan disease to blepharospasm (eyelid twitch or abnormal contraction) to the task specific focal dystonias, like writer’s cramp and musician’s dystonia. The term “dystonia” was originally descriptive, referring to clinical presentations in which the adjacent muscle groups of a patient were simultaneously hypotonic and engaged in a muscle spasm; thus the two muscles groups were dystonic. Though there was some debate about the accuracy of this term, it stuck, and became the clinical label for physical symptoms of involuntary muscle activations that included twisting, twitches, and spasms (Albanese et al., 2013).

As research on dystonia grew, investigators included presumed etiological mechanisms in their classification systems of dystonia. These systems became unwieldy and contradictory because of the wide spectrum of syndromes and disorders in which dystonia symptoms can play a role. Recently, an international panel of researchers and clinicians convened to refine a consensus definition of dystonia. This definition excluded any reference to etiology, and in the publication of this work the authors justified their decision by stating that “the pathogenesis of dystonia is not sufficiently well understood to contribute in a meaningful way to the new definition” (Albanese et al., 2013, p. 866). The full definition is: “Dystonia is a movement disorder characterized by sustained or intermittent muscle contractions causing abnormal, often repetitive, movements, postures, or both. Dystonic movements are typically patterned, twisting,
and may be tremulous. Dystonia is often initiated or worsened by voluntary action and associated with overflow muscle activation, (Albanese et al., 2013, p. 866).”

There a few things to note from this definition. It remains descriptive in that nothing of etiology is included and it refers only to the physical manifestations that characterize dystonia. It contextualizes these aberrant movements or muscle contractions, noting that they often occur with, or at least are exacerbated by, the intentional initiation of a movement or action – possibly the jerk or twitch in one’s hand when initiating a movement with the arms and hands in order to putt. Also, the authors noted it is relatively common to have presentations of dystonia which include neurological or psychiatric aspects, and that it is generally understood that the phenomenology of dystonia is “not purely motor.” Finally, important for our purposes here, the authors go on to suggest a classification system which is divided in two axes: clinical characteristics and etiology. The etiology axis includes an “acquired” category, in which “psychogenic” is listed. Albanese et al (2012) noted that there was debate over whether to include psychogenic dystonia with dystonia proper or to categorize it with other “pseudodystonias,” which have a presumed cause other than those hypothesized for dystonias. I point this out only to note that psychological causes of dystonia-like phenomena have been acknowledged, but that these are also thought to be different in kind than the purer forms of dystonia, which have organic etiologies.

However, task-specific focal dystonia (TSFD), which is the most common dystonia associated with the yips, is generally not thought to be psychogenic, though it used to be (Torres-Russotto & Perlmutter, 2008). These dystonias meet criteria for the above definition, and additionally affect a single body part and result from the initiation of an action which involves highly skilled, repetitive movements.
Much of the research on TSFD has occurred with two of the most common presentations, musician’s dystonia and writer’s cramp. Stahl and Frucht (2017) reviewed research on these two presentations of dystonia, with attention to current work on etiology, physiological underpinnings, and interventions. Though they did not mention the yips, their work is useful in that it highlights the key aspects of TSFD.

Task specific focal dystonias generally affect adults, with average age of onset during the twenties or thirties. Symptoms typically begin for one task and are confined to the twitches, spasms, or cramps of a single body part, and often spread to others muscles groups and tasks later on (Stahl & Frucht, 2017). Additionally, as is often seen with the yips, certain “sensory tricks”—changes to grip, gaze, or posture—can have an ameliorating effect on dystonia symptoms, though these often fade over time.

Writer’s cramp inhibits writing through uncontrolled cramping in the hand or lower arm. Musician’s hand dystonia occurs with a large range of instruments which require skilled fine-motor hand movements, like a guitar, violin, and piano. It usually manifests first in the hand in which more intense muscle control is required, and can be quite task-specific, affecting certain instruments but not others (Christine & Potter, 2012; Stahl & Frucht, 2017).

As in many dystonias, the underlying causes of TSFD are unclear. Researchers have several hypotheses. Recent studies show that between 20 to 25% of individuals with task specific focal dystonia have at least one family member with similar symptoms. This suggests a genetic, heritable influence. Because TSFD manifests in tasks which have been repetitively practiced over many years, researchers hypothesize that over-training may play a role. Additionally, risk factors including perfectionism and anxiety have been linked to the phenomenon (Stahl & Frucht, 2017).
Attempts to discern the pathophysiology of task specific focal dystonia have recently turned to transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) and brain imaging studies. Work from TMS has found that TSFD patients show decreased neural inhibitory mechanisms, especially those that are involved in selectively recruiting muscles for task-specific movements (Stahl & Frucht, 2017). These findings were referenced by many investigators and pursued in future studies because they match the phenomenology of TSFD, wherein patients attempting a limited action with a specific muscle group experience activation of adjacent groups.

Treatments for TSFD include medication, physical therapy, surgery, and injections of Botulinum neurotoxin targeted to the affected areas. These injections work by inhibiting signals from nerves to the muscles involved into dystonic movements. None of these interventions have demonstrated significant efficacy (Stahl & Frucht, 2017). Botulinum neurotoxin is the most frequently used intervention for writer’s cramp and musician’s hand dystonia. It tends to decrease dystonia symptoms for several months before losing efficacy. However, many professional musicians simultaneously lose the level of skillful dexterity required to perform and have to stop playing at such a high level.

To summarize this research on dystonia with attention to the relevant aspects for the yips literature, ‘dystonia’ remains a descriptor for a set of physical symptoms, which can arise from a variety of etiologies. It is a clinical, observable phenotype: involuntary movements of muscles. These symptoms can manifest in a variety of contexts. Note that some of these etiologies are known. A brain lesion to the basal ganglia can cause dystonia. While future research may reveal overlapping pathways of etiology and pathophysiology between a dystonia acquired through brain injury and a TSFD like musician’s dystonia, for now the only thing liking these two phenomena together is the physical symptoms of dystonia. Also note that the etiology of TSFD is
not currently known, with hypotheses ranging from over-practice to genetics. And while researchers recognize psychogenic dystonia as a dystonia ‘proper,’ TSFD is increasingly understood to have organic origins. This is how the researchers use the diagnostic category “focal dystonia” in the yips literature, as something of a declaration that the yips is a movement disorder in-the-body, particularly in contrast to a phenomenon of the mind. When research concludes that the yips are a focal dystonia, the implication is clear: they are a phenomenon in-the-body and call for further medical research and interventions. However, the only thing linking the yips to focal dystonias is the presence of involuntary muscle contractions and activations, which need not be present in most definitions of the yips.

**In-the-body**

The work of Sachdev (1992) and McDaniel et al. (1989) laid the foundation for how many conceptualize and research the yips, by both using psychological measures and subjective descriptions, and by concluding from these studies that the yips, as a focal dystonia, is best described as an abnormality in-the-body. We now summarize the yips literature that has emerged since these early studies, distinguishing between the studies and methods which attend to physical manifestations of the yips, and those that attend to psychological aspects of the phenomenon. We conclude the literature review with recent conceptual work which has tried to bridge the wide range of findings by situating the yips on a spectrum between body and mind.

Several studies have probed the physical manifestations thought to be characteristic of the yips phenomenon. Many of these made use of electromyography, which measures the electrical activity of skeletal muscle, and is often used in medical settings to help diagnose other dystonias.
Clarke et al. (2015) identified six studies that used EMG to measure muscle activity in yips-affected individuals. I summarize the results here.

Alder et al. (2005 and 2011) used EMG in two separate studies. The impetus for this line of investigation was unpublished EMG observations made earlier, which showed abnormal spikes of muscle activity in the arms of golfers affected by the yips during the putting stroke. The authors followed up by comparing 10 golfers with self-described putting yips to 10 unaffected golfers. They were hooked up to EMG sensors spread out along the arm, and asked to putt on a flat, indoor putting surface at varied distances from the hole. Results showed that 5 out of 10 of the yips golfers, but none of the non-yips golfers, had co-contraction of wrist flexor and extensor muscles as measured by EMG, which the authors note is “a hallmark of dystonia” (Adler, Caviness, Hentz, Crews, & Smith, 2005). The yips golfers also had worse performances. The authors concluded, because of detecting these muscular aberrations in those with the yips but not those without, that at least in some cases the yips is an organic disorder.

Alder et al. (2011) continued this work by adding more participants, having the putting occur outdoors on a real putting green, and adding measurement of the fingers and wrist joints. This study is interesting in that the analysis further removed the definition of the yips from both subjective account and performance outcomes. The researchers found no differences between groups distinguished by subjective report of having the yips. No differences in EMG measurements were detected. However, participants were also video recorded, and a subset of participants from both groups—15 subjectively-identified yippers and 2 non-yippers—were observed on video to have an involuntary movement while putting. When grouped according to their video yips and not their subjective report, the authors saw significant differences in the EMG results – more of the video yippers had wrist co-contraction than the non-video yips.
participants. Note also that no significant differences were observed in the putting outcomes. Adler et al. (2011) concluded that a subset of golfers have an organically-caused focal dystonia or golfer’s cramp, and seemed to suggest this irrespective of subjective report and performance outcome. The authors also noted that the study was not able to replicate the stress and pressure of a more competitive context. This frames the yips as being involuntary movements—the thing able to be detected by EMG and video evidence—and untethered the phenomenon from both subjective report and performance outcome.

Some EMG studies have supported Adler’s findings of increased muscle activity in yips-affected golfers. Smith et al. (2000) conducted an interdisciplinary study of golfers that included an EMG component and aimed to determine whether the yips was a neurological issue exacerbated by anxiety, or was primarily psychogenic. The investigators found that 4 yips-affected golfers had increased heart rates, increased and sporadic EMG activity, and worse overall putting performance relative to 3 non-yips golfers. Similarly, Stinear et al. (2006) found that 15 yips golfers had increased activity in the putting-dominant arm as measured by EMG, as compared to 9 non-yips golfers. However, both these authors and Smith et al. (2000) did not definitively answer the question of yips etiology, instead using the results as the foundation for a later-elaborated theory, discussed below, of the yips as a continuum between dystonia and performance anxiety.

In contrast to these results, three other studies using EMG to probe the involuntary movements of the yips failed to replicate the findings of increased EMG activity during performance of a yips-associated movement (Klämpfl, Lobinger, & Raab, 2013a; Lagueny et al., 2002). These studies were conducted with golfers and petanque players. Some of the discrepant results may be due to the varying physical manifestations of the yips in different sports; the yips
in golf seems especially prone to produce aberrant movements in the hands and wrists (Bawden & Maynard, 2001).

Overall the EMG results demonstrate that in some, but not all, individuals with self-described yips, there is increased involuntary muscle activity in the muscle group most impacted by the yips. The reasoning of some of these studies is somewhat circular, wherein investigators used the physiological detection of muscle activity in some athletes with the yips as evidence of the phenomenon being a dystonia. First, they declared that the yips are involuntary movements, and then they searched for those movements in a group of golfers and labeled those aberrant movements, and the golfers that experienced them, as manifestations of the yips. Finally, because these aberrant movements are dystonia-like, the researchers conclude that the yips are a golfer’s dystonia, and stated this regardless of subjective report or putting performance.

Based on the assumption that the yips are an organic disorder with both causes and mechanistic pathways primarily located in the physical body, a few studies have been conducted to determine the efficacy of physical interventions. Injections of botulinum toxin are a primary treatment in many focal dystonias, especially writer’s cramp and musician’s dystonia (Clarke et al., 2015). Dhungana and Jankovic (2013) reasoned that it would be helpful for the yips, too, and attempted treatment with two individuals. These injections immediately mitigated yips symptoms, allowing both players to return to the course, but the results faded over time. This suggests botulinum toxin treatments may be useful in the short-term alleviation of the physical manifestations of the yips, but do not impact the underlying causes.

While medications, such as beta-blockers, have been used by individuals with the yips for years, the results are mixed, and though athletes occasionally experience a reduction in symptoms, the underlying issues do not remit (McDaniel et al., 1989). One study used the anti-
pseudoparkinsonian drug Artane to address a tennis player’s yips (Mayer et al., 1999). The individual had experienced the yips in his dominant arm when intending to strike a ball, though felt no yips-associated sensations when swinging without the intent to hit the ball. The impairment worsened and he eventually taught himself to play with the other arm, though similar symptoms quickly appeared in that arm. After several unsuccessful interventions, including surgery, a trial of Artane was initiated, which is used to decrease the spasms of Parkinson’s disease and other movement disorders. The yips symptoms decreased significantly and the medication was continued with minimal side effects and increased athletic performance for at least three years (Mayer et al., 1999). The authors concluded that athletes would benefit from more attention paid to medication interventions for yips and dystonia-like phenomena.

One other study employed physical intervention and showed success. Rosted (2005) employed acupuncture for a 65 year old golfer with the yips. The sites of intervention were the top of the head and the wrist. Symptoms abated and did not reappear at 24-month follow-up. The author noted it is unclear whether the effect came from the physical intervention or the expectation of the patient, but encouraged further trials.

In-the-mind

I now turn to the research that investigated the mental, emotional, and psychological aspects of the yips. Many of these studies attempted to correlate known, validated psychological constructs with the yips. The first examples of this type of research come from the studies mentioned above by McDaniel et al. (1989) and Sachdev (1992). Both used surveys to gather descriptions of the yips in order to better characterize the phenomenon, and in doing so attempted to connect the yips-affected individuals with different measures of anxiety. Sachdev
(1992) showed no differences between yips-affected individuals and the control group. Two other studies confirmed these results, using the same Trait Anxiety Inventory (Adler et al., 2011; Klämpfl et al., 2013a). Other research looked at state anxiety, wondering if individuals with the yips were more prone to fluctuations in anxiety dependent on context. Adler et al. (2011) and Klämpfl et al. (2013a) found no difference between those with and those without the yips. However, Stinear et al. (2006), specifically measuring changes in state anxiety between high and low pressure situations, found a significant difference between groups. Overall, there are few results which show a direct relationship between the yips and common measures of anxiety.

As mentioned above, McDaniel et al. (1989) found no correlation between the presence of the yips and depression. While that study did link the yips with obsessional thinking, only one question probed for this aspect of anxiety. Both Sachdev (1992) and Adler et al. (2011) used more rigorous psychometrics and found no relationship between obsessive tendencies and the yips.

Other research has focused on the role of rumination, perfectionism, and reinvestment in the yips. Reinvestment is defined as the conscious attempt to control one’s movement during skill execution (Bennett et al., 2015). Each of these factors has the effect of turning one’s attention inward, toward the self, and away from the task at hand. The evidence for the role of these factors is, again, mixed. Whereas Bennett et al. (2015) found a significant elevation for each trait in the yips group over the non-yips controls, Klämpfl et al. (2013a) found no differences in perfectionism or reinvestment. Another study from this group confirmed the reinvestment results (Klämpfl, Lobinger, & Raab, 2013b).

Overall the psychometric data is inconclusive. Most studies show no relationship between a variety of psychological constructs and presence of the yips. A few studies suggest a direct
relationship between the yips and the presence of anxiety-like constructs, but it remains unclear how these interact, if at all.

Before moving on to the psychologically informed intervention studies, we pause to expand on the theory of reinvestment, as I come back to it in the discussion section. While the quantitative data suggest no relationship between reinvestment and the yips, testing this correlation relies on a reinvestment scale which may not have ecological validity for the yips context. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of reinvestment is useful in discussing the yips, and one of the qualitative researches discussed below makes use of the theory as well.

The term reinvestment was first used in reference to the impact of conscious control on movement and action by R. S. W. Masters (1992). Masters original hypothesis was that inward focus can be disruptive when attempting to execute a learned task that requires complex skill. Individuals are likely to turn their attention inward when in high stress situations, and are additionally more likely to hold their attention inward when they have a repository of explicit knowledge—facts about the skill be implemented—on which to focus. This hypothesis was tested by teaching participants how to putt in golf, with half the group receiving explicit instructions and the other half acquiring the skill with only implicit knowledge. Under high stress situations Masters found the explicit group more likely to suffer breakdown of skill. In this study Masters also proposed a link to the yips: “Reinvestment of controlled processing in automatic skill may explain choking, and indeed, may explain more severe forms of choking, such as ‘dartitis’ or the feared ‘yips.’ That is, under pressure, the individual begins thinking about how he or she is executing the skill, and endeavors to operate it with his or her explicit knowledge of its mechanics” (Masters, 1992, p.345).
R. Masters and Maxwell (2008) continued researching reinvestment and came to see it as the conduit through which many types of skill disruptions might operate, noting that the disposition to reinvest conscious control in habituated movements could happen for a variety of characterological, physiological, mechanical, or environmental reasons. He suggested that when being evaluated by others, individuals tend to assess whether their performance is meeting expectations. If it is, they become less self-regulatory; if not, they initiate self-regulatory behaviors to decrease this discrepancy, one of which is reinvestment. Once someone reinvests conscious, declarative control into a movement, it leads to ongoing disruption of skill as a previously automated movement regresses to an earlier stage of learning in which component parts of the movement operate independently. The fluidity of the skill is disrupted. R. Masters and Maxwell (2008) also noted some evidence that reinvestment plays a role in the yips, pointing to the accounts of athletes that discuss frustration at trying to remember how to perform their affected movement. Furthermore, the authors commented on ‘motor programs,’ which are the collective unit of cognitive, neurological, and muscular factors involved in any acquired skill. They suggested that reinvestment, as it functions in a phenomenon like the yips, disrupts this motor program, and they noted that while some athletes attempt to circumvent the yips by altering their movements, previous motor programs are difficult to erase. In this way the yips function as a sort of cognitive virus, capable of disrupting new programs.

Note that researchers use the theory of ‘choking,’ an intense form of performance anxiety, to link reinvestment to the yips (Bawden & Maynard, 2001). Choking happens first as athletes worry about their ability to perform. The anxiety and self-focus of this high-pressure situation disrupts athletic movements by causing athletes to reinvest conscious thought into the execution of their skill (Baumeister, 1984). However, while choking and reinvestment models
offer a framework for understanding inhibited performance in some contexts, they do not account for the long-term nature of the yips, failing to describe why the process of reinvestment would progress over time to become a chronic issue (Bawden & Maynard, 2001).

Continuing the review of psychologically-oriented literature, there have been a few studies of interventions which target the mind. Bell and Thompson (2007) used solution-focused guided imagery (SFGI) to treat a single golfer whose yips added a reported 9.2 yips per round of golf. SFGI uses basic concepts from solution-focused counseling, training individuals to imagine their problem has been solved and to visualize what this would look and feel like as it impacted their performance. They then write a message to themselves and, at the end of each session, rate the severity of their problem from 0-10. The investigators used five sessions of SFGI lasting approximately 20-30 minutes. They reported a drop in observed yips to 0.2 yips per round, an effect which lasted the 60 days of the follow up period. They continued this work two years later with 3 subjects, finding again that 4 or 5 sessions was effective in significantly decreasing the symptoms of yips and improving putting performance (Bell, Skinner, & Fisher, 2009).

The other intervention study used Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) to treat a golfer with the yips (Rotheram, Maynard, Thomas, Bawden, & Francis, 2012). EFT has been used to treat individuals with psychological and somatic symptoms stemming from trauma. The therapy uses ‘tapping’ techniques to stimulate areas on the body—typically acupuncture points—while the individual is attuned to the relevant life event. While some researchers and practitioners describe the impact of EFT in the framework of traditional Chinese medicine, others say it relaxes the body’s flight-or-fight mechanisms. In Rotheram et al. (2012), EFT was conducted in four, two-hour sessions, during which the golfer’s body was tapped while tuning into the perceived psychological causes of the yips. The authors reported significant alleviation of yips
symptoms as determined by visual observation, putting performance, and “social validation.” These improvements maintained at 6-month follow up. They concluded that significant life events may play a causal role in the yips phenomenon, and that EFT can be effective in alleviating the resulting yips.

With such wide-ranging presentations of the yips phenomenon, as well as variable contexts in which these interventions were tested, it is difficult to draw any broad conclusions about the efficacy of treatments at this time. At the least, the majority of yips researchers would agree that no consistently effective interventions for the yips has yet been found. It should also be noted that, even without specific intervention, individuals’ experience of the yips waxes and wanes, and can sometimes disappear altogether. This variability in the course of the yips further confounds longitudinal intervention research.

**Qualitative Research**

As mentioned above, only four qualitative studies have been conducted and in general these extend and deepen the yips research which focuses psychological and emotional—in-the-mind—aspects of the yips phenomenon. Philippen and Lobinger (2012) rightly state that qualitative methods allow for a deeper sense of the personal experience of the yips phenomenon, and that engaging with this personal experience informs our growing understanding of the yips. All four studies do this. Perhaps most striking are the reports of persistent and negative emotional experiences related to the yips. As the current study is an extension of this work that has already been done, we sketch here the methodological approaches and findings of these studies. My general sense of this work is that the interview data—at least the sections contained in the analyses—reveal the richness and emotional poignancy of the lived experience of the
person who yips, but that some of this richness, and therefore some of the revelatory potential of qualitative methods, is lost in the analysis and presentation of this data.

These four studies are helpful in situating my present work as they cover four different sports—golf, cricket, tennis, and baseball—giving a flavor for the both conserved and variable aspects of the yips across activities. The first two use similar procedures, including semi-structured interviews followed by content analysis. We describe the methodological details of these studies as they inform the procedures used in this current project.

Philippen and Lobinger (2012) sought a better understanding of how the yips is cognitively and emotionally experienced in golfers, especially the focus of attention in yippers and its relationship to reinvestment. Participants included 17 golfers who had at least some tournament experience, and who self-identified as prone to yip. The participants all reported good putting skills before the onset of their symptoms. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure standardized but open-ended questioning, and were divided into two sections. The first dealt with thoughts and feelings associated with yips experiences. Participants were asked to offer some reflections on their understanding of the yips. The second phase of the interview asked participants to describe on what their attention was focused immediately preceding a yip (Philippen & Lobinger, 2012).

The data were then analyzed using a thematic approach to content analysis. Content categories were established by deductive and inductive readings of the data. The authors especially desired themes that emerged inductively from the raw data. These lower order themes were then further clustered together into higher order themes.

The authors provide an example of this process. Responses such as “sometimes fear of having to take a putt,” and “fear of something happening again,” were grouped together with
others in the lower order theme “fear of having to take a putt.” Responses like “feelings ranging from frustration across resignation and disappointment to anger,” and “when it happens more than once or twice I really start to feel down,” established the lower order theme “feeling disappointed or frustrated.” Finally, these two lower order themes, together with responses like “feeling helpless,” formed the higher order theme “negative emotions related to the yips-affected stroke,” (Philippen & Lobinger, 2012, p. 334).

Collecting all themes together and analyzing their frequency, the results showed that fear of putting was the most often cited feeling associated with the experience of the yips. Anger was the second most frequent emotional response. Finally, disappointment at being unable to control the yips, as well as a feeling of helplessness were also significantly represented in the data. In discussing the results, the authors noted a correlation with anecdotal accounts of the emotionality of the yips. Further, they speculated that the long term nature of the yips phenomenon—the fact that individuals often experience it for years, sometimes for life—may in fact result from “a negative (i.e., dysfunctional) cognitive and emotional association with the task of putting” (Philippen & Lobinger, 2012, p. 337). The authors also noted the relative intensity of the subjective experience of negative emotions associated with the yips phenomenon, implying that this had not previously been named by researchers.

Bawden and Maynard (2001) used many of the same methods and procedures with cricketers, attempting to understand the personal experience of the yips phenomenon in that particular athletic context. The authors’ stated rationale for their approach was to collect the common factors across yips experiences in cricket, and to add rigor to previous anecdotal accounts of the personal yips experience.
Eight participants with an average of 11 years of cricket experience were used in the study. Inclusion criteria were the experience of a dramatically diminished performance over the previous two seasons. All participants had previously sought psychological advice for their decreased performance. The interviews were semi-structured.

The results consisted of 15 ‘general dimensions’ that were created from 50 higher order themes. These general dimensions included “perceptions during first experience of the yips,” which referred to themes of anxiety, negative thoughts of other peoples’ perceptions, panic, and needing to escape (Bawden & Maynard, 2001, p. 941). These themes align with Philippen and Lobinger (2012). Another general dimension concerned self-presentation. Cricketers who are bowling are very much in the spotlight. One participant said, “My heart started racing, my mind was just elsewhere completely, it was just feeling totally aware of the embarrassment that I was feeling,” and another: “I don’t think other people understand how embarrassing it is” (Bawden & Maynard, 2001, p. 942). Two general dimensions especially relevant for this present study engaged the relationship between an individual and their yips: ‘perceptions after first experience of yips,’ and ‘perceptions of future performances.’ Aggregated under both of these dimensions were concerns about being teased, plans to avoid future cricket experiences, and a fear of being out of control: “It’s happened before and I couldn’t do anything about it, it will happen again” (Bawden & Maynard, 2001, p. 943). As referenced in my yips definition above, these cricketers made clear the difference between ‘normal’ poor performance and the yips: “I’d never bowled anything like that before, there was a hell of a difference” (Bawden & Maynard, 2001, p. 944).

The authors suggested that the yips phenomenon is initially a physical problem and not a psychological one, because the participants were surprised by their first yip and lacked an explanation for it. After the initial yip, however, self-consciousness, anxiety, and fear of
performance dominate the experience of the yips, and perhaps exacerbate the phenomenon. These conclusions are similar to Philippen and Lobinger (2012) and much of the quantitative research on the yips; investigators have created models wherein anxiety explains how the yips become a long-standing personal experience. Also similar is the focus on, and uncertainty about, the first yips experience. Fixation in the yips literature on the athletic moment of the yips, especially the first one, potentially hinders our understanding of the overall constitution of the yips phenomenon. Researchers tend to categorize all the personal reactions that occur after the first yips experience as a secondary anxiety response. This restricts investigators from mining these reactions for meaning and insight as part of a larger, more comprehensive understanding of the whole phenomenon. To further this point, here is one last quote from a cricketer (emphasis added): “It sounds ridiculous but I still love it, cricket is everything, cricket isn’t just about playing on the square, it’s about attitude and how you conduct yourself, it’s a mirror of life,” (Bawden & Maynard, 2001, p. 946). Perhaps for this athlete the emergence of their yips and associated distress is also mirrored in significant ways in their life outside of cricket. It could be useful for our understanding of the yips to articulate connections between the yips and a broader personal context.

An autoethnography by Jensen and Fisher (2012) achieved some of this, as it centered on one of the author’s experiences with the yips in tennis, particularly when serving. The authors suggested their work contributed to the field by highlighting the ongoing experience of yips symptomology endured by athletes living through the phenomenon. This has rarely been a focus of yips research, which, the authors argue, has prevented a fuller understanding of the way the yips are carried by athletes, and which is especially important for coaches or researchers dealing with yips-affected individuals. Jensen’s reflexive account of his personal struggles as a college
athlete on the tennis court reveals the depths of anguish and loneliness that one feels when repetitively brushing up against yips experiences, and especially when attempting to ‘overcome’ the yips. The authors framed the paper as a description of the “paralysis, embarrassment, and powerlessness (Jensen) faced when dealing with the yips, something both he and his coaches did not understand, nor know how to deal with at the time” (Jensen & Fisher, 2012, p. 281).

The study revealed some of the dynamics between an athlete and their yips. This relationship seems fraught with tension, struggle, anger, and mistrust. Additionally, Jensen mentioned that at the writing of his study, the outcome of his relationship with his yips was positive. He returned to playing successful tennis and was unaffected by the yips. Yet it took a long time and his progress was not linear. When he was asked how he overcame the yips, he responded: “I still don’t have an easy answer, quick fix, or a straightforward formula to follow in response to the question that I was asked at dinner. However, through much thought and analysis, I can truthfully say that it took a lot of persistence, time, and a better understanding of myself as both an athlete and a person to be able to play competitive tennis again” (Jensen & Fisher, 2012, p. 282). Overall, this work did much to reveal the centrality of personal distress in the experience of the yips, and opened avenues for future work using similarly depth-oriented qualitative methods.

A further hermeneutic phenomenological study by Martin (2016) looked at the experiences of baseball players affected by the yips. Martin’s stated reason for using this method was that it is an ideal lens through which to engage new topics, and that given the lack of published research on the experience of the baseball yips, his work could capture something of the multiple domains—body, mind, and culture—in which the yips manifests. His overall
research question was “What is it like for a baseball player to experience the yips” (Martin, 2016, p. 32).

Martin enrolled five participants in his study, all male baseball players with a history of the yips. He used semi-structured interviews to delve into each participants’ experience. The interview questions centered on a few themes: descriptions of the onset of the yips, the physical sensations of the yips, emotional and behavioral impact of the yips, attempts to cure, and personal explanations of the yips. In addition to analyzing major themes for each participant, and then aggregating these into larger order themes consistent with a general lived experience of the yips in baseball, Martin continually referenced his notes and pre-understandings of the yips throughout the analysis process to guard against significant bias in the analysis of the data.

Martin’s content analysis produced seven general themes. He noted that for three of five participants, the first experience of the yips was during an indoor practice, and concluded that a primary aspect of the yips is that they likely first occur in an unfamiliar context, and that this unfamiliarity leads athletes to reinvest conscious control in their movements. He also found that the descriptions of participants were similar to accounts of choking. Choking reinforces reinvestment processes, and Martin’s findings reaffirmed for him the psychological aspects of the yips.

The second finding was, for Martin, support for a physiological etiology of the yips. While he noted that the progression of each participants’ yips followed a pattern consistent with a choking paradigm, he found that none of the first experiences of the yips occurred in a real game, with no significant outcomes at stake. Additionally Martin noted that participants did not report overt concern about technique or performance prior to the first moment of yips. From
these data Martin tentatively concluded that the yips phenomenon is “at least partially rooted in the physiological realm, and is subsequently worsened by anxiety” (Martin, 2016, p. 56).

However, a third finding was again support for psychological forces in the genesis of the yips. Martin found that all five baseball players first experienced their yips early in the season, in a tryout or scrimmage. Each participant reported they were attempting to impress either a coach or other teammates. Martin suggested that a “motivation to impress others spurs the onset of the yips,” (Martin, 2016, p. 60).

The other findings were that the yips in baseball necessarily involves easier throws and increased time to think about the throw; that participants experienced significant embarrassment which was followed by shame; that three of five players reported altered sensations of the ball in their hand; and that each case of the yips had a poor prognosis, with all players changing their position to avoid the affected throws, and three of five participants quitting baseball altogether.

Overall, this work supported the broad findings of the yips literature, and Martin made efforts to connect the content from his interviews with the main paradigms of yips research, especially the reinvestment-choking literature and work on focal dystonia. He concluded that the yips does indeed exist along a spectrum of etiologies and presentations from performance anxiety to focal dystonia.

In the results and discussion the author seems, at times, too quick to interpret the experiences of his participants through the current theories of the yips in the literature. In the results for one participant, Martin details an interaction with a coach and then moves on to frame this in reinvestment theory: “Kurt quoted his coach as saying, ‘Why can’t you throw the ball? Underhand the fucking ball to the pitcher!’” This ridicule from Kurt’s coach served to exacerbate the problem, which he attributed to an increase in wanting to throw the ball accurately, leading to
a reinvestment in the motor movements that are required to execute a basic throw” (Martin, 2016, p. 40). Connecting this interaction to the reinvestment literature is understandable, but it also seems to limit the impact of Martin’s chosen methodology. In doing this, Martin partly continued the trend in the yips literature of a focus on the yips moment itself, without pulling back and telling a more coherent, personalized, and contextualized story of the yips, which is something that continued qualitative research can add to the yips literature.

Overall, the growth of qualitative research on the yips has broadened the perspectives on the phenomenon and has begun drawing attention to the personal stories that emerge from the yips experience. Continued qualitative work that centers on these complex personal stories will add to our understanding of the characteristics of the phenomenon which do not as yet fit easily into current diagnostic and theoretical models. In the summary of the yips literature below, we return to highlight the important contributions of this qualitative research before moving on to my research question. To transition to this summary we first look at the most recent and prominent trend in the yips literature, which attempts to collect all the findings from both quantitative and qualitative work into a single theoretical paradigm.

**The Yips Spectrum: a synthesis of mind and body etiologies**

This influential perspective in yips research views the phenomenon, both its expressions and its etiology, as dispersed along a spectrum, with the ends anchored by focal dystonia and choking, or performance anxiety. The exemplar for this framework comes from work by Aynsley M Smith at the Mayo Clinic. In 2000, the group stated their objective clearly: “to determine whether the yips is a neurological problem exacerbated by anxiety, or whether the behavior is initiated by anxiety and results in a permanent neuromuscular impediment” (Smith et al., 2000,
The method for doing this involved developing a questionnaire to gather data about yips prevalence in tournament level golfers, and to learn about the golfing context in which yippers thought themselves most likely to yip. A second phase of the study gathered behavioral and physiological data in a controlled setting. Four self-identified yips golfers and three unaffected golfers putted in three different putting scenarios. Heart monitors and EMGs measured heart rate and muscle activity; the grips on their putter recorded the force of grip, and putting performance was evaluated. As expected, yippers had higher heart rates, increased and irregular muscle activity in their arms, gripped their putter with more force, and performed worse than their non-affected controls. Though no definitive conclusion of the data could be made, and no data was gathered directly about anxiety, the authors postulated “that yips-affected golfers represent a continuum that is anchored at either end by anxiety and focal dystonia. It is likely that the yips represents a physical, physiological, and psychological interaction” (Smith et al., 2000, p. 436).

Smith et al. (2003) followed up the study by developing a framework in which the yips exist on a spectrum. This investigation included a questionnaire that elicited golfers’ descriptions of their yips. The researchers approached these descriptions through the lens of their yips continuum. They divided the descriptions into two categories: a type-I yips which is primarily focal dystonia and references only or mostly physical symptoms, and a type-II yips which includes psychological symptoms and anxieties, categorized on the choking end of the yips spectrum. As 55% of the respondents described the yips with physical symptoms alone, the authors concluded that the majority of yips cases represent focal dystonias, and discussed implications for future research.

This research represents one promising approach toward better understanding the yips phenomenon, and yet is also susceptible to circular reasoning at times. For years researchers...
have presumed that focal dystonia and anxiety are both implicated in yips etiology, which can lead to findings that are mere restatements of the hypotheses, as in Smith et al. (2003). Researchers in this study assumed that subjective descriptions of the yips would break into two categories which correlated with their established framework for understanding the yips, and then influenced the result, for example, by excluding several responses that did not clearly describe only physical or psychological symptoms. Yet in those responses there seems potential for fresh and revelatory perspectives on the yips phenomenon. One definition excluded as “too vague to be interpreted” described the yips as “a nasty monster,” (Smith et al., 2003, p. 26). This definition seems full of creative and imaginative possibility in describing the yips phenomenon, at the very least by revealing something of the intensity of this individual’s personal relationship with the yips.

Clarke et al. (2015) built on this spectrum-based conceptualization of the yips. The group noted that in Smith et al. (2003), the authors excluded from analysis several athletes that reported both physical and psychological symptoms, and that the model developed from that study—the Type I and Type II spectrum—cannot account for such presentations, which seem relatively common in golf and other sports. As such, they recommended converting the spectrum into a two dimensional diagnostic model with Type I dystonia symptoms and Type II psychological symptoms anchoring the two axes. In this model, a third category—Type III—is included for those athletes experiencing a mix of both types of symptoms. The authors suggested this model could help researchers and clinicians better classify athletes along the continuum of yips presentations, and that in turn this could better focus intervention efforts. For example, Clarke et al. (2015) suggest that those with more pure Type II yips are unlikely to be helped by pharmacological treatments.
The authors also clarified a multi-sport definition of the yips and suggested its use moving forward, especially as it includes the spectrum of yips symptomology: “a psycho-neuromuscular impediment affecting the execution of fine motor skills during sporting performance” (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 177). They concluded that the exact etiology of the yips is still unknown and attributed this in part to the dearth of longitudinal studies. They suggested that such studies, proceeding in conjunction with their dimensional model, would lend insight into the etiology.

In summary we can say that recent work increasingly recognizes the variety of yips presentations and is adding diagnostic flexibility to conceptual models, such that researchers can categorize varied presentations as the yips, but use qualifiers to note particular symptomology. Yet there persists a compelling interest in discovering an ‘exact etiology’ for the yips which continues to elude researchers. I have suggested above that this attempt discern one or several causes for the yips is happening too quickly or narrowly. As investigators analyze the yips into smaller components, the process results in the disappearance of the yips themselves, the larger phenomenon which gathers to itself, and shows itself, in the bodies and minds of athletes. Research can reduce the yips to the muscular contractions detected by EMG, though this excludes some people who identify as yippers—as individuals plagued by a spontaneously arising erratic and poor play for an easy shot—from a yips diagnosis. What I have done with my definition, as well as the scope of my research perspective, is preserve the self-identified and functional definition of the yips, and assume from the start that these various manifestations can usefully be grouped, languaged, and treated as a single phenomenon.
Finally, a tacit assumption of much of this literature is that the yips is something like a disorder – a pathological disruption of normal functioning. Again this makes sense when considering the fields from which this research arises, predominately medicine, psychology, and sports psychology. Researchers take for granted categorizing the yips as a malfunction and that the momentum of the research should push toward effective treatments. Having familiarity with the yips myself I do not deny the desire on the part of the athlete to be cured of an undesirable experience, but I do wonder what effect this has on the sorts of questions that researchers can ask about the yips. Disease models of human behavior often obscure the meanings hidden away in experiences that are disowned. Also notable in this literature, especially the quantitative research, is the effacement of the athlete. Attention is paid to symptoms—to muscle twitches and heart rates—and to the moment a yip arises, but not to the full person who carries the yips or to the moments between yips. Perhaps we catch only a brief glimpse of the full yips phenomenon when we focus on the moment of interruption.

Of course a number of these studies, and in particular the qualitative work, did attend to yips-affected individuals. As mentioned above this has the effect of broadening the lens through which researchers are viewing the phenomenon. Rather than looking only at the athletic moment of the yips, these qualitative projects included descriptions and analysis of the emotional valence of the yips experience as it manifested in the recollections of affected athletes. If, as I have suggested, it is true that this pulling back of perspective will increase our understanding of the phenomenon as a whole, then these studies are a move in the right direction. They have increased the investigatory gaze considerably and, together with continued quantitative research, offer chances to synthesize findings for a fuller picture of the yips phenomenon. Yet currently there is
still room to widen the qualitative perspective, and it is likely that the potential of these methods will continue to be realized in emerging research.

To that end, my current project uses phenomenological approaches in researching the yips as a means of further pulling back from the dystonia and anxiety paradigm in order to engage the experiential elements of the phenomenon. To more fully understand the yips it is important to take account of the overlapping and complicated dynamics amongst the minds, bodies, social relationships, and histories of yips-affected individuals. Again, this is likely to offer glimpses of manifestations of the yips phenomenon less represented in the literature. Phenomenological methods and theoretical understandings are useful in this regard as they focus on the dynamic interplay amongst a phenomenon, its constitutive elements, and the environment which gives rise to it. By expanding the breadth and depth of the experiential aspects of the yips phenomenon we can more fully describe how it is that athletes arrived at a situation in which they express the yips, what it is like to identify as an individual with the yips, and the structural elements of attempts to ameliorate yips symptoms. One way the current study is positioned to achieve this broadened perspective is by making use of the type of interview data excluded by previous research, as in Smith et al. (2003) and Philippen and Lobinger (2012), mentioned above. These data tend to be emotionally-laden, metaphorical, and through most methodological approaches appear only indirectly related to the yips phenomenon, and as such are not easily categorized in existing models. Yet these data also have potential to contribute to a holistic description of the full yips context. Such contributions to the yips literature would be valuable for researchers, coaches, parents, and psychologists hoping to understand this puzzling phenomenon, but especially for yips-affected athletes themselves, who often feel isolated and misunderstood in their experience of the yips.
The Phenomenological Field

Having introduced the basic structure and definition of the yips phenomenon, as well as reviewed the literature, we now turn to a description of the phenomenological orientation through which this study approaches the topic, and highlight the impact of this philosophical lens on my research. Above all, I approach the yips as an experiential phenomenon which reveals itself in various expressions, which includes, but may not be limited to, the physical, emotional, and cognitive manifestations observed in individual athletes.

Marquardt’s (2009) description of the yips as a “contextual movement disorder” provides a unique entry and vantage point from which to examine the experience of the yips. Eschewing the disease conceptualization—again, assuming the yips is meaningful behavior and not only an aberration of proper functioning—I can rephrase the definition of the yips as a contextual movement phenomenon. The yips are, at the least, a movement-based experiential phenomenon which arises in a particular context. The yips depend on this context for their emergence, or perhaps we could say: the yips phenomenon is this context, it represents one face of a particular personal, embodied, and environmental context. Since yips research is still in its early stages, there is much uncertainty about the full scope of this context.

While I am tuning my inquiry of the yips to a specific channel of that context—namely, the yips-experienced individual’s expressions of the yips relationship—my broader philosophical orientation is situated within Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of the lived body and the ‘phenomenal field’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2009). Using his concept of context or phenomenal field has profound implications on how we understand, conceptualize, and work with the yips, and it can provide a different way of thinking about the yips as a whole. In Merleau-Ponty’s framing, the phenomenal
field is the entirety of the system ‘ego-others-things.’ It is the clearing out of which arises the experiences that we discretely label phenomena, such as the yips (Merleau-Ponty, 2009). That is, the phenomenal field is the entire system through which our experience is revealed and shows itself; it is the substrate through which we experience ourselves and the world around us, and it includes our ego or sense of self—the ‘I’ which we take for granted as we move throughout our days—our bodies, other individuals, and the objects of our surrounding environment.

Two related aspects of the phenomenal field are important here: one, there is an inherent connection throughout the parts of this system which reveals itself as ‘form,’ which I expand on below; two, this connection is foregrounded, emphasized, and explored as a vital aspect of any phenomenon, which is in direct contrast to the ways by which much of the scientific community analyzes phenomena. Whereas Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the unity of being, which is instantiated in each part of the phenomenal field, he notes that everyday meaning and experience—phenomenology’s primary data—has been reduced by conventional scientific analysis to a series of causal relations. In such analysis, the explanation of a phenomenon is often assumed to account for its constitution. We see this type of reasoning in the yips literature—specifically the dystonia-choking paradigm—which assumes that either the objective body or personal anxiety, or a combination of discrete elements of both, causes the yips. Phenomenological perspectives offer the opportunity to be agnostic about ultimate causes and instead go about articulating descriptions of how a phenomenon moves through the various elements of the phenomenal field.

Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on the body also usefully complicate the distinction made in the yips literature between mind and body. By assuming this distinction a priori, the lived body, Merleau-Ponty writes, “…ceased to be my body, the visible expression of a concrete Ego, and
became just one more object in the totality of objects…..Thus, while the lived body became an exterior without an interior, subjectivity became an interior without exterior, a disinterested spectator” (Merleau-Ponty, 2009, p. 65). This describes well the split that yips researchers have made between the dystonia-like aspects of the yips and the psychological ones. And it invites the possibility of considering an alternative approach wherein the manifestations of the yips in an athlete’s mind are presumed connected to those manifestations in their body, and both of these are assumed to be in fluid contact with the environment. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘lived body’ allows me to view the individual as permeable rather than a discrete and isolated subject, which in turn calls me to observe the yips phenomenon moving through them and their environment, rather than as something contained within them.

The above reviewed qualitative and quantitative studies divided the yips into physical and mental etiologies, but it is clear that the experiential aspects of the yips occur in a more complex phenomenal field and that this dynamic context needs to be investigated. This study intends to recover some of the unitary nature of the yips as a whole phenomenon, a phenomenon which has several means of appearing and expressing itself. Helpful in this regard is Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘form,’ which is the structural component of the phenomenal field connecting egos, others, and things in concrete action; form is that which allows the whole system to move as one, and all actions which pull together people with their environment, such as the yips, have a particular form. This ‘form’ is like a wave moving through the phenomenal field. We can observe the structure and motion of a wave because it shapes the droplets of water—the substrate of the wave—that rise and fall as the wave moves laterally. The yips phenomenon has a similar structure, in that the people and objects of the phenomenal field are impacted as the form of the yips moves through the field. And just as with waves moving through water, all components of
this form—say, the hole to which a ball is aimed, the muscle twitch of the wrist, the quickened heartbeat, the sense of inner dread, the interested on-lookers—reference the whole form itself. That is, the components are arranged in a ‘gestalt’ which is not reducible to those components. This is why, in approaching the yips phenomenon, it is unhelpful to assume ahead of time that we can delineate bodily experiences from psychological ones. Merleau-Ponty (2009) sees form as “the identity of the exterior and the interior and not the projection of the interior into the exterior” (p. 70). In the dimension of lived-experience, the yips phenomenon is its physiognomy, or the way it shows itself to us. In furthering our understanding of this phenomenon I wish to describe, explicate, and amplify those expressions in hopes they may give insight into the gestalt of the yips.

To this end, the embodiment of the yips is particularly relevant to my study and an entry point into the complex phenomenal field. Merleau-Ponty regards the lived-body as central to all experience: the body experienced as ‘me’ functions as my anchor point in the world, in that it is the site which makes experience possible, the locus from which we are aware of the phenomenal field. We experience coherence and fluidity with the world because we experience with and in our lived bodies (Kennedy, 2005). In the moments when it does make intuitive sense to posit an inner life that is distinct from the outer world, the lived-body sits right at that threshold, as the conduit through which intentions are actualized. As such, the lived, expressional body is revelatory of the forms that run through it. As it pertains to the yips, this implies that something of the ongoing relationship between an individual and their yips can be glimpsed in the words, gestures, postures, and tones with which the individual engages the yips.

These notions of the phenomenal field, form, and the lived body are central to the perspective with which I approach my research question and the yips phenomenon.
Methods

To engage my research question I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the meanings of the relationship between yips-experienced individuals and their yips, as those meanings are expressed in open dialogue about the yips. I wanted to expand on prior research which offered glimpses of the personal experiences of yips-affected individuals. Max van Manen writes that the phenomenological method “is driven by a pathos: being swept up in a spell of wonder about phenomena as they appear, show, present, or give themselves to us” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 26) This spirit of curiosity in pursuit of holistic descriptions is particularly useful for the yips phenomenon, which, for all of the emerging research on it, has continued to confound researchers. I have been confounded as well, and in this confusion is opportunity for fresh perspectives, especially regarding the personal aspects of this yips. As yips research attempts to explicate causes and formulate interventions, informed by a disease model approach, there is little space to inquire about the meaning of the yips. If one engaged the yips not only as an artifact of dysfunction, but as meaningful experience in its own right, I suspect that descriptions of the yips would differ greatly. A taken-for-granted assumption of my investigation is that the yips phenomenon is meaningful, and furthermore that it arises out of a meaningful world which can be engaged in order to reveal that meaning.

This assumption central to my study comes from the fundamental tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, which accepts that the primary lived experience of everyday life is both imbued with meaning and linked in an inextricable coherence (Van Manen, 1990). The basic task of the practice of phenomenology is to elucidate or bring to light the meanings and conditions of lived experienced which are implicit and taken-for-granted in the emergence of most phenomena, and which are required for those phenomena to emerge and be experienced as they are. Any
experience or participation in the world is pregnant with implicit meanings. Phenomenology is used as a tool for interrogating and then describing these meanings.

While phenomenologists have differed regarding the epistemological status of phenomenological investigations, the hermeneutic orientation which inspires much of van Manen’s work as well as the method for this study, assumes that no complete or final knowledge can be obtained through such phenomenological investigations, as understanding is always contingent upon the experiences through which that understanding is formed (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenological research attempts to call attention to certain aspects of phenomena that typically remain hidden or unacknowledged, but makes no claims of epistemological certainty.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approaches articulated by van Manen are the foundations of my methodology. Van Manen’s work does not have a formulated method, and yet this does not imply a lack of rigor or procedure. The structure of hermeneutic phenomenology involves an interplay between four activities: “a) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; b) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; c) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 70)

These steps suggested that a successful project hinged on eliciting rich, lively data and allowing fresh understandings to emerge out of that data, while remaining faithful to the original meanings of my participants. I now outline these steps in my procedure, noting especially that the analysis emphasized sitting with two forms of data—my personal notes from each interview as well as transcripts from our conversation—and that the main results emerged from writing and
re-writing the meanings of the yips phenomenon as expressed by my participants (Van Manen, 2014).

I sought four to five adult participants for this study. This sample size followed from other similar projects, allowing enough data to access the phenomenon while still being manageable for the in-depth analysis of this project (Martin, 2016). After obtaining IRB approval from Duquesne University, I used email, postings to sports psychology listservs, and word-of-mouth to reach out to athletes, coaches, sports psychologists, and trainers, asking if they or anyone they knew had experience with the yips and would be willing to participate in my study (see appendix for recruitment materials). My inclusion criteria were that participants were 18 years of age or older, and that they had an “on-going relationship with the yips.” By “relationship” I meant that participants had experienced the yips at some point in their life, and that, regardless of whether they were still affected by the yips, they either continued to participate in the affected sport, or they had other connections to the yips that kept alive their thoughts, feelings, and understandings of the experience.

It was difficult to find participants, I believe partly due to the discomfort generated by the yips, which typically encourages avoidance of the topic. And I specifically asked people to delve into the personal and emotional aspects of the experience, which can be distressing, especially for athletes currently going through the yips. Several people told me that they were aware of athletes with yips experience but that they were unlikely to speak with me. Two coaches told me of athletes with the yips but did not want me speaking with them unless I could assure them I would implement an adequate intervention after the interview, which I could not do because of the nature of my project as well as the current lack of an effective intervention. Two participants
agreed to work with me and, after setting up an interview time, backed out as the date approached. However, after several months of searching I enrolled the four participants required for my project.

Note that all participant names and identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

**Interview Procedure**

1. Before making contact with participants I wrote my own reflection on a prominent yips-experience. Additionally, I wrote about my preconceptions of the yips-phenomenon with a focus on presumed causes, styles of maintaining the yips, interventions I assumed would mitigate the yips-experience, as well as my personal desires in speaking with yips-experienced individuals. I returned to these writings later in the process, checking the interview transcriptions, synopses, and findings against my preconceptions.

2. Participants sent me a description, written in as much detail as possible, of a prominent yips-experience. This served as a beginning, starting the process of evoking and situating the yips-experience, and allowing me to begin relating to each participant’s experience.

3. I conducted in-person, open-ended interviews with my participants at their location of choice, which was the home of each person. The interviews centered on the relationship between yips-experienced individuals and their yips, recording both audio and video (see appendix for interview questions). In order to heighten awareness and expression of this relationship, interviews began with a review of each participant’s description of a yips-experience. The rest of the hour to hour-and-a-half long interview focused on the scope
and context of the participant’s yips experience. I asked each participant to demonstrate the movement associated with their yips.

4. Immediately after the interview I took notes about my experience of the conversation: what stood out, my curiosities, my experience of embodied expressions or gestures used by participants, as well as my embodied reactions. I referred to these notes throughout the analysis.

5. Reviewed video of the interviews to add to my notes on embodied participant reactions and to help crystallize my sense of the ‘whole level’ meaning of the interview.

6. Transcribed the interviews. The transcriptions and my notes about each interview served as the primary texts to be analyzed.

Data Analysis

Van Manen (2014) outlined three levels of thematic analysis which are useful when engaging qualitative texts. I used these levels in analyzing individual interviews as well as the data set as a whole. These levels include a wholistic reading, which attends to the text as a whole and tries to capture the essence or main significance. A selective reading goes through the text several times and looks for statements that are especially revealing of the experience in question. Finally, a detailed reading attends to every sentence and interrogates its relationship to the central phenomenon, in this case asking of each sentence: “what does this phrase reveal about the nature and meaning of the yips and the relationship between individuals and their yips?”
Additionally, because of the breadth of each interview I chose to concentrate the data into smaller anecdotes, which then served as the primary data to which I subjected these three levels of analysis. Anecdotes are simple and concise stories which center on a particular experience, essence, or concrete theme (Van Manen, 2014). In general they heighten and amplify the vividness of experiential material by excluding extraneous and repetitive information.

Anecdotes were formed from the transcripts after each transcript and the associated video were reviewed and analyzed through whole-level analysis. This whole-level meaning helped guide decisions about which material to form into anecdotes, with attention focused on what seemed the prominent elements of each participant’s yips experience. I then collected the relevant subsets of the transcript for each interview and wrote them into anecdotes which centered on that particular aspect of each yips experience. See the appendix for an example of this anecdote-writing process.

Once all anecdotes were written, each one was subjected to the three levels of analysis. These results then served as the primary material for narratives of each participant’s yips experience and prominent themes. Note that each interview was analyzed separately and written into a narrative before comparing results across participants.

1. Each full transcript was read and each video watched. Whole-level meanings were recorded for each, which were then re-written several times to arrive at a succinct phrase or statement representative of the whole.

2. Each transcript was re-read, using post-interview notes and whole-level statements from step 1 to identify interview themes and material to form into anecdotes.
3. Anecdote material was aggregated. Redundant information was removed, syntax was changed to active voice and first-person, and the general structure and tone of the anecdote was written centered on a particularly evocative phrase or idea from the material.

4. Anecdotes were read at three levels: wholistic, selective, and detailed. The wholistic meanings were written again into concise statements, the selective phrases were used as quotes in narratives and results, and, in the detailed reading, each sentence of the anecdote was translated into a statement of its relevance to the overall meaning of the yips.

5. Results from anecdote analysis were written into narratives for each participant. During this writing process, the analysis from wholistic readings of the entire transcript, the video, and the anecdotes were referred to in order to re-immers the narratives in the meanings most central to each interview.

6. Narratives were compared across participants and subjected to the three levels of analysis, producing themes that were both consistent among all data and revelatory of the meanings of the yips phenomenon.

7. Themes were organized into results and summarized with examples and quotes from interviews.

8. Reviewed my writings regarding personal experiences of the yips and assumptions about causes.
**Goals of this study**

My project does not seek an ultimate explanation of the yips, but rather a descriptive and believable account of what it is like to experience the yips, along with necessary factors that contribute to the constitution of the phenomenon. I aim to make the yips more personal and more meaningful, to allow athletes and researchers to access the phenomenon through a dimension less represented in the literature. This can benefit people experiencing the yips and provide teammates, coaches, friends and family with a framework for understanding.

I set out with the assumption that the expressions of the yips—the way they are carried and discussed by athletes—contain within them key aspects of the yips phenomenon, and that in describing and expanding these expressions, we can get a fuller picture of the phenomenon. Note that the features I highlight are likely not exclusive to individuals with the. Rather, what I am doing in this project is expanding the list of necessary conditions known to influence the yips.

Additionally, I am seeking to articulate aspects of the yips phenomenon which have typically been excluded from prior research, namely the personal and emotional histories of athletes that help make sense of their relationships to their sport and to the yips. As mentioned in the above literature review, most research has focused on events during or after the initial yips experience. In this study I am expanding the breadth of data to include experiences that occurred prior to the onset of the yips, especially those that the participants themselves deem relevant to their understanding of the yips.

The participant narratives below describe the personal and athletic contexts that bound the yips experience for each of my four participants. They are two baseball pitchers and two golfers, three men and one woman, aged 67, 53, 53, and 24. The names used here are pseudonyms.
Greg

Greg is a 67 year old baseball player and a pitcher. He started playing what he calls “adult” baseball in 2004, when he attended a “fantasy” camp for the sport, and through that learned about baseball leagues for men who were his age. His relationship with the yips began a few years after that, when his team made their annual trip to Florida for a tournament. Greg’s experience of the yips proper—of diminished performance recognizable as the yips—was brief but intense, and therefore memorable. While Greg has made use of the experience to help him grow as a player and pitcher, he still feels somewhat conflicted about his role in making space for the yips to affect him. And the experience lingers with him, as yips memories often do. He told me in our interview that he would never forget the feeling. In some ways Greg’s yips experience was transformed by him into other life lessons and as part of spiritual work that he had been working on. Greg’s yips took a different path than most, and might provide us with a look at different outcomes that are possible due to different field conditions.

Greg learned to play baseball when he was young, though does not recall anyone formally instructing him. Instead he remembers learning about the sport from radio broadcasts of Yankees games that his grandmother listened to in their home. This early immersion in the sport made a lasting impression; Greg still recalls details from games that happened 60 or more years ago. His embodied relationship to the sport began outside with the neighborhood kids, most of whom played baseball. And Greg enjoyed bringing his natural aptitude for throwing objects to this shared activity with friends on the street.

His knowledge of and experience with baseball grew from there, picking up tips from peers, coaches, and from watching professionals. Greg played organized baseball in Little League and described himself in our interview as a below average hitter and a good fielder. He
tried pitching a few times and had one memorable experience, during which he pitched several shutout innings and got some praise from his coach. Greg stopped playing when he entered high school, however, when he became “anti-organized sports” and did not want to participate in that competitive environment. He switched to softball and played that for most of his adult life, until diving back into baseball after the Yankees fantasy camp in 2004.

Greg enjoys being a student of the game of baseball. He studies new pitching techniques and practices throughout the year. Recently he and a good friend on the team discussed with enthusiasm their belief that if they keep practicing and working on their game, age need not slow them down and they can continue to see growth and improvement. And as I will discuss further below, Greg has come to approach baseball with many of the life lessons that serve him when in ‘real life,’ outside of athletic space. In many ways this approach to the game informs Greg’s relationship to his yips as well as how he carries the experience with him now, as evidenced from our conversation.

I met Greg through his wife. After hearing about my dissertation and interest in the yips, she insisted I should talk with him, confident that he was familiar with the phenomenon, though I was not sure if he had experienced it personally. When I mentioned “yips” to him, he said, “oh yeah, you mean like when I can’t throw the ball over the plate?” Yes, I thought, that is what I mean. We spoke a bit about the project and his experience of the yips, and agreed to follow up, perhaps for an interview. Greg seemed enthused, articulate about his experience, and like someone with deep and varied interests. He spoke about calling on his knowledge of the Native American medicine wheel when he was on the mound, and had an introspective attitude.

We agreed to meet at his house for an interview, and as we made plans decided I would spend the night on Friday and we would have our conversation on Saturday. It was my first
interview and I was increasingly anxious as it approached. I felt like there was a lot riding on it, that in some way my ‘performance’ as an interviewer would determine the quality of the data, and that if I did the interview ‘right,’ I could capture some essence of the yips. Do it wrong, however, and I would lay a shaky foundation for the rest of my interviews and the project as a whole.

Some of this nervous energy dissipated over the course of the evening and morning that Greg and I spent together before the interview. He was a welcoming and gracious host, and after making me some breakfast in the morning we went for a snowy walk with his dog around his property, chatting about our shared passion for nature and about Greg’s plans for the woods surrounding his house.

When we finally sat down for the interview Greg had put on his baseball hat and grabbed his glove and a ball. And the interview retained this playful, show-and-tell atmosphere. Greg was excited to share with me his love for, and experience with, baseball. At several moments in the conversation I saw Greg light up with boyish enthusiasm, when discussing the feeling of striking out a batter or explaining the intricacies of a well-thrown breaking ball. We spoke for about 90 minutes.

**Yips moment.**

Greg experienced the yips once. It happened during a game his team played in Florida, as part of an annual tournament for 60-and-older men’s baseball teams. Greg was relatively new to pitching. This particular game was their team’s “stadium game,” the one time during the Florida week when Greg’s team was scheduled to play in the major league stadium that the professional teams use for spring training.
He found out a day ahead of time that he was the starting pitcher for the game, and felt some anxiety and mild alarm: “What? I’m pitching in the stadium game?” Greg was conflicted, both wanting the chance to pitch but also not wanting to be the starter. He did not have much pitching experience to lean on for confidence. While he felt good during warm-ups and was throwing hard and accurately, as the beginning of the game approached he was increasingly nervous and “in his head.” Greg entered the game fixated on avoiding walking the opposing players. “Walks will kill you,” is a baseball axiom Greg mentioned a few times in our interview. And this fixation on and aversion to doing the wrong thing stayed with him. As the first batter approached the batter’s box Greg told himself not to walk him: “Whatever you do don’t walk anybody!” He walked the first batter. And then he walked the second, and then everything seemed to spiral further out of his control. Greg could not throw the ball over the plate. When he finally did throw a strike, the ball was popped up to the second baseman and what should have been a routine play resulted in an error and the runner reached first base.

At one point Greg looked toward the dugout, thinking, “How long are you gonna leave me out here? Save me.” Greg does not recall many physical sensations during the experience. He instead described his awareness as scattered and centered “in his head” and not on his body or his throwing mechanics. He remembers a stream of thoughts filled with self doubt: “I was having a major conversation going on in my head: I can’t remember how to pitch. What was I thinking? I’m not a pitcher. How long can this go on? I’m gonna walk this guy too.”

And the walks kept piling up, along with a hit or two. Greg said “At one point, there was just no turning back. There was no way I was ever gonna right the ship.” The other team scored ten runs with no outs in the first inning before Greg was pulled out of the game. While he felt some shame and anger toward himself, he was mostly relieved to be out of the spotlight and for
the nightmare to be over. And so this was the context in which Greg experienced the yips, this time when he “couldn’t throw a strike.”

A few preliminary reflections on this yips experience. It was clear from the way that Greg narrated his experience that this pitching moment was different in kind than any other pitching outing he experienced either before or after. It was distinct both in Greg’s experience of it—out-of-body, personally traumatic—and in the outcome. Additionally, while Greg was relatively new to pitching—he had pitched and started before, just never in the specific situation of the ‘big stadium game’—he was familiar with the movement required for his task; in his own description, throwing is “one of the most natural things (he) can do.” Greg does not recall any pattern to how his throws were missing, just that “they weren’t where they were supposed to be, and it didn’t seem like (he) had any control over it.”

Yet Greg’s yips experience—and his relationship to it—took a different path than most others. Below I offer some reasons for this, but first continue by describing the aftermath of his pitching outing.

**Aftermath.**

Greg recalls his teammates being supportive in the immediate aftermath. The game did not much affect the team’s standings in the tournament. Additionally, Greg noted that the athletic context was not significantly competitive. While many teams from all over the country attend the tournament and hope to place well or win, Greg and his teammates are there to have fun. It was a vacation for them, and in many ways they felt privileged to get to play baseball in Florida in November. Rather than fixating on the impact of Greg’s yips on the outcome of the game, his
teammates quickly turned their attention to tomorrow’s scheduling, wondering when they needed to wake up and therefore how late they could stay out that evening.

In our interview Greg noted the significance of this, stating that “I didn’t ruin anybody’s time. I didn’t blow the whole season or anything like that. It was just one more thing to chuckle about.” And Greg was eventually able to do just that later in the evening, with the help of his teammates and “several” beers. Unlike many yips experiences, we can see this as a mitigating impact of others on Greg’s yips. In the immediate of aftermath of his first yips experience Greg received direct social support as well as a reprieve, as the context was such that his performance did not become a focus of attention.

Greg does not remember if he pitched again that week. He was not in a position that it was expected of him to continue pitching. He was one of the team’s pitchers but it was not a requirement and was not yet an identity for Greg. This meant that he was not forced, either by his or anyone else’s expectations, to re-enter the pitching context soon after his yips experience. He was able to get some time and distance away from it, which was helpful for Greg because, even with the support from teammates and the lighthearted athletic environment, he remembered, “I still felt really bad and my confidence was totally shot.”

However, he soon after made a decision which he counts as important in his arc as a pitcher and, I would add, in his relationship with this yips experience. Greg said “It’s a memorable experience and an educational one because I could have gone a couple of different ways. I could have said ‘fuck this…I’m never pitching again. This is too much for me.’ Or, ‘I wanna get better at this. I don’t want this to ever happen again.’ And I’m like, ‘well, you like pitching,’ so I chose to do the work to get better at it.”
Greg then devoted himself to learning about the craft of pitching, both by researching techniques and strategy, and investing lots of time honing his pitching style and execution. It seems notable that Greg had the space to do this – that he had not previously established himself as skillful pitcher. He had a positive desire to pitch and to feel comfortable in the role, and simultaneously a desire to avoid the experience of the yips. This is again evidence of the personal suffering which can emerge from a yips experience. People know that, whatever it was that happened, they will do anything to avoid having it happen again.

Greg was successful in this. He went on to become one of his league’s best pitchers. He even had one season in which he was performing at such a high level as a pitcher, fielder, and hitter that he was voted the most valuable player of the league for that season. During our interview he lit up when talking about this and proudly mentioned the MVP plaque hanging on the wall downstairs.

The memory lingers.

Yet for all this success the yips experience from that one game still lingers with Greg. Greg partly demonstrated this with his immediate acknowledgment and recall of the experience—“you mean like when I can’t throw a strike?”—when I first met him and mentioned the yips. His connection with this experience is still in process. This is also evidenced by his ongoing hesitations and tensions when brought back into contact with aspects of the context in which this experience occurred. One aspect was the tournament setting. Greg told me that as a pitcher he has never performed well in the Florida tournament since then. Another aspect was Greg as the starting pitcher for the ‘home team,’ meaning that his team took the field first, with Greg on the mound to begin the game. Greg described the impact: “I’m still stuck with a little bit
of mental thing whenever I am pitching – I don’t like to be the home team and take the mound first…even now, as one of the better pitchers in our league, I still feel this, ‘are we – are we the home or away team? Shit, we’re the home team…’ I’ll never forget what it felt like to do that, and that’s still in there somewhere.”

Furthermore, he still speaks about the experience with his teammates. Greg noted that he is always the one to bring it up—it would not be “good form” if others initiated—and that it is refreshing for him to do so, a way of staying in contact with the experience but doing it on his terms, and in a safe space. He mentions it when he and his friends are reminiscing, and “of course everybody remembers it.” Greg continued, “…it’s one of the good times for me, personally…it’s like baseball therapy. If you have a traumatic experience and you stuff it and don’t get a chance to talk about it, bad things are going to start happening. And so it’s therapeutic. I can talk about this traumatic experience I had.”

As we further discussed how the experience has stayed with him, Greg mentioned a memory from his MVP year which he thought was relevant; that though it did not happen when pitching, the form of the experience overlapped with his yips experience. At the time Greg was hitting the ball well, feeling in a good athletic flow and rhythm and hoped to continue it. However, at the start of one game, as he was walking to the plate to hit, his friend stopped him and said “Just keep playing with confidence. You have been playing with confidence all year long. So just play with confidence.” Greg thought to himself, “Play with confidence, what is that?!” And then described the impact: “It got my way. And I started thinking about it and I went up there thinking about it and I think I went 0 for 4 that day…Sometimes just stay out of my way. I hadn’t been thinking about anything.”
Again, this moment was not a yips experience within the definition I am using here. Yet Greg noted it because it shared some experiential and structural aspects with the way he conceptualizes his yips. His conceptualization allows for some flexibility, in that it led to extreme results of his yips experience in Florida, but it can also occur more regularly with a subtler impact.

**Understanding of the yips: the moment was too big.**

There are two central aspects of Greg’s understanding of his yips. The first is related to Greg’s process of coming to understand the yips moment and the second is the content of this explanation. In some ways Greg still seems to be processing aspects of the experience from that game, and this lack of certainty found its way into our conversation. The most apparent expression of this was the ambivalence with which Greg spoke about “the stadium game.” He shifted back and forth between in his portrayals of the context in which he yipped; at first it was something unique and set apart from other games, and later it was a regular setting that ought not be delineated as anything different. These shifts were to connected to the content of his narrative. In the beginning of Greg’s retelling, he demarcated the game as something special; he referred to it as the stadium game, and it was clear that this was familiar language, probably common within the culture of his teammates and their annual tournament. That is the name for this annual game which is set apart by others due to its unique location. When he introduced the game he also described what makes it “a big treat.” The stadium is large and has all the trappings of a major league stadium: a large scoreboard room for 30,000 in the stands, advertisements along the outfield and much larger dimensions. Greg emphasized that you can feel the difference of the size of the stadium when on the field.
After narrating his yips experience, however, Greg downplayed the significance of the stadium context. Note that this was right after he took personal responsibility for his yips performance. It was as though the process of retelling the details of the game shifted Greg’s understanding of the meaning of the ‘stadium’ context. After taking me through the narrative, Greg emphasized his role in bringing about the yips: “I got in my own way.” When I asked what he meant, Greg replied that it was “just a baseball game,” that it was no big deal, and no different than any other game, including the games he played back home during the regular season. Remembering what he had said earlier, I suggested that there were contextual differences. He briefly acknowledged these and then said, “but when you cut through all the crap it’s still a baseball game.” He then emphasized the consistency of the infield dimensions, and observed that “all I had to do was throw the ball over the plate.”

Greg underwent a second shift in perspective when elaborating on these field dimensions. This one was abrupt; Greg caught himself midsentence while buttressing his argument that the stadium made no difference. It was as though imagining the physical field brought him back to the experience of looking around the impressive landscape. “It’s the same 60’6”, the mound is still 10 inches above the field, the batter box is the same size as……and it feels different.” I encouraged this perspective, suggesting that at the very least there was a relationship between Greg and the context. “Yeah, it wasn’t all me. Right. There were some environmental factors in play as well.”

In listening back to our conversation and reading the transcript, I felt that I was hearing two parts of Greg, two voices that were not particularly aware of each other. Rather, they emerged independently depending on the immediate context of our conversation. Setting up the story Greg described, with boyish enthusiasm, the special context of this big stadium game. After
the story trudged through the yips experience itself, another part emerged. This part will not get caught up in the meaning and significance of the stadium game. This part of him remained disappointed that Greg allowed the yips to take hold of him, even if just for that one moment.

It is as though during our interview I heard his internal wrestling about the origin of this experience, wondering whether to blame himself or the context. In general this seems like an aspect of Greg’s current relationship with this yips experience. He is ambivalent about the etiology of the experience but is also invested in it. His relationship to the yips is inherently filled with tension and ambivalence. Just as researchers are uncertain about the etiology, yippers themselves are conflicted.

Understanding the yips: I got in my own way.

Despite the ambivalence in Greg’s account, he explicitly emphasized his role in bringing about the yips when speaking of causes. This was the closest Greg came to offering an explanation for his yips. When summarizing his yips experience he said, “Now, this is all an example of me getting in my own way. By starting with the negative—don’t walk this guy—I put an obstacle, a mental obstacle, in front of me and prevented my body from doing what it knows how to do…But the moment was too big for me. Or rather, I allowed the moment to be too big for me. Ya know? I mean it was just a baseball game. It was another opportunity to do what I love to do, and instead I created this whole angst over playing a game I love to play. So, I made the moment too big for me. Or bigger than it was or had to be.”

Here again Greg emphasized his role in the yips, stressing that it was not ‘the moment’—the sum of immediate personal, environmental, and relational factors—that was, in and of itself, too big or overwhelming, but instead it was Greg’s interaction with the moment that allowed the game and the demands of pitching to be overly burdensome to him. This is an interesting
element of Greg’s attempt to tease out a cause for his yips experience. He imagines the situation could have gone differently, an alternative past in which Greg would not have been, at that game down in Florida, the sort of person to allow moments to be too big. If we take his phrasing literally and play with it a bit, let’s imagine he did in fact make the moment ‘bigger’ than it needed to be. Here we assume that the moment—him pitching in the stadium game—had some established and objective size, and that Greg, because of some propensity or personal capacity, increased the size of this moment, allowing it to encompass more—tasks or degrees of difficulty? Significance? Meaning? Emotions?—than was required. This assumes that Greg performed some manipulation on the moment, turning it into something that it need not be. And in reflecting on this in our conversation, Greg remained mildly disappointed in himself.

Yet he also offered some understanding, and maybe a bit of self-compassion, for what he brought into that moment that went beyond the terms of the game and what was required of him, and in doing so gave a deeper account for the emergence of his yips. He mentioned that the most prominent emotion he felt during the game was fear. He was afraid that he would never be allowed to pitch again, and connected this to a feeling from childhood. When you are young, he explained, if you do not perform well on the field, you are picked last for the team. Greg had experience with this. “It’s a shitty feeling.” And he believes that his yips experience connected him with that feeling he had long ago: “I think I have this imprinted fear of letting down the other kids on my team and then not being allowed to do this again. That’s how deep it goes.

Viewed in this way, Greg’s yips experience involved him allowing the moment in the stadium game to expand and encompass other fields from other times with other players. And the emotional locus that bound together his past with that present was fear, and a fear of being excluded.
We can see from Greg’s understandings of the yips that, even though some part of him remains ambivalent about his yips experience, he also demonstrates a personal and meaningful framework in which to make sense of the yips. He has a way of carrying the experience that allows him to make meaning of it. While some part of Greg may still wish the yips experience did not happen, he believes it made him a better pitcher, and he was also fortunate that, in tandem with his growth as a baseball player in the last decade, he continued to seek experiences and understandings oriented toward personal growth. Some of these experiences influenced Greg’s baseball performances and identity, and as he mentioned them in our interview they seemed like important influences in Greg’s relationship with his yips experience, especially in that they provided a contrast to the fear and hesitation of his yips.

**Life lessons.**

One reason Greg likes baseball is that he recognizes many life lessons in the demands of the game. And he believes that if he embodies these lessons on the field, he performs better. One of these lessons is the connection between vulnerability and intimacy. He recognizes that, in his life and in his relationships, he must be vulnerable in order to achieve intimacy. He analogizes this to risk and reward: in order to gain the most important and precious rewards from life and relationships, Greg must be willing to take the risk of being vulnerable.

He recognizes a similar dynamic in pitching. Greg sees pitching as an act of total athletic vulnerability. He is centrally located, raised up on the mound, and has perhaps the most important task on his team. And if he and the team do well, he reaps the rewards, feeling praised and like the hero. If he performs poorly, he can feel like a disappointment, and perhaps be more in touch with the fear of exclusion of himself as a little boy. It is a risky proposition, but one that
Greg is glad he is willing to take up. He relishes those moments when he is the hero, or feels “right on (his) game,” or strikes out someone much younger than him. And by willing to risk unpleasant experiences within the bounds of the game, Greg opens himself up to a more intimate connection with himself as a player in the bounded space of baseball.

This habit of seeing and cultivating personal meaning in the game could appear in conflict with Greg’s sense of what plagued him during the yips experience – making the moment “bigger” than it needed to be by treating it as something beyond the narrowly defined athletic movements, tasks, and rules given by the game situation. Yet Greg’s most important life lesson, one that has helped him in his relationships, his work, and on the baseball field, seems ideally crafted to treat moments on their own terms without making them bigger than needed. He refers to it as “presence,” which means something like: not attending to things that are outside of his immediate context. When Greg is present, he is aware of himself and his body in space, attuned to his breath, and feels a connection to the people around him. He does not feel fragmented or “in his head,” or fixated on past experiences or anxieties.

Greg gave two examples of his experience of presence while pitching in baseball. Both are instructive in describing Greg’s relationship to his yips because, in both his conceptualization and the athletic results, these moments seem like the opposite of the yips. The first was a game in which Greg recovered his sense of presence when he felt it slipping away. At the time, Greg was continuing to deepen his engagement with Native American spirituality and had just come from a retreat involving lots of self-discovery and experiential learning. He found himself on the mound during a tight game and, at a crucial moment, felt he was not executing his pitches as intended. His catcher and coach came to the mound to talk with him during a timeout, hoping to give Greg time to collect himself and regain control of the moment. As the game was about to restart, Greg
“took a stroll around the mound,” and in doing saw that the baseball field, with its bases and directions, could represent a Native American Medicine Wheel used to symbolize and manifest various spiritual concepts. Greg took a moment to breathe and reflect: “I faced East and asked for the strength and courage of the Warrior. I faced South and asked for some Magician energy to help me escape the jam. I faced West and reminded myself of how much baseball means to me and the joy I receive from playing, then faced North and asked for wisdom and the ability to create some order while being open to outcome. I took a deep breath and toed the rubber.” Greg felt present and refocused on the task at hand, and had none of the doubt and angst of his yips experience. He got out the next three batters and his team won the game.

Another example of Greg’s baseball presence happened during a night game a few years ago. It was, for Greg, an experience of awe, joy, and gratitude, and as he recounted it in our interview, he implied a positive impact on his pitching performance. It was a night game that was played under lights. There was a full moon and cool, crisp, autumn air. Greg’s wife came to watch. He recounted, “I remember standing on the mound, under the lights with this dark sky and gigantic full moon up there. It was so awesome, to have nature and baseball all in one. ‘Wow, it doesn’t get any better than this.’ I felt so blessed. And that feeling—with the moon’s energy shining down on me and a ball in my hand— it just put me in such a peaceful place. I didn’t give up any runs until the last inning. I was right on my game and it was all because I was in such a full place. I felt full, calm, powerful and blessed, like...what could go wrong?” Greg again lit up as he told me this, animating the story with gestures at the sky and the imagined field, and with a big smile on his face. I noted how different this was from the energy he had when discussing the yips, and again he wondered about inserting this perspective back into the moment of his yips in Florida: “Right, what if I’d gone into that stadium nine years ago and said,
“Wow, I’m in a major league stadium. I’m in Florida, I’m playing baseball, I’m pitching. What could go wrong?” Instead of, “Don’t walk this fucking guy” right? (“Well we wouldn’t be here having this conversation Greg.”) Right, we wouldn’t... until the next time I got in my own way.”

Both above experiences are instructive because they situate Greg’s understanding of his yips as well as his relationship to them by offering counter-examples. We can think of these moments when Greg feels full, calm, and powerful as opposing the yips. These moments of presence in the moment and athletic flow counter the fragmented experience of Greg being ‘in his head.’ Both experiences nourish a feeling of expansiveness, during which Greg connected with ideas and feelings that were bigger than him and beyond the confines of the purely athletic moment and task, yet that left him feeling full and whole, connected with himself and the environment, rather than leaving him with fears, doubts, and insecurities. What could go wrong? When Greg feels attuned to his body and filled up by the environment and the moment, rather than made small by it, he performs as he desires. ‘Presence’ allows him not only to endure the moment, but to thrive in it, as though he has all the resources he needs.

**Summary and initial commentary on the interview.**

As it relates to the definition of the yips I am using here, Greg experienced the yips once in a relatively unfamiliar context. While that experience remains, based on Greg’s memories of what it felt like and the performance outcome, the only full yips moment for Greg, he also relayed a few experiences that, for him, share experiential and structural characteristics with the yips; namely, that he is not ‘present,’ feels in-his-head, or that he is ‘getting in his own way.’ Classified according the dimensional model from Clarke et al. (2015), Greg likely meets criteria for a relatively pure Type II yips, something more similar to performance anxiety. Greg does not
remember any physical sensations from the experience and partly attributes this to his limited understanding of pitching mechanics and to his sense of being “in his head” and not his body. The context in which Greg yipped was also unfamiliar to him, correlating with the findings and discussion from Martin (2016) which suggested that first experiences of the yips may often occur in unfamiliar athletic settings.

Greg continued pitching and to this day has had no other yips moments. Yet as already noted, his relationship with this yips experience—the memories, feelings, and ways of orienting to the moment—has stayed with him and has energy in it; in talking about it Greg and I were able to access rich and personal reflections and also to uncover some uncertainty about how exactly to place the experience.

One way to think about Greg’s experience of and relationship to the yips is that it offers a glimpse of how the yips can manifest for those who have limited experience and success at the activity affected by the yips phenomenon. Perhaps Greg’s yips moment is more like how it presents in children and novices, those for whom the movements and motor programs involved in executing their task—in Greg’s case, throwing the ball over the plate—are not yet sedimented and known to operate successfully without intervention. Though I noted above that the movement itself, throwing a ball overhand at a target, was something with Greg had significant experience, he was a relative beginner on the mound in a competitive game.

Furthermore, Greg had many mitigating factors or ‘resources,’ that helped him avoid immediately re-experiencing the trauma of that pitching context. He had not yet established himself as a pitcher by identity, was in a minimally competitive environment, had friends and teammates with whom to discuss the experience, and additionally had meaningful personal frameworks in which to carry the experience and allow him to bolster his pitching confidence. In
other words, he had safe spaces to which he could fall back, recover, and then build back up his repertoire of skills, confidence, and life lessons.

When I first spoke with Greg I forgot to ask him a question that I asked all other participants, and so followed up with him a couple months after our conversation. When I asked Greg what the yips would say to him if they could speak, he responded, “First thing that came up: I got ya now and you’re not in control. You’re mine now.” And then I offered, “yeah, you don’t have the yips, the yips have you,” to which he responded, “Exactly. We allow them to have us.” Here again Greg reminded me that those who experience the yips play a significant role in making space for them to take hold.

And yet from this I outline the more personal, emotional, and personified aspects of Greg’s yips experiences. Greg’s yips ‘got him’ and took control. They were waiting for the right moment to emerge, the seeds for which were planted decades earlier when Greg was young and found himself on the playground. And they found a good opportunity, when Greg was in the spotlight in a big moment, when the setting was just different enough to jostle Greg out of his still emerging and fragile pitching groove. He had nothing to fall back on and so all it took was a reminder of stakes – that people were counting on him and if he let them down he would no longer be allowed to play. And Greg’s yips were successful, making it impossible for him to throw over the plate, and he was removed from the game without making it through the first inning.

However, the feeling afterward was not the same as on the playground. It stung, for sure, but Greg also had space to laugh and talk about it, and his worst fears were not realized. He made a choice to not let that happen ever again, and had sturdy ground—social, athletic, and personal-emotional space—to which he could retreat in order to ensure growth in both his
baseball and personal life. This kept the yips at bay, especially as Greg continued finding practices—breath work, and embodied and spiritual awareness—that helped him engage the personal themes and experiences from which the yips took hold in the first place.

Greg’s relationship to the yips includes and references all of this. Giving up ten runs in the top of the first inning is one manifestation of the larger whole that is Greg’s yips phenomenon. It points to the experiences of being picked last on the playground, the childlike joy of prowess on the athletic field, the pride in a dominating pitching performance, the context of the ‘big’ stadium, the lingering disappointment at getting in one’s way, and the personal growth that weaves together Greg’s last ten years of baseball lessons.

After responding to my question about the yips speaking, Greg quickly went on to describe an experience which happened between our interview and the follow up, another instance when Greg was able to resist the forces that feel to him similar to the yips. He was pitching and was in the middle of a “monumental streak” of 9 consecutive innings without walk. At some point on the mound Greg became aware of the streak, and then immediately walked the next two batters. But, he told me instead of surrendering to the voice of the yips—“you’re mine now”—that he retained control. Greg stated, “I said to myself, ‘it’s just your mechanics.’ And then I was so deliberate in my approach. Took my stretch, stared at target, slowed everything down.”
James

James is 53 years old, a recreational golfer, and has had repeated experiences with the yips in the last five years. What characterizes James’s yips experience more than anything else is unpredictability. His yips come and go without any indication or warning. This positions James as an observer and responder to his golfing experience, and without agency on the golf course. His yips have a mysterious quality to them. Throughout our conversation James used the phrase “something happened” when describing both the arrival and the departure of a yips experience. He repeatedly referenced the yips as an “it” that overtakes him without any bodily indications; the only sign being his poor golfing outcomes. Also characteristic of James’s yips, he only experiences them on the golf course but not in practice sessions on the driving range. With little framework to make sense of the phenomenon and no sense of the factors that predict a yips experience from a successful golf outing, James is left hoping for some “magic” to help him regain his abilities.

His relationship to the sport began at summer camp when he was eight. Golf was one the electives offered, and James was intrigued by the golfing challenge, which promised “a buck” to any campers that hit a golf ball into a milk crate on the fly. He signed up and was the only camper to do so. He enjoyed the one-on-one attention, tips, and encouragement of the camp counselor. James felt he had a certain aptitude for the sport and continued playing with other kids in his neighborhood when he returned from camp.

James continues to golf throughout most of the year; in New York in the spring, summer, and fall, and in Florida during the winter. He loves the game, feeling that there are few things in life more satisfying than a well-struck golf shot. He likes the sense of self-mastery that comes from gathering the intentions and movements of his body in concerted action aimed at the target.
There was a theme of control through our conversation. James strives to be in control of his game and evaluates himself according to that metric; part of his frustration when first experiencing the yips was feeling out of control of his body and movements, and not being able to reassert control through his usual techniques.

This sense of self-mastery in golf has been elusive for James in the last few years. I heard about James’s experience through a sports psychologist with a yips specialty. When I asked Dr. Rob Bell for prospective participants for this project he gave me the contact information for James, who he suggested might have “the full swing yips,” instead of just having a putting issue.

I was nervous when reaching out to James. He had been in contact with Dr. Bell—who specializes in using guided meditation and positive imagery as an intervention for the yips (Bell et al., 2009; Bell, Skinner, & Halbrook, 2011; Bell & Thompson, 2007)—to help fix his golf game, and instead I contacted him in hopes he would delve into his experience without promise of a fix. Yet he was enthusiastic about helping and surprised that more people were not willing to speak with me. When I said that people would rather avoid the topic, James responded, “you can’t change what you won’t acknowledge.”

We conducted the interview at James’s home on a sunny spring Saturday, right before he was planning to go to the driving range for a practice session. In our interview it seemed that James’s relationship with his yips had reached something of a stalemate. He was not concerned that talking about the yips would exacerbate them. I found him to be open and articulate about what he knows of his yips experience, but also that this knowledge was limited in scope, and limited by the very nature of James’s particular manifestation of the yips. Throughout our conversation he seemed resigned to the opacity of his yips. He was restricted in how descriptive he could be about his experience because so much of James’s yips are hidden away from him. A
primary characteristic of James’s yips is that they are elusive and that James has little agency or even awareness regarding their presence. James is a smart guy, educated and articulate and confident. He carried himself with confidence and charisma in our interaction. At times I felt myself lulled into a casual, matter-of-fact attitude regarding James’s yips experience, in contrast to the awe and curiosity with which I engage the yips at most other times, and how I approached James’s golfing issues when I looked back at our conversation. It is clear from our conversation taken as a whole that James’s relationship to his yips has changed over these five years, that it is still in flux, and that it is revelatory of important aspects of the yips phenomenon in general.

**Arc of yips relationship.**

Most striking about James’s yips is the degree to which their appearance is dependent on him playing on a golf course and not a practice or driving range. James guessed that the first time he experienced the yips was five years ago. He acknowledged that he could not be sure of the timeline because when it first happened, he did not note it as a bounded experience, or expect that it would become “a thing.” He thought it was an aberration and that it did not merit much attention. This differs from other yips experiences. As already noted, most individuals register their first yips as notable and as something to be avoided in the future, and anxiety forms around the context in which the yips occurred. Perhaps something of this did occur for James and he either does not remember it or it happened outside of his awareness, which is in keeping with the opaque nature of his yips.

Regardless, James recalls the circumstances of the first yips event. He was at a local course that was familiar to him and, as he always does, warmed-up with a variety of shots and clubs on the driving range. He hit it well, too, and recalls going up to the first tee expecting to
play a solid round of golf. However when he attempted his first swing he nearly missed the ball, striking only the top of it; the ball trickled off the tee several yards in front of him. He paused briefly, noting it as strange—"Wow, how interesting"—and then put down another ball. The result was another “terrible shot,” and James described the rest of that day as “a surprisingly bad round of golf.”

This experience repeated itself. At the time James did not acknowledge anything out of the ordinary. However looking back he can see a pattern emerged after that first day, and this basic framework has structured James’s golf game for most of the last few years. He warms up great on the range only to discover he “cannot play on the golf course.” In the beginning James had particular difficulty with the first tee, noting heightened anxiety about that opening shot. In time he adjusted, however, and after a solid range session felt positive about approaching the course. Yet the good play and flowing rhythm of the practice range falls away at some point on the course. It might not be the first shot, but usually James quickly loses the swing capacities he had on the range. His errant play on the course does not have any pattern, either. It is not the case that all his shots are missed to the left, or to the right, or exhibit some sort of identifiable mechanical cause.

Once this happens it is difficult for James to get back to the rhythmic and successful swings he executed on the range. In fact his mentality shifts into a panic mode, shouting “danger, danger, evasive maneuvers!” as he tries to compartmentalize and limit the impact of the first yips-like shot. He is rarely if ever successful, noting “it’s not like I can fix this in my own mind.”

This is the basic scope of James’s yips. He warms up on the range and performs well and as he intends to. This play does not translate to the golf course. This pattern was originally frustrating for James. He admits that early on, as he realized this issue would stay with him, he
got angry. “There were a few slammed golf clubs,” he told me. But as we talked about his reactions to and feelings about the experience, he spoke with little emotion, seeming somewhat resigned to his golfing fate, and yet there were glimmers of frustration, especially regarding James’s efforts to understand the phenomenon. I now expand on the central features of James’s yips experience.

**Jekyll and Hyde.**

When James hits well on the range, he feels confident, in control of his game, and sees results that are consistent with his intentions and level of skill. If his shots on the range are not going well, he can almost always talk himself through it, usually by focusing on one or two of his “swing keys,” mechanical cues addressing some aspect of his swing. He told me once he makes the adjustment, “I start hitting great, quality shots, and being in control of my game.”

However, something happens between the range and the golf course. James’s most apt description is to compare it to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the story of the affable doctor and his violent and evil alter ego. The qualities that characterize James’s range experience do not hold for the course; the course represents an inverse of the range. The swing keys that nudge him back in the direction of good swings and desired results on the range fail on the course. James underscored the sense of a personality change by noting with a shrug of his shoulders that, on the course, “it feels like I’m talking to a stranger,” a stranger who either does not understand James’s appeals, or does not care to listen.

The nature and quality of James’s shots are also flipped between range and course. On the range James mostly hits what he characterizes as “good” shots. When he does hit a bad shot, it is the typical bad shot expected by someone of his skill level. And James hits only two or three
of these per session on the range. However, he said, “If I go out and play on the course these
days, I’m lucky to hit two or three good shots. The whole situation is flipped…..and the bad
shots I hit on the golf course are atrocious. They’re the kind of shots hit by somebody who’s
never golfed. I mean the only way I could hit these shots worse is if I missed the ball
completely.” These aspects of James’s experience are in keeping with a yips experience, in
which performance is dramatically diminished.

When I pointed out to James that the range differs from the course in that you do not
retrieve your ball, and that it might be easier to get into a rhythm by hitting balls in rapid
succession, he assured me he controlled for this variable. James performs what he calls
“simulated rounds,” in which he chooses one of his familiar courses and plays out an entire 18
hole round at the driving range. He pictures the course and chooses spots in the driving range
field as targets, simulating the pace and exact shots of the golf course. His club choice is
determined by the simulated situation as he makes his way through all 18 holes. In these
simulated rounds James achieves (simulated) scores better than anything he has ever hit on any
golf course, scores that he “can’t even dream about on the golf course.”

James is ambivalent about these simulated rounds. He enjoys them, still relishing the
thrill of a well struck shot, but they can lead to frustration, too, as they seem to him to give clear
evidence that he can still play high quality golf but that for some reason (more on this below),
the results do not translate from range to course. Before continuing to articulate the central
features of James’s yips experience, I briefly elaborate on the differences between the driving
range and the golf course.

The driving range is a large open field. Typical practice facilities have several tee boxes
arranged in a line with small demarcations between them, oriented toward the field where balls
are hit. Tee boxes have natural or artificial turf, and golfers can choose to place balls on a tee or on the ground directly. Large buckets of golf balls are used to give players between dozens and hundreds of practice shots. The range field may contain a few normal course elements to help with practice, such as a green and flag, sand traps, trees, and distance markers. It is these elements that James uses to assist his simulated rounds.

One key difference in the layout of the driving range and the course is the size of the space into which the ball is struck. The wide and open range becomes a much narrower fairway. While James aims at specific targets and has success hitting them, the landscapes appear much different – on the range James sees an open field and chooses to narrow his field of play, on the course it is narrowed for him. And the consequences of poor play are different on range and course. The stakes are bigger on the course, with every shot determining the nature of the next task and affecting the overall score. And the formal rules of golf do not apply on the range. While James may hold himself accountable to rules of the game while playing his simulated rounds, it does not carry the same force of tradition and convention.

Though perhaps obvious, another significant difference is that, for James, the range has never been linked to the yips context. The initial yips event and ensuing pattern were marked by a contrast between range and course. James warmed up well on the range and then faltered on the course. This contrast still holds within James’s experiences and associations to the range.

When I asked if he still enjoys hitting at the range, he insisted he did and for emphasis added, “the range is a safe place.” One way of collecting together these differences between the driving range and the golf course is by referencing the discussion of play and play spaces from above. The driving range, while still a space for golf and golf-like activities, is not the full and
“real” game. Rather it is a play space within a play space. A freer and artificial version of the real game.

It comes and goes.

Other than knowing that his poor play will happen somewhere on the golf course, James is not aware of any manifestations of the yips that show up before, during, or after his swing. Many individuals with the yips develop a cue—muscles twitches before moving or anxiety about a yips-inducing context—that give them some indicator other than performance that the yips are present. Not for James: “No, I cannot feel it coming on, and that’s the most surprising thing to me.”

This has been true throughout James’s relationship with the yips. He stressed that after his initial frustration and anxiety when this began, he now walks to the first tee expecting a positive result, and, to the best of his awareness, his cognitive and emotional state are the same as they were on the range. He said, “I’m thinking the same thoughts, I’m setting up the same way, I have the same intention, I think I’m doing everything the same way with the same pre-shot routine. And then something physically happens to change the swing.”

However, James does not feel a physical change, instead he assumes this is happening because of his wayward shot. This is confounding and frustrating for James. While most yips experiences resist the understanding of the athlete, James’s yips remain especially opaque to him. He never knows when they will arrive within his round and experiences them as an unwelcome surprise visitor when they do, which in turn positions him as a spectator to his own golfing experience, as though he is watching someone else’s performance.
James experiences this lack of awareness and agency in the long-term, too, as there have been stretches of time when his yips have gone away and his performances returned to their previous levels. This imbues James’s overall relationship with inconsistency, mystery, and befuddlement. He stated, “It comes and goes. This hasn’t been five years of ‘can’t play golf.’ This has been five years of some of that and then it went away for a while. And then there are times like last year, when something happens.”

James then described a series of outings from the previous summer, when not only did his yips leave, but he played the best golf of his life. It began when James played with a friend at a local course alongside two strangers. As he began the round his performance was slightly better than usual; he was not playing well but was not losing a lot of balls either, which at the time was more enjoyable for James than most rounds. Then came an inflection point. James said, “Then all of a sudden something happened. And I don’t know what it was. I par’ed both eight and nine, and then the other people left at nine. I played the rest of the round two over par. And I’m like, “That’s fun, I like that. That’s good. Maybe I should do this more often.” Two over par is a remarkable score for a recreational golfer of James’s caliber, more aligned with his “simulated rounds.”

That release from the yips stayed for some time. James played one more good round of golf and one more “acceptable” round, before asking his wife to come play with him so he could show her his improved game. When the season ended, James stopped playing for a period before continuing in Florida for the winter. The yips returned. James described, “I was terrible. I had one or two rounds where for moments, all of a sudden, I could hit it again. I made one swing and I was like, ‘Wow, that is the best swing I’ve made in a year.’ And that feeling stayed for a little while but then it was gone again.”
That James’s yips can come and go across longer periods of time reinforces his passivity in the experience of both yips-like and flow-like play. He operates more as a receiver and expresser of good and bad play, as though golfing aptitude moves through him and he expresses it, rather than it emanating intentionally from him in top-down fashion. When the yips do leave he feels relieved: “Sometimes it goes away to the point where I won’t hit these horrible shots and I just won’t play a good round of golf. That feels like an improvement.”

**Understanding the yips.**

James lacks a coherent narrative or framework for making sense of his yips. The best he can do is reason through the phenomenon, using the information he does have and his understanding of mind-body interactions. He said, “My understanding is that this is a physical manifestation of a mental problem.” James went on to list his premises. On the range he can swing and strike the ball the way he intends, as evidenced by the outcome of his shots. Between the range and the golf course he has not physically changed: “…unless I trip and fall down the stairs on the way to the first tee…I’m physically the same guy I was two minutes ago.” Here he seems to mean something like: the fundamental structure and functionality of his body—apart from his mind—is conserved from the range to the course. Yet the only way to produce different results on the course than the range is from a different swing, and a different swing results from a difference in physical movements. Though because James cannot detect any physical changes, he assumes it is happening outside of his consciousness, saying, “Something happens, and I think it happens at a subconscious level. Because all of a sudden, I’m not making the same swing.” Thus his yips are a physical manifestation of a mental problem.
It was clear that James still conceptualizes this “mental problem” as related primarily to his movements and swing techniques. The problem is some deficient understanding of how to execute his swing, and he holds out hope that he can learn what this issue is and correct it: “I think that if I knew what the physical part was, I could overcome the subconscious mental part because I would bring it into consciousness and would physically, twitch my left pinky, or whatever I need to do to hit a good shot. So that’s the magic I’m looking for.”

The yips with others.

He craves this magic, in part so he can appreciate the game the way he used to, which especially involves enjoying his time with others on the golf course. This is another central aspect of James’s yips – that they are both impacted by, and have an effect on, other people in his life. James’s yips involve others. He never used to have difficulty playing with others. Having grown up playing at municipal golf courses where space is limited and golfers are often grouped together with other parties, James is used to playing in front of others, including strangers, and it never gave him anxiety until his experiences with the yips. Now it does, and he tries to avoid playing with strangers when he is experiencing a “horrendous” stretch of the yips. If he is playing with strangers and experiences the yips, he “gets a little quiet and doesn’t talk about the golf game as much.” It is not something to be discussed.

James recalls one particularly difficult round of golf that he linked to the presence of others. It happened in Florida three years ago. James and his wife, who is a golf pro and instructor, were playing with one of her important students and the student’s husband, who James described as “an extraordinarily powerful and wealthy guy in the financial industry.” They played at an exclusive club and James described the round as one of the first times he lost a lot of golf balls: “It
was the worst round of golf he had ever played up until that point.” The emotional impact was significant. He felt terrible, feeling like he embarrassed himself as well as his wife. He stated, “here I am a husband of a golf pro and I can’t hit a golf ball. That was, like, actually a problem.” At the very least James feels that that social context exacerbated his swing struggles.

After a difficult round like that James avoids playing with others or casual acquaintances. Yet even when struggling he still enjoys playing with those he knows well. In these situations James has found ways to manage his yips experience so as not to negatively impact the experience of others or disrupt the enjoyable, pleasant social interactions.

He rarely discusses his golf game when on the course with others, and he never speaks about his yips experience with friends. If his friends do reference something related to the yips, they might make one teasing comment if he hits a ball into the woods, such as, “Oh, there you go again, you probably have three dozen balls in there, see if you can find any of them.” No larger conversation happens. I was surprised by this, given that any friends of James’s would clearly note a dramatic change in his golf game in the last five years, and asked a follow up to gauge whether James’s golfing companions had any way of sharing this experience, or referencing it in a way that makes it explicitly known within the group. He reflected for a moment to consider his response before saying (transcribed verbatim to retain pauses): “I don’t speak about it with my friends. Our golf course banter has pretty much stayed the same. Like for instance….um, you know, there’s…there’s…yeah, I don’t know anyone that says anything like…you know…[pause]…anything. Yeah. I don’t think that it’s actually a topic of discussion.”

James uses another tactic to manage his yips experience when playing with others. It is considered a courtesy in golf to help playing partners who have lost a ball. An average round for James these days has him losing several balls, and he does not want to be the one who holds up
his partners or the groups behind him, the one that breaks the comfortable pace and rhythm of the round or to feel that he is “detrimental to the experience for others.” As a solution, James discovered that the Home Depot sold cheap golf balls, priced five dollars for a dozen. He buys these and tells his partners, when they offer to look for a ball, “don’t bother,” and places a second ball down for another attempt. He summarized, “So yeah, I definitely feel like there is an awareness of how my actions affect other people; people in our group, people behind us, people on the rest of course. I wouldn’t want to be that guy.” James has found ways to adapt his manifestation of the yips to the social pressures of the golf course.

These accommodations all seemed aimed at allowing James’s golf experiences to proceed as though everything were normal, even though he recognizes that something odd is going on, and even though his playing partners, strangers and friends alike, must register something of this. Yet the politeness of the golf course endures, except for the occasional jab from friends.

One person who certainly knows that “something happens” to James on the golf course is his wife. They have been together for 10 years, and James admitted in our conversation that there are complicated dynamics among he, his wife, and their shared involvement in golf. He mentioned, “There is a whole relationship going on with the golf and with wanting my wife to see me in a good light.” And rarely has she seen this on the golf course. While she has offered some tips here and there, the issue with the yips has been trickier for the two. James mentioned that she can feel his frustration and that she, too, is frustrated, and I followed up, suggesting that the yips takes up some emotional space in their relationship. James then pulled back a bit, insisting the two do not allow it to affect them.

Still, James’s relationship to his yips is meaningfully connected to his relationship with his wife. Last summer when James suddenly found himself playing well, she did not believe the scores
he reported. He did not blame her, and instead insisted she had to come play with him. It was important that she see him perform well – to see that he could do it. And it was important enough for him to fight through pain to do it; on the morning of their golf date he pulled a muscle in his back at the gym (in the interview he wondered aloud, “why that day of all days? Perhaps there’s something to that). He continued the narrative, “we went to the golf course and I could barely stand up but wouldn’t let that stop me. I went to the range and hit it well. And we went out to play and I was right on my game….And she said, ‘I’ve never seen you play like this.’ And let me tell you, I didn’t care if my back never recovered or if I was a cripple in a wheel chair. That would have been okay because I had that moment that was important to me, for her to see that I could actually play.”

James’s yips are not only an experience for him, but are shared, explicitly or not, by and with others. Their absence has an impact, too, leaving James feeling better about himself, including in the eyes of his wife.

**Humor reveals deeper expressions.**

This final aspect of James’s yips is harder to describe, but it seems integral to how James relates to his yips, and how they show themselves in conversation. A more emotional, darker, more critical face of James’s yips poked through in a few brief moments when James was using humor to respond to one of my questions. Note that each of these questions was less direct and linear, more metaphorical and imaginative. These were exactly the sort of questions I hesitated to ask James, something about his demeanor and identity gave me trepidation that they would not be received. But they were received, and I believe the responses indicate something about the nature of James’s yips and his relationship to them. I list them here in the order the came up during the
interview, with a brief discussion about each exchange. I then collect together some thoughts about
the significance of all three.

Patrick: “Do you have a name for your yips?”
James: “What, like Fred? (laughs). No, I never really had a name for it. I mean the closest I
probably came was “you suck.” (laughs).

The phrasing here is ambiguous; I cannot tell who is speaking. Is this a name for the yips,
or a name James gives to himself when experiencing the yips? As in, is this self-talk or speech
directed toward the phenomenon? Regardless, it was the first glimmer in my conversation with
James of the emotional valiance of his yips, coated in criticism, insult, dismissiveness.

[Note: we were standing, James had just demonstrated his typical pre-shot routine]

Patrick: “Do you have any thoughts about something happening in your transition from the range
to course? On the range you’re in rhythm, feeling good, and maybe as you’re walking to approach
the course...”

James: (interrupts and briefly comports his body into the following pose: bent knees – shrinking a
few inches; raised and tense shoulders pulled up to his neck; chest caved in; raised hands, moved
in a shaking and tense motion, as if to defend himself from being struck from above. He is bracing,
shaking, and tense) “And do that? (laughs).” No, when I go up to the first tee I’m expecting a
positive result.

Two things here: This was the most that James moved his body in our interview in a
spontaneous, expressional way. The pose itself, at the very least, indicates that some part of
James’s experience tells him what a possible embodied expression of his yips could look like: it
would look scared, small, frazzled, struck by something. This is similar to other times in our conversation when James gave an unprompted denial, telling me what is not happening instead of telling me what is. He is not anxious, he is not worried about hitting the ball out of bounds, he is not overly focused on hitting a good shot. These statements, and the above pose, indicate that James at least understands what would make sense, given his experience, as a thought or feeling associated with his yips. Perhaps for James a yips-like movement looks like being struck and being made smaller.

*Patrick: if this thing, yips or not, could say something to you, do you know what it would say?*

*James: (Whispers) I hate you. (laughs). Nah, I don’t know. I would never even think of it that way. I don’t know if it has a life or an energy. You know, I don’t think I’m really on a first name relationship basis with it.*

What struck me about this response was how immediate and instinctive it was. Joke or not, he knew what to say. And there was an intensity to it, a whispered, under-the-breath, forceful declaration. Again, under the guise of a joke it is easily, and perhaps usefully, dismissed.

Taken together, these responses have qualities that link them to other expressions of the yips from other yips-affected individuals. They are critical and self-diminutive, and they exist in the landscape of self-reproach and disgust. They are contracting responses; they are the sort that makes someone feel and be small, less desirous of engaging with others or the world. And under the cover of humor they are protected expressions. They are delivered in a play space which allows for spontaneity and free movements, but which also asks that the slate be wiped clean when the joke is done. We were just playing! And yet each response was instinctual and not premeditated. James was not “in his head,” as so many with the yips experience.
This is in keeping with the theme of opacity in James’s yips. He does not have much of a narrative to frame his yips, not an emotional or personal or even embodied narrative like some others do. And yet expressions revelatory of the emotional and relational nature of James’s yips emerged in the few moments when it was safer to do so. The rest of the time it remained tucked away.

**Summary and initial commentary on the interview.**

With respect to my definition of the yips, James has regularly experienced the yips during the last five years, with intermittent periods of relief. James yips involve the loss of the ability to execute a full golf swing as intended. This is somewhat rare for the golfing yips, which typically manifest in putting or chipping, requiring fine motor movements with a much smaller range of motion than a full golf swing. However, as the yips typically affect a basic, easy, or fundamental skill that had previously been mastered, James meets criteria for the yips. In his case the impact is on his ability to execute the basic fundamentals for a variety of swings with a variety of clubs. If assessed on the yips spectrum, James would likely be classified as an intermediate, Type III, case, or else as unclassifiable. He reports no physical symptoms and, at least currently—when James’s yips began he felt frustrated and increased anxiety—claims no psychological symptoms. His only indicator of the yips is the outcome of his shots, which are significantly, even surprisingly, worse than what he used to hit and what he currently hits on the driving range. As is the case with most presentations of the yips, James’s are confined to a particular context in which they manifest, the actual golf course. He has never experienced the golf yips on the driving range or other practice spaces.
Those two spaces represent opposite ends of the performance spectrum for James. The range is flow-like, the course is yips-like. James assumes that something happens to him unconsciously, but has no explicit hypotheses about what this might be. He seems to think it is a mechanical or technical problem with his swing, and hopes to discover a way out of the yips.

James and I have different associations to ‘subconscious.’ In one sense I agree with James, that something about his yips lies out of his awareness and that bringing it into consciousness could be helpful. Yet we have different ideas for what could make a good access point to this unconscious element. James believes that something physical and technique-related is the primary factor. I conceptualize it more broadly, not because I know the primary cause of James’s yips, but because I suspect that some of the manifestations of his yips, as expressed in our interview, carry clues to this potential access point. Here I outline my understanding of James’s yips, by expanding on the more personal, emotional, and personified aspects of James’s yips.

James’s relationship with his yips is characterized by opacity, by the distant and unfamiliar connection one has with a stranger. James and his yips do not share a communication style and do not know how to begin establishing one. Maybe they do not want to. I suspect that James, like Jekyll with Hyde, wants little to do with his yips.

They are cruel and like to taunt him. They show up for long periods of time and then occasionally leave, just long enough for James to feel relief, to again feel the joy of a flowing swing, a desired outcome, and a sense of self-mastery. And they never show up on the driving range, teasing James just enough time and space before pouncing on him on the course.

He experiences their relationship as one of mystery and acrimony. James can feel persecuted by his yips, and when they first showed up he used to fight back. He slammed a few
clubs to let the yips know what he thought of them. When James saw that others did not like this he learned to accept his yips, to enter an uneasy stalemate, to be a mediator in between his yips and his wife, friends, and others that golf with him. These accommodations maintain a cautious distance from his yips and keep up pleasant appearances. James does not speak about the yips with his friends, and is content—“it’s fine”—to make the focus of outings with his wife about working on her game. James keeps the yips hiding in plain sight.

**Update.**

Here is an update to James’s yips story. I spoke briefly with him a few months after our interview, as he encouraged me to follow up if needed. I wanted to ask a question about he and his wife—if they had been together for 10 years, and he had the yips for 5, did they play together much before the yips? Yes, they did. But in the course of this conversation James mentioned that he was “cautiously optimistic” about his current golf game and his progress with respect to the yips. Before the start of his golf season his wife insisted that he take six lessons with a new coach. He did, and this coach encouraged him to adapt an entirely different swing than the one he’s used his whole life. Instead of moving his clubhead left to right as it approached the ball, he would do it right to left. And it has worked. He played a few times and felt confident and was “way more in control.” James said, “I don’t have the fear that that crazy shot is coming over. Occasionally it happens, but if I then focus on the new swing, I can usually hit a decent shot.” James emphasized that he had stopped playing for the fall but was hopeful about the season in Florida.

This development makes sense—it is a solution related to the ‘sensory tricks,’ or the technique and equipment changes, often known to mitigate yips symptoms. James has built a
new ‘motor program’ that is unaffected by the yips. However, previous accounts have shown that the yips can occasionally overcome these new approaches and take hold in a new movement context (R. Masters & Maxwell, 2008). Golfers have experienced the yips ‘spreading’ to their other hand (McDaniel et al., 1989). And in the following account of Megan’s husband, John, his putting yips sequentially affected at least three different putting techniques that originally overcame the yips. Note that the instructions for James’ new swing give him a concrete cognitive anchor on which to tether his focus while on the course. This movement is not yet habituated. He still exerts mental effort to execute it. I comment more on how these new motor programs and sensory tricks might operate in the discussion section.
Megan

Megan is a 53-year-old golfer. She is a professional, competing as a touring pro back in the late 80s and early 90s, and transitioning to a club and teaching pro around 1993. Her experiences with the yips began about twenty years ago, long after she stopped competing. And as of two years ago her relationship with the yips entered a different phase; she now feels past them, and positioned herself in our interview as looking back at them. Early in the conversation she corrected herself, changing “that’s when it happens” to “…happened, past tense.” In solidarity with Megan’s hopes I use the past tense here in this narrative though she acknowledges that the yips linger in the back of her mind at the start of each season. Despite finding her way through the difficulties of the yips, Megan still orients to them with significant emotion and some frustration. For Megan the yips are “evil,” and for years she tried to block them out by avoiding the golfing context that triggers them.

Another important general aspect of Megan’s yips is that she has had a partner in the experience. Her husband John, also a forming touring and current club pro, experiences the yips as well. During the interview they seemed to me something of a team, with Megan calling John from the other room to help recall timelines or details, and with John briefly adding his perspective on the yips to our conversation. I include his few contributions together with Megan’s narrative both to supplement our discussion of the yips and to retain something of the quality of their shared experience of the yips. Megan had someone with whom to share the burden of this disruption.

Megan spent most of her childhood in a retirement community in Florida. Her father moved the family just outside of Orlando when she was five years old. The town had a golf course and most everyone in the neighborhood played. Megan took up the sport when she was
10, alongside the town’s other junior players. She recalled that there “were a lot of kids that were golfers so that’s just what we did, we’d carry our clubs and play all day long.” Megan started playing tournaments when she was 12 and got attention for her natural skill. She went on to play in college and then to test out some professional events in the late 80s. In 1991 she qualified for the LPGA tour, and after that year played a couple more years of “mini-tours.” By then she was married and she and her husband, who also played professionally, looked for more stable job situations. He got a job as a club pro outside of Pennsylvania and they moved north, with Megan also getting work as a club pro.

Megan loves the game, partly for the natural beauty of its courses and the peace and quiet that comes with walking the landscape, and partly for something deeper, more ineffable; “it’s a game that just gets under your skin.” She talked about how hitting a couple good shots – struck exactly how, and landing exactly where, you intend to hit them—brings you back for more. And once that happened for Megan she was hooked, always striving to get back to that feeling, the effortless feel of a flowing golf swing that leads to perfect contact between ball and club.

Megan and I connected through word-of-mouth. She heard I was looking for help in learning about the yips, and having dealt with them for so long, she was willing to offer her experiences in hopes they might provide understanding or relief for others. As with most of my participants I felt some trepidation about the impact of our conversation. While talking to Megan on the phone I assumed that she was still struggling with the yips; she told me how the yips affected her when she was chipping. I did not yet know if she was still competing in tournaments, and worried that our conversations might bring her into closer contact with the gravitational pull of the yips. Yet she seemed enthusiastic about helping and we set up a time to meet.
Somewhat serendipitously, Megan had a conflict on the day we scheduled our interview and instead of meeting at her house we met the following day in the pro shop at the golf club where she works. We sat in the middle of the shop, with my camera and audio recorder interspersed amongst the golf clubs and clothes ready for sale. And the Masters Tournament—the one in which Ernie Els yipped a few years earlier—was on television. Golf was quite literally all around us.

My conversation with Megan was the shortest of all the interviews. We spoke for about an hour, which included additional comments from her husband and a few interruptions by patrons of the shop. Megan answered all my questions but did not veer into tangents or expand on stories to underscore her descriptions of the yips. I experienced her as open and honest about her experience, and happy and willing to answer my questions. Though it was as though she did not want to dwell on the yips. She has moved on from them, was happy to help with the project, but did not want to linger in that area of her mind where the yips have residence. I begin here with the narrative of Megan’s first yips experience.

**First yips experience.**

Megan first experienced the yips in 1997 or 1998. At the time she was employed at the first country club at which she and John worked when they moved to Pennsylvania. She was at the pro shop and decided to go outside to the practice green and hit some chip shots. In her retelling of it, Megan “just grabbed some balls for something to do. And then it just happened.” She did not say whether it was the first shot or occurred after a few normal practice chips. Regardless, she hit “this ugly stub off to the right,” and immediately froze, reacting with alarm: “Oh my god, what just happened. I looked around to see if anybody saw.”
Note the social component. Megan instinctively knew—an immediate, embodied knowing—that whatever had just happened was not a thing she wanted others to see. Right as it occurred, before any conscious thought on the shot, the result, what to do next, or how to make sense of it, the social constitution of Megan’s yips shows itself. Because of how immediate this reaction was, it is useful to think about the checking of Megan’s surroundings as part of the yips movement itself. Before any conscious reflection or intentional action, she moves from an “ugly stub” to the scanning of her social environment. Some part of Megan knew that this movement, in spite of it being a practice shot in a non-competitive context, was something to guard from the view of others.

She said she checked for others because she was embarrassed about mis-hitting such a simple shot, that “it was so bad.” Afterward she tried again and again with similar results. Finally she stopped, frustrated, not wanting to continuing attempts to get out of the rut.

She then reflected on what was happening, recognizing that this was not a normal mishit: “You can chunk chips and hit them thin, but this was just a totally different animal.” It was less predictable, more feral. And the shot was accompanied by specific physical sensations, like a “spasm.” Megan started to panic because “it was something in (her) hands” that she could feel right at the moment the club contacted ball. And that was when she knew: “I’ve been around golf enough and heard people explain what it feels like, especially from John – that it’s like the club ‘goes off’ in your hands. It felt like something went off in my muscles. And then I knew – this is the yips. Immediate dread and panic.”

Megan felt dread because she knew how insidious and intractable the yips can be for golfers who experience them. This emotional response was the beginning of an embedding process for Megan, a long period of avoidance and turning-away from the yips. I describe this in
more depth below, but first further articulate the particular context of the shot affected by Megan’s yips.

**Context of affected shot.**

Megan’s yips began at time when, relatively speaking, her golf performance mattered less than at other times in her life. She was finished with professional competition and was out on a practice green without an invested audience. It happened, and would continue to happen, right at the moment of contact; a split-second spasm occurring when, for the success of the shot, it matters most; as she puts it: “when everything happens.” And it only happened in a narrow golfing context.

Megan’s affected shot is referred to as a ‘bump-and-run.’ It is employed when there is a short distance to the hole but the ball remains off the putting surface. Instead of trying to hit the ball high in the air, intending it to land near the hole, a player hits the ball with a lower-lofted club (the club face is closer to perpendicular than a higher-lofted club, resulting in a lower trajectory of the struck ball). There is shorter air time and the intention is to land the ball and let it ‘run’ toward the hole along the ground.

The full context of Megan’s yips is narrower still, with the ‘lie’ of the ball determining whether a particular bump-and-run shot was susceptible. The lie describes the relationship between the ball and the ground. For Megan, it was a “tight” lie that provoked her yips: “when it’s the tight, closely mown grass, and I feel like I have to get the ball up in the air a little bit.” The variation in outcomes between a tight lie and other shots was dramatic. At the peak of Megan’s yips she was unable to even make a yip-free practice swing—a stroke not intended to hit the ball—when preparing for a tight lie bump-and-run. Yet if she moved the shot to longer
grass and a looser lie she could perform freely without yipping. A looser lie allows the ball some space from the ground. The longer grass holds it up higher in the air, though only slightly. Yet it was a determining factor for Megan’s yips.

Megan was especially frustrated because the shot was simple and she ought to be able to perform it with ease. She was incredulous as she demonstrated the movement to me in our interview: “It’s not a difficult shot. The movement is just here to here. That’s all I was doing. But I couldn’t make good contact. I might hit the ground so far behind the ball that the club bounces up into the ball and I’ll scull it. And it’ll go low and forever and then I’ll have the same shot coming back. I could hit it either too far or too short, but all horrible.”

Like most manifestations of the yips, Megan’s were confined to a subset of the movements required to play the game. The rest of her performance was fine, though her overall performance for a round of golf was slightly worse due to the outcomes of her yipped shots.

**Response to the yips.**

As mentioned above, even in the first instance of yips, Megan felt the panic and dread that would characterize much of the emotional valence of her yips. When, later in our conversation, John described the yips as existing in one’s head—I expand on this below—Megan elaborated by suggesting that the yips experience grows larger with time, that it expands to encompass more personal space, thoughts, and feelings. She said, “Once it happens the first time it just kind of snowballs into this big deal. At least it did for me.”

Part of Megan’s ‘snowballing’ process was her attempts to ignore the phenomenon. She tried to pretend that it was not real, intentionally pushing it out of her conscious thoughts and focusing instead on the rest of her unaffected and enjoyable golf game. However, the shot itself
would remind her, initiating a patterned response of fear and aversion when she saw the lie that
was in part constitutive of her yips movements: “It got to the point that panic would set in when I
saw I was going to have the shot. I would immediately think, ‘I’m gonna yip this one.’ And at
first I could still make perfect practice strokes and feel prepared for the shot, but then ‘ughhh,’ I
would yip it. I would take the club back knowing it would be bad. It just got in my head.”

One way to think of this snowballing effect is that it circumscribes the process by which
an individual’s yips experience is embedded, how it comes to be carried within the matrix of the
athlete’s specific yips-affected movements and associated cognitive processes. Once the first
experience happens, athletes develop a repertoire of orientations and reactions to their yips
context. For Megan this repertoire included aversion and turning away from the experience.

She attempted this in a concrete way on the golf course by choosing other, less efficient
shots in place of a bump-and-run when it looked like a lie might produce a yip. Megan recalled,
“I got pretty good at avoiding the shot altogether. If I didn’t have anything to go over I’d just
putt, even when the right shot was definitely a chip.” And yet she occasionally forced herself to
perform the shot, telling herself that it was the preferred action. This led to many yipped shots on
the course, some of which were seen by others. These witnesses, as well as the overall stigma of
the yips in golf, were also part of Megan’s embedding process.

The yips with others.

That the yips would deeply impact Megan was partly determined ahead of time, both by
general golf discourse on the yips and by Megan’s personal associations of the phenomenon.
One of Megan’s first reactions was something like disgust or self-criticism, calling into question
her golfer identity: “It’s personal. Like I said I felt embarrassed. I’m supposed to be a
professional and I have an easy chip and it goes two feet. That should never happen. That’s why it really rocked me. I was just like, ‘Yikes, yips are for shitty golfers, not me!’” And the yips have a superstitious, magical quality to them. When asked if it was talked about on the course, Megan playfully interrupted me with a “shush,” and looked askance while whispering “don’t….don’t say that word…you never want to say that on the golf course.”

However, it was of course apparent to her playing partners that something different happened during those chip shots. Megan was more nervous playing with others. The turn-taking of golf means that all other players can be entirely focused on each player’s shot. This impacted Megan’s anxiety, which became embedded into her preparation to play; she felt scared of yipping well before arriving at the golf course. She recalled, “I had panicky moments if I had to go out and play with the ladies; I felt more pressure and my yips were always worse if I was with somebody else.” The impact of Megan’s yips grew with time.

Importantly, and further discussed below, Megan did not feel the same anxiety with John. She could acknowledge it openly with him. But, she said, “you can’t quite do that with other people,” later emphasizing that “it’s a private problem.” And others did not seem to want to discuss it with her, either, though some part of Megan worried what they might be thinking or saying to themselves: “No one ever said anything. Maybe they whispered behind my back, ‘Oh, Megan’s got the yips!’” She felt that fear when she yipped on the course with others, sensing derision, whether it was actually happening or not.

We saw something of this in the narrative of James’s yips, too; that despite the phenomenon being apparent to everyone present, there was some instinctive, socially-sanctioned prohibition on discussing it with others. Megan did not want to, perhaps knowing that such conversations would not be safe with friends and acquaintances in the way they were with her
husband. In addition to avoiding the conversation, Megan avoided playing with others in general. Her life at the time provided an easy out: “I guess I did actively avoid playing with others. But with work and kids it was pretty easy to avoid playing.”

What is it about the yips that keeps these conversations off limits? This might be a particular aspect of the yips in golf, where polite conventions and individual play mean that no one is much invested in addressing another’s play, especially if it is going be uncomfortable. And the yips shots are uncomfortable, both for those hitting them and those watching them. Even the typical playful, teasing banter in which friends can engage is not quite appropriate. If a player hits a bad shot but has previously proven themselves to be a quality player of the game, then teasing is okay, as they are still a member of the group and it is expected they will return to the basis of normal, quality performance. When someone yips, it is apparent to everyone that something else is going on, and neither performer and observer know how to categorize the event. The yips do not mark one as a normal player having a bad shot or day, but as something worse: and other, or potentially an outsider. And, given fears in the golfing world of the yips as a contagion (“shhh, don’t say that word”), people want to keep the yips, and the yipping elements of the person, at a distance. People go out to the golf course to have a good time, not to deal with difficult and uncomfortable, topics, conversations, or experiences.

**Having a partner.**

However, when Megan did go out on the course she felt most comfortable playing with John. Her relationship with her husband gave Megan a resource that is rare relative to most yips experiences. Already noted above is Megan’s perception that she felt more pressure with others
and was not bothered—or at least to a lesser extent—if she yipped in front of John. The consequences were different.

Central to this comfort with John is his familiarity and experience with the yips. It is not only that she is closer with him than others, that in theory he is a loved one who is relationally safer and less likely to change his view of Megan as a result of her yips. Examples from James and Teddy (below), suggest that relational closeness is not, on its own, predictive of the degree to which individuals feel more open discussing or managing their yips. John was the only person that Megan ever spoke with about the yips. Beside it being a “private problem,” one that instinctively compels people to hide from the view of others, Megan mentioned that it helped her that he shared the experience: “I knew that he knew what it was all about. Because I don’t think you can fully appreciate it until it happens to you. So that was important.” We can think of it as him carrying the mark of the yips, too, and so there was less fear of being othered, or at least misunderstood.

This shared comfort was on display during our interview. John was in the shop too, and popped in from an adjacent room a few times, enthusiastically offering his perspective and sharing in some playful incredulity and frustration regarding the mysteriousness of the yips. It was a noticeable difference than other interviews in the few moments when all of us were together, as though we were even excited to talk about the yips in a group where everyone shares the experience.

This was partly the impetus for my thinking of Megan’s relationship with John as a resource in moving through her yips; it felt good to have people who “got it,” and Megan confirmed that John’s experiences with the yips allowed her some occasional moments levity on the golf course, which loosened up the gravity of a yips situation usually coated in shame and
embarrassment. When they played together and John saw that Megan’s ball landed in her yips context and, he yelled, “Don’t yip it!” Megan replied, “Well, I’m sure I will!” Then she would hit it, and, even though she would still yip, the burden of the situation was distributed among the two of them. We can image that, at the same moment John realizes where the ball is, Megan sees it too and, were she with anyone else, would feel panic and dread. Perhaps she felt similarly with John, too, but rather than feeling this alone, his teasing, together with his shared identity as a yipper, allowed some connection and direct acknowledgement of Megan’s situation. Not only were the consequences of a yip different with John than with others, but on the course they openly shared the stigma of being a yipper.

**Finding a way out.**

Megan found a way to move through her yips, and I now describe this process. Recall that Megan’s first adjustments to the yips were various types of avoidance. She avoided the shot, avoided playing with others, and found ways to avoid playing much golf altogether. That avoidance was undesirable; it did not ameliorate the yips and Megan was still drawn to play the game she loves. She tried a few other adjustments to the stroke itself, one of which was slowing down the movement leading up to contact of the ball, as she hypothesized that the yips “were a quickness thing.” However, she said, “that just complicated matters; now I was doing two things wrong: decelerating and hitting a yip.”

Finally about two years ago John suggested that Megan try the solution that has worked for him: not looking at the ball when striking it, either by closing her eyes or looking at the hole instead of the ball, so that she could not see the club making contact. This relates to John’s understanding of the yips as being “about the moment of contact,” which I discuss below. Megan
was at first doubtful it would work but quickly experienced success. She told me, “The first time I looked at the hole, I thought, ‘oh, I’m probably gonna miss this altogether.’ But it was just a perfect, smooth stroke. There was no yip. Then when I tried it while looking back down at the ball, I yipped.”

With a working solution available, Megan felt great relief. Though it was an abnormal approach—still not the preferred way of performing that shot—the deviation from the ideal shot was smaller than the other solutions Megan had tried. And to someone watching her they might not even suspect anything. She had found an effective alternative which allowed her to perform the stroke. At the time she said to herself, “Oh, thank god, I can do it. I really can. If that’s all it takes, I’ll look at the hole, I’ll close my eyes, I don’t care. It’s way better than hitting a yip.”

She continued experimenting and discovered she preferred keeping her eyes closed because it kept her head in the usual position of a golf swing. She had to practice enough so that she could “trust it,” but once she began to feel the shot performed properly without any spasm in her hands, she was reassured that she could make it through her yips.

Last golf season Megan even regained her ability to perform the shot while looking at the ball. When asked for her understanding of this, Megan said, “I think I’ve gotten the feeling of the stroke back and I have more confidence in it. And I can now do it with people other than just my husband. So I feel like it’s behind me. That’s part of why I agreed to be interviewed – I don’t mind talking about it now because I don’t feel like I do it anymore.”

**Explaining the yips.**

Given all of this—Megan’s twenty years of yips experience, the associated emotions and behavioral adjustments, as well as her solution and current status as (hopefully) yips-free—I was
curious about Megan’s understanding of the yips. Like many yips-affected individuals, she does not have a clear framework for making sense of the experience. She was at a loss for explanation why it happened, stating, “I never had any trepidation about that kind of shot ever before, and so I felt like I was struck by an out-of-the-blue thunderbolt.” She was zapped without any warning. And this is in keeping with her experience in the moment of a yips-affected stroke: “for that one split second my hands do something that my brain didn’t tell them to do.” Yet right after saying this, Megan added that she agreed with John’s yips conceptualization, that “something in my head makes my hands do that. That’s the only way I could explain it. Like a short circuit; something messed up the signal.”

John commented as well, adding the possibility of an emotional component: “Yeah, for me the yips is always the moment of contact. Maybe mentally I have some fear, wondering ‘where the hell is the ball going to go?’ that makes me afraid of the contact part of the shot. It’s right as I’m getting to contact that something happens. And I’ve read that some people think the yips are something wrong with your methods or stroke. I don’t buy it. I think it’s more up here (points to head).”

Together Megan and John have a sense that the most significant moment of yips influence is at the moment of contact between the ball and the club, and that, while the feeling is something like an experiential short-circuit, wherein one’s hands do something the brain did not tell them to do, the explanation that makes the most sense to them is that “something” in one’s head makes the hands do that. Perhaps it is useful here to distinguish between “brain” and “head.” Both Megan and John speculate that the yips has to do with the “head,” or being-in-ones-head, and Megan distinguishes this from the operations of her brain. Think of the operations she refers to as the province of her brain as being those conscious thoughts and intentional actions that are available
to her awareness. This seems in keeping with James’s “stranger” on the golf course. The yips is somehow connected to being-in-ones-head; it is not in the brain or in one’s conscious, intentional thoughts. The experience of it is: my hands respond to some other part of my brain that I’m not familiar with, that I don’t have access to.

**A deeper explanation.**

Here I return to Megan’s reported lack of trepidation about bump-and-run shots prior to having the yips, adding to the full context of Megan’s yips-affected shot with information not included above because it is more pertinent to this section on explanation and etiology. Earlier in our conversation, when we discussed the first few incidents of the yips, Megan said she never had a way to make sense of them. This was when she reported no trepidation with the bump-and-run shot. However, near the end of our conversation, after I asked her to demonstrate the shot with a club, she clarified the full context of the affected shot. She told me that it was a bump-and-run with a specific club, either an 8-iron or a pitching wedge. After the demonstration, she continued to add personal context to that particular shot: “All of my life I was criticized because I always used my sand wedge everywhere. I’d hit a bump and run with my sand wedge because I could take the club further back, break my wrist a little for more of a swing, and that was easier for me. But John just kept telling me, ‘You’ve got to learn how to hit a bump and run with the right club, like an 8-Iron or a pitching wedge or something like that.’ I was just like, ‘I don’t wanna do that. I don’t like that shot.’”

She continued, mentioning that John is quite skilled at the shot and that it was his aptitude for it that eventually made her “break down” and try the shot. This happened sometime after she was done competing professionally. At first it went fine, though she recalls never having
confidence in the shot, never quite feeling like she could control the distance of the ball well. She then conceded that this might partly account for her yips experience: “So maybe that’s why the yips crept into that shot in particular, why it was that one that came back to bite me in the butt. It found my weakness.”

Megan then reinforced how subtle were the differences that distinguished a yips shot from a non-yips shot, and expressed some frustration:

Megan: “Even when my yips were bad I could go over and hit shots—even bump and runs—out of the higher grass, with a little bit cushion under the ball, and I was fine (hands up, a bit incredulous).

Patrick: What do you make of that?

Megan: I don’t knowww! (clenches teeth/jaw, hits chair with both arms in exasperation) It’s just the lie, was just too tight! You get that in the golf courses up here just because the grass is different. It’s tighter. It’s shorter. In Florida you don’t really get tight lies. So, it was the tightness of the lie that bothered me a lot. Just not much room for error. It’s easier to chunk it.

Patrick: what brought you up north?

Martha: John was born here....and he got a job as a club pro....the jobs are better up here than in Florida....Although Florida sounds pretty nice right now (laughs, a reference to the weather).”

Megan did not state explicitly that being teased about her avoidance of ideal bump-and-run shots caused her yips, but instead allowed that it might be a factor. We can think of it as Megan suggested – a weakness. If the yips were going to find their way into Megan’s golf game it makes sense that they would most readily gain access through a particular shot with which she
was less familiar, that she had actively avoided most of her life, that others had criticized her for, and that happened to occur with particular lies that did not happen in her home setting of Florida.

Before transitioning to summarize this account of Megan’s yips and discuss possible frameworks for understanding them, I list here a few unknowns and curiosities from our conversation. First, Megan only tangentially acknowledged the personal and historical context in which her yips-affected shot—a bump-and-run with an 8-iron—was embedded. In our conversation she seemed to land on the idea spontaneously, and we did not linger on the topic. I am curious if this had occurred to her before our conversation. Second, her account of the history of that shot changes the situation of the practice session during which she first experienced the yips. She was not just going out to practice any random shot, she was choosing to hit a shot which she had only recently begun regularly utilizing, and one which she had been told she “needed” to learn how to hit. I am curious to know her mood and mindset on that day. How had she been playing lately? Had she had any recent conversations or thoughts about that shot? Any conflicts going on with John, the ideal model for that shot and the person nudging her to hit it?

**Summary and initial commentary on the interview.**

Megan experienced the yips for approximately 18 years and, as of this past season, tentatively feels that they are behind her. She likely meets criteria for Type III yips but with an emphasis on Type I symptoms, with the spasm in her hands. Megan experienced the yips in a specific golfing context: a bump-and-run shot with an 8-iron or pitching wedge in a “tight lie” with short grass. She played all of her competitive golfing career without hitting this shot, preferring instead to use a different club which allowed her more height on the shot. Her first yips experience occurred in 1997 or ‘98, about five years after she had finished competitive play.
The experience happened while she was practicing this shot on a practice green. She was stunned, felt a spasm in her hands, and after hitting a few more shots with the same result realized she was experiencing the yips. As her yips firmly embedded without relief, she tried to avoid the shot when playing, avoid playing with others, and eventually played less golf overall. Her husband John, who also experiences the yips, suggested she try striking the ball with her eyes closed. She did, and was able to perform a smooth swing with no yip. At the time she first experimented with this, she still yipped if she opened her eyes. Since then she has gained confidence in the movement and can now perform the shot with her eyes open.

It seems important that Megan’s solution to the yips was, at first, still a sort of avoidance. She closed her eyes and blocked out the visual experience of the moment of contact, when, in her own words, “everything happens.” She blocked out awareness of this scary moment and instead focused on her body and the movement. This gave her a safe ‘plan B’ to fall back on when the shot was still problematic, and as she repeated the motion enough was able to get back into the groove of the shot, finding her way back to confidence and flowing movement. Eventually she let herself peek her eyes open again.

Here I outline my understanding of Megan’s yips, by expanding on the more personal, emotional, and personified aspects of her yips. When asked what the yips would say to Megan she replied, “Aha! There you go, I made you screw up...it’s evil.” And this is how Megan experienced them, as taunting and malevolent, relishing the mistakes they force upon her. Her yips took control when she finally tried the shot that she had avoided all her life, when her confidence was shaky and when the teasing from past experiences would be an easy trigger to disrupting her flow. And though it took some time it eventually worked. Megan regularly yipped.
her bump-and-runs, feeling as though some unknown part of herself initiated the spasms in her hands.

Megan’s yips are also the tension that results from her fighting against all of the ‘oughts’ her yips context: I have to hit the right shot, I have to get the shot up in the air, I have to use the right club, I have to do as well as John, and I have to hit shots in lies that are too tight, when there is little room for error. Perhaps Megan was onto something when she suggested that a part of her head makes her hands yip. We can think of it as a mutiny or a coup, her body and mind protesting and revolting from this sense of “have-to.”

Regardless, Megan had a partner in the experience which allowed some comfortable spaces in which to discuss and work through her yips. Her husband eventually suggested she close her eyes, and this worked well for Megan, consistent with her desire to avoid the overwhelming moment of contact, when “everything happens.” This gave her a chance to regain the feel of a smooth stroke, and she currently feels confident that the yips—at least the disruption of her movement—are behind her.
Teddy

Teddy is a 24-year-old former baseball player. He played all the way up through college and his primary position, the one at which he excelled, was pitcher. Teddy experienced the yips for about a year. It was a difficult year, as the yips significantly impacted his transition from high school to college, both on the mound as well as outside of baseball, emotionally and in his relationships. Teddy’s yips gradually progressed to a crescendo that left him frustrated and despairing. And though he found a way to work through them, he acknowledged in our interview that there are still missing pieces to the puzzle of his yips. When Teddy’s yips were at their most impactful, they disrupted his athletic and personal identity and brought him to a dark place.

While Teddy played other sports, he knew as early as middle school that baseball was his best and the one for which he had the most passion. He mentioned in our conversation that if, when he was younger, he had the opportunity to specialize in baseball and play year-round, he probably would have. Yet he was still able to excel. He loved the feeling of dominating batters when he was in the flow of his game. As a pitcher he was known to be “wild but effective” meaning he often threw the ball inconsistently, but when he needed to, he could hit his spots and be precise. He played through high school and, especially toward the end, got a lot of attention and praise for his abilities. Teddy relished this feeling, noting in the interview that in hindsight perhaps this gratification was too important to him.

Teddy and I connected through a sports psychology listserv posting that went out to researchers, clinicians, and students around the country. In our first exchanges through email and over the phone, I was struck by Teddy’s enthusiasm for yips. Rarely did anyone with yips experience have much more than a begrudging acceptance when agreeing to speak with me. But Teddy loves thinking about the topic, and his experience with the yips is a primary reason he
switched his undergraduate major from business to psychology. When I checked in with him in the middle our interview, wondering how he felt discussing his yips experiences with me, he said he felt great, and that if he were going to get a Phd he would probably study something similar, primarily because he understands how “demoralizing” the yips can be for those who experience them.

Our interview underscored this enthusiasm. Teddy was happy to discuss any aspects of his past or current experiences, and made it clear through the conversation that he had spent significant time and energy thinking through the elements of the yips experience, especially the ones most useful to working through them. Teddy was, at the time of our conversation, finishing his Master’s degree in counseling with a focus on sport and health psychology. Teddy’s yips experiences were the impetus for his interest in psychology, and it was evident in our discussion that the sports psychological knowledge and techniques he accumulated, both as part of a regimen to help him deal with his yips, and as part of his graduate and clinical training, are now central to how Teddy frames his yips experiences. I expand on this below when discussing Teddy’s understanding of the yips. I mention it here to note that, while all individuals with the yips frame those experiences through subsequent realizations and analysis, Teddy has put more energy into this than most. His yips experiences led him into psychology and then he used those understandings to provide a sturdier scaffold for managing the experience. Yet like many individuals with the yips, an ultimate account of their etiology eludes him. I discuss the implications of this and how, for Teddy, a comprehensive understanding was unnecessary. An impact of this on our interview and the data is that Teddy had a clear narrative arc to his experiences. He took me through it. I begin that here.

Progression of the yips.
Teddy’s relationship with the yips began in the summer after his senior year of high school. He played through the early part of the spring season but had a baseball-related eye injury—a ball struck his eye when he was at bat—and was somewhat worried that the success he had before the injury would leave him when he returned. But he came back pitching better than ever. Within a month of returning he pitched a perfect game, meaning he recorded an out for every batter he faced. Soon after, he applied for and was granted membership on the state all-star team. As Teddy told me, it was at that moment that “something clicked” in his head, wherein he felt obligated to prove he was deserving of his all-star status. This theme of expectations and proving oneself runs throughout Teddy’s narrative of his yips. I return to and expand on this below.

It was around that time when his performances started to change, and once this inflection point began, Teddy’s yips progressed over the course of the summer to severely “diminish” his game. The first changes were relatively minor. Teddy was known for pitching full games without needing a relief pitcher, meaning that his ability to throw quality pitches—over home plate while still difficult for batters to hit—would last the entire length of the game. However with the yips, he began only getting through five innings, and had to throw many more pitches than before. Then the trend continued and he could only make it through three innings. Finally, he was unable to finish the first inning. At first Teddy was just confused and frustrated, thinking “what the hell is going on?”

None of his coaches or teammates seemed to know what was happening, and the issue was only directly addressed when Teddy was at his worst, throwing 65-70 pitches while failing to get the three outs of the first inning. His coaches moved him to second base, a position at which he previously excelled as well, but he had trouble making the throw from second to first
base. Teddy said his yips “affected any kind of throwing except from the outfield.” If he could “just throw” the ball as hard as possible and not worry much about the location, that was fine. It was the precision throws that were impacted.

The context of the precision throw mattered, too. Teddy reported that he was usually fine—meaning he could throw a strike—when he was just practicing and was not facing a batter. Once a batter came to the plate, however, he began to fear hitting the batter with the ball. Sometimes he would, or else he would throw anywhere but the strike zone. In general there was no pattern to how Teddy was missing his throws. He walked a lot of batters on four straight pitches, often walking the bases loaded, which led to the other team scoring several runs. His pitches were erratic: “I hit guys, threw over their heads, threw it in the dirt, and threw it behind a guy’s back many times. Once I threw the ball over the whole backstop” (The backstop is the large screen behind home plate that separates the playing field from observers).

As his yips progressed through the summer, Teddy was aware of increasing physical and psychological manifestations. He often felt what he now knows, but did not at the time, were symptoms of anxiety and panic. He had “a lot of racing thoughts, muscle tension, and increased heart rate,” all while on the mound pitching. Clammy hands were his primary indicator that the yips were coming on. And in one of the worst points of Teddy’s yips, he experienced a panic attack on the mound. He recalled, “I was in this black space, just black all around me. I was like, ‘what the fuck is going on?’ I had no idea, just felt like I was in a black haze. It was a moment of total dissociation.”

At some point during the summer a friend of Teddy’s mentioned the yips to him, and after looking it up Teddy felt dread: “Oh shit, this is exactly what’s going on.” He could not find many success stories, and thought he would have to quit, like Yankees second baseman Chuck
Knoblauch. Mostly, Teddy was frustrated and confused; it all felt unfair. He kept asking himself, “what’s wrong? Why me? Why is this happening to me? What did I do to have this happen to me?”

And just as with many yips experiences, the phenomenon expanded its impact and influence into other contexts. Teddy’s yips “affected (his) mood and emotions outside of baseball.” He noticed intrusive and self-critical assessments happening in his summer work as a landscaper. Of his tasks on the job he frequently thought, “now I’m not doing this correctly or perfectly, either.” Nothing was enough. Every moment became a potential performance, and every performance reflected poorly on him. Even his social interactions and relationship with his girlfriend were affected; Teddy stayed home a lot and isolated himself, feeling detached from his normal identity and personality.

These identity struggles carried over into his freshman year at college. In one of Teddy’s last summer games, two of his college coaches who had recruited him to pitch were in the stands watching him play for the first time. He pitched poorly, and he felt this marked him with a stain; of his coaches and performance, he thought, “now they have this on me.” That was how he began the fall of his freshman year on the baseball team. He switched from pitching to outfield and was “gray-shirted,” a designation which meant he could practice with the team but not play in games. For Teddy that felt like “rock bottom.” It was if his coaches were saying, “we expected you to up here, and you’re not, so we’re gonna put you down a little bit.” He felt empty; Teddy had “unfulfilled things I wanted to fill.”

Reactions of others.
Before continuing with the trajectory of Teddy’s yips experience I pause here to expand on the reactions of those that witnessed his changing performance. Throughout Teddy’s experience with the yips, and particularly during their early embedding process, he felt he was disappointing those around him. These self-critical judgments played out in significant others. As discussed, the yips can be unsettling not only for those experiencing them but for observers, too. And people close to the athlete express this in a variety of ways. At first, no one discussed what was happening with Teddy. While I can only speculate, I imagine that many people hoped this aberration would just go away, especially because Teddy had been pitching so well. Once it was clear that would not happen, coaches finally said “dude, what the hell, what’s going on here?” Teddy remembers them being supportive, but that this mostly took the form of reassurance that he would work through it and be fine, which felt good in the moment—confirming what Teddy wanted to believe himself—but did not lead anywhere. Teddy told me, “no one knew the critical questions to ask or the things we need to actually do to work through this.” Teddy described his head coach as “old school,” someone who encouraged Teddy to “suck it up.” Teddy continued about his coach, “He kept putting me out there hoping I would push through it, that maybe I’d get over it.” Looking back, Teddy conceptualizes this as a sort of exposure therapy, but acknowledges that he did not see it that way at the time and that it was not helpful that summer. As an aside: exposure to a fear-inducing stimulus can be effective in diminishing the fear response, but it requires a physically, emotionally, and relationally safe space in which gradual exposure to the triggering situation can occur. That summer on the mound was not safe for Teddy. Exposures conducted without this safe container for the experience can have the opposite impact, increasing the fear response.

At least one teammate, Teddy’s catcher, helped reinforce these fears in a more direct way. As the receiver of Teddy’s pitches, his catcher was tethered to Teddy’s performance, and therefore
the yips, more directly than most. As Teddy pointed out, “his performance and mood were based on my performance.” As Teddy’s play faltered, his catcher got angry, cursed, and communicated this by throwing the ball with more force back to Teddy. It was direct tactile feedback confirming Teddy’s fears that he was upsetting and disappointing people with his performances. At the time, Teddy thought, “alright asshole, I’m trying my best here. This is not helping me!”

Teddy’s relationship with his father was impacted as well. His father is proud of Teddy’s accomplishments, and in high school most of these came from sports. Then Teddy experienced the yips. He summarized his father’s reaction as, “What the hell is going on? You need to do something about this. What do we have to do?” Teddy had no clear answers and so remained frustrated: “It was tough because I felt like I was letting down one of the people I’m closest to. All of my interactions with others were like that, with me wondering how I was going to let each person down.” Furthermore, “I kept thinking about what others must be thinking about me. Probably ‘why is he sucking? What’s wrong with him? He was so good and now he’s garbage.’”

While below I discuss the significance of these social forces in the meaning of Teddy’s yips, note here that Teddy’s fears were partly validated by the reactions of those around him. People were confused and upset, and the dynamics of various relationships shifted because of his yips. While Teddy’s fears may have misinterpreted or exaggerated some of the impact of his yips, they were not completely unfounded.

**Progression of the yips: “just throw.”**

The burden of Teddy’s yips was especially felt by him in social relationships. However, the presence of others also played a crucial role in helping Teddy find a way out of the yips. At the end of Teddy’s spring semester the baseball season was over and there was just a week left of
school. He and his closest friends—five guys who were all freshman on the baseball team—did not have much to do, and the weight of the semester and the season were over. In Teddy’s recollection his friends said, “Alright, screw it, we’re taking you to the (practice) facility. You’re gonna warm up and you’re just gonna throw. No one’s around. It’s just us.” They wanted to take some practice swings, but also wanted Teddy to pitch. Teddy agreed but was nervous, having not pitched in months. He told his friends, “Alright, we’ll see what happens. I don’t wanna hit you guys, but I might.”

Once they began playing Teddy threw a few balls to begin, not yet feeling comfortable. And then something happened, another inflection point in his yips experience. He recalled, “then I took a deep breath and told myself, ‘just throw,’ to just do what I knew how to do. And after that they all took three at-bats, so I faced 15 batters, and I struck out 9 of them.” Not only did he throw the ball over the plate, he “dominated” the batters. He was shocked, saying to himself, “oh, it looks like the old me!”

His mood shifted immediately. It was hard for him to process it all in the moment; he had not felt such “elation and joy” for a long time, and he delighted in picturing himself successful on the mound again. The feeling continued the rest of the day. His friends gave him some good-natured teasing, annoyed at his pitching dominance over them, but also joined him in fantasizing the implications for the team. In our interview he described the sensation of a weight being lifted off his chest or shoulders. That burden had built up over the entire year, the frustration and exasperation of Teddy continuously asking himself, “dude, why are you sucking? Why are you sucking? Why are you sucking?” Instead, he felt lighter, and as though he no longer had to prove himself.
It is useful to highlight a few salient features from this important moment in the arc of Teddy’s relationship with the yips. What about that context was facilitative of Teddy’s return to successful pitching? Most important seems to be the relative safety of the space in which the experience occurred. ‘Safety’ in this sense implies lower stakes and fewer negative consequences—real or perceived—for poor performance. An experience is safer if it is less likely to produce real or perceived results that correspond to the fears of the individual with the yips. This safety occurred in a few different domains in Teddy’s example. First, he emphasized in our interview that these were all close friends of his: “(They were) all good friends. I don’t think I would’ve done it if they weren’t close. They didn’t have expectations of me, and they hadn’t had playing opportunities that year either. We were in the same boat.”

Also important in his relationship with these particular friends was that they never knew him as “old Teddy,” the ace pitcher who was recruited for his prowess on the mound. They knew his stats from high school, but he never played well during their time together. In other words, the close relationships he established with the friends, which occurred amidst Teddy’s lost confidence, were not contingent on his identity as a pitcher. As opposed to those relationships from high school, which witnessed Teddy’s growth and success, these relationships began when Teddy was “at rock bottom,” and yet they grew into close connections regardless. And having already reached rock bottom, Teddy did not have much to lose. He had fewer expectations on himself, and perhaps could hear his friends encouragement to “just throw” as real encouragement, and not a demand that he perform or else face consequences.

Furthermore, Teddy helped create safety in the space for himself. When he told me that, prior to the experience, he warned his friends that he might hit them, he noted it as an example of his tendency to focus on the negatives. Certainly it reveals a fear, but I can also frame it as...
asking his friends to commit to sticking with him. A way of saying, “hey, this might not go the way you want, and before I agree to this I need to know that you’re okay with that.” All these factors seemed to combine to create a safer setting in which Teddy was freer to experiment. It was a movement in the direction of true play, with openness and encouragement, instead of demands and proscriptions. This seems in keeping with the timing of the moment, too, with little studying to do, and the rigor of the baseball season behind them. It was in this context of openness and possibility—school almost finished, the summer approaching—that Teddy, along with his friends, found their way into a moment that shifted Teddy’s relationship to his yips.

**Rebuilding Confidence**

This experience laid the foundation for Teddy’s way of regaining his throwing ability and his confidence, a formula he used in both the short- and long-term, when he was again struggling on the mound and as part of his journey back to consistent and desirable pitching results. During the throwing session with his friends something in Teddy’s head “just clicked.” He had an experience of taking a deep breath and saying to himself “just throw,” and this helped calm his nerves and focus on the task at hand. This was his “revelation,” that instead of focusing on the past or on what others might be thinking of him, he needed to focus only on what he could control: his task in the moment. For Teddy, this removed “all those extra stressors that were unnecessary,” reminding him of the simple task: “I just gotta throw the ball over the damn plate.” Importantly, Teddy was able to pair this knowledge with an experience, allowing him to believe it. Either the knowledge or the experience alone might not have been sufficient; many people try to talk themselves through the yips by rationalizing that the stakes are low, or that they need to stay in the moment. But because of the setting, Teddy was able to live out this knowledge in his
body, movements, and attention. This is why it appeared to him as a revelation, a spontaneous moment of insight which likely had been in the works for a long time, but needed a certain set of circumstances to set it loose. Teddy described that, in that moment of release, “the rigidity of my game cleared away, and once I let that go, my game and my thoughts were more fluid.”

Teddy used the rest of that summer to rebuild his game on top of this new foundation. In summer ball he slowly worked back up to pitching six to seven innings per game. Teddy knew from the experience with his friends that his body could pitch the way he wanted to, his next task was to invite his mind to catch up to his body. Or, as he phrased it in our interview: “Could my mind lead my body in doing it more consistently?”

This curiosity began his forays into sports psychology. He learned about breathing and relaxation, and created some mantras to use as tethers, reminding him in moments of struggle to stay present and focus on the task at hand. On every baseball hat he used, Teddy wrote the phrase “breath and focus,” as well as two bible verses: “This is the day the lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,” and “I can do all things through him who gives me strength.” Taken together these had the effect of both grounding him in the moment and reminding him of a bigger, expanded perspective outside of baseball. Both kept him from ruminating on past failures or the thoughts of others.

And he built upon the basic structure of that first “reset” with his friends, using it when he felt the yips—increased heart rate, clammy hands, shaking hands—creeping back in to his experience. In contrast to a year earlier, Teddy simply noted, “okay, something’s up right now.” He stepped off the mound, took off his hat and looked at the mantras written on his cap. Then he took a deep breath and assessed the situation, listing the concrete details of the game situation, and made a decision about how to proceed. After that, Teddy took a deep breath “and literally
shook it out, knocked it all out of me, and got back on the mound. Then I was back in the moment.” This investment in the present moment is key for Teddy’s system of moving through the yips. He said, “If I put myself in the past then I worried that I would miss (a throw) and be taken out. I needed to push those things aside.”

Having spent the summer between his freshman and sophomore years rebuilding his game, Teddy returned to school without expectations from others and was able to pitch in the fall. He stayed in his groove, being one of the best pitchers on his team during that time. These performances continued into the spring, and Teddy was finally able to pitch in a regular season game and played well. He stayed in the rotation as a regular pitcher in his sophomore and junior seasons. And while he was projected to be the ace, his team’s top pitcher, going into his senior year, he had to sit out due to shoulder surgery. While he can occasionally feel yips-like experiences occasionally in other contexts, for instance when playing darts, or even when working as a counselor, he no longer plays baseball and is not exposed to his yips.

**Identity as a pitcher.**

The attention Teddy received for his pitching was meaningful and important to him. Woven into our interview were several acknowledgements that Teddy’s view of himself, as well as how he imagined others saw him, was filtered through his identity as a successful pitcher. During the early progression of his yips, when Teddy did not want to acknowledge them, it was because he “didn’t want to hurt (his) brand or reputation.” And entering college he had been talked up by some of the upperclassmen. When he could not perform, he imagined them thinking, “What? Who is this? What is this? This is nothing, this guy sucks.” This again demonstrates the two-sidedness of Teddy’s investment in his identity as a pitcher. When he was
playing well it felt great but weighed him down when he experienced the yips. When he regained his form he also recaptured some of that old identity: “it felt amazing to be able to show them the old me. Like, this is who was supposed to be coming to college.”

**An explanation: high expectations.**

Moving to discuss Teddy’s explanations for and understandings of his yips, I start with a focus on “expectations,” an element of Teddy’s yips that he emphasized throughout our interview and are central in his conceptualization of his yips. As mentioned above, Teddy feels that something shifted after pitching his perfect game and being accepted on the all-star team. Yet even before this there was an environment of high expectations surrounding Teddy. And these expectations were explicitly named and discussed. Going into his final year of high school Teddy was projected to be player of the year. It was assumed that he would the best player in his league. And for the early part of the season he met these expectations, giving up only eight hits in seven games. After he returned from his eye injury he threw his perfect game, and that was around the time when Teddy’s perspective shifted, when he considered a new possibility that shook him. He thought to himself, “Okay, I’ve had a good course of success here. I have to keep it going. If I don’t keep it going, then what?”

This question seems central not only to Teddy’s yips experience, but perhaps to the phenomenon in general. We can imagine that some element of Teddy’s yips are a testing of the question, ‘what are the consequences of poor performance?’ Teddy said, “when it came to pitching I felt like I had to perform. If I didn’t, then I was gonna sit the bench.” Before Teddy considered such consequences, before this curiosity even presented itself in his awareness, he was feeling confident and dominant as pitcher. If we think about athletic performances as
existing along a simple spectrum of expansion and contraction, Teddy was feeling expansive. He felt big, capable, agentic, and in a state of flow (I speak more about expansion-contraction in the discussion section). Once he began wondering about the consequences of disrupting his string of success, he entered a period of contraction, feeling smaller, less capable, and disrupted from fluid movements and performances.

The insidiousness of Teddy’s yips—and again, perhaps the yips in general—is that this anxious question, “If I don’t keep it going, then what?” gets tested and answered. It is almost as if asking the question, or just having anxious awareness of the question, helps bring about an experimental situation in which the question is answered. Teddy asked the question and soon after discovered the answer.

Regardless, the antecedent that laid the groundwork for this questioning and freezing was the success Teddy had achieved on the mound. It was as though his performance outcomes were a ratchet – they could only move in one direction, without any room for slipping backward. His success and the attention he received for it felt wonderful in the moment, however it had the impact of alerting him to other possibilities. If praise comes from good performances, what happens if that goes away? Note again that these perceptions of Teddy’s were not unfounded. He learned that he was valued in a particular way when playing well. He was recruited to play college baseball, and marked as special and skilled among other players.

**A deeper explanation.**

Yet given all of Teddy’s implied explanations for his yips and strategies for working through them, he admits lacking a fuller framework for the etiology of his yips. After we discussed his habit early on of “repressing” awareness of the yips, Teddy continued and
discussed his searches for an explanation. The full exchange:

Teddy: Do I really have a good idea of why this happened? No. But I was able to learn how to deal with it and manage it.

Patrick: Do you come up with anything when you do think about why it happened?

Teddy: You know I could ruminate on it all day. And I still try to find pieces that I won’t be able to find, or I could, but I won’t find a place to put them. So, trying to find the puzzle pieces...what is it that helping me? What was it gonna help me with? ‘Cause that’s the past. Past is past.

Patrick: But you tried sometimes?

Teddy: Oh, of course. I think that’s what made me more frustrated because I was living in the past rather than figuring out, ‘what can I do right now? What can Teddy do now to develop himself and make himself better?’ It’s a way of staying solution-focused by concentrating on what was successful in the past and how I can use it in the moment. Screw the part that was shitty. Don’t worry about that ‘cause that’s not helping me.

Thinking too much about other antecedents or meanings of his yips was unhelpful for Teddy. And in some way it directly contradicted the habits that allowed him to work through the yips, which involved focusing on the here-and-now, on his strengths, and on solutions to the predicaments that were in front of him. In other words, Teddy got what he desired. He was able to return to good and desirable performance. He did this within a framework that made sense and worked for him, and one that even played a role in carving out an academic and professional interest. Teddy defined his counseling orientation to me as strengths-based, solution-oriented CBT work.
And yet of course I remain interested in the what “puzzle pieces” Teddy had collected when he was searching for answers. I did not want to push, and I am still not convinced that delving into personal past is necessary in dealing with the yips (more in Discussion section). Or rather, it may not be useful if one’s goal is to regain functionality in a lost movement. With Teddy there clearly seems to be rich personal material that could be accessed, but he also made a clear choice not to do it.

**Summary and initial commentary on the interview.**

Teddy experienced the yips for approximately one year. They disrupted his ability as a pitcher to throw consistently and accurately, and later impacted any throw that required precision. Teddy’s case is more difficult to categorize according to the dimensional model of Clarke et al. (2015). He did not report any twitches or muscle contractions when pitching, though his throwing patterns were similar to other pitchers who have reported difficulty releasing the ball, which would align with type I symptoms. Teddy did experience distressing anxiety and panic symptoms as his yips progressed. He likely meets criteria for Type III yips with an emphasis on Type II symptoms.

Over the course of that summer he experienced a progressive diminution of his pitching performance. This included an inability to pitch more than one inning, and wild, erratic throws that were unable to find the strike zone. As this progression happened, teammates, coaches, and parents did not know how to help, which partly confirmed for Teddy his fears that diminished performance would have undesirable consequences. About a year after the yips first afflicted Teddy, he had an experience with friends wherein he regained his ability to pitch the way he intended to and of which he had previously been capable. This led to a gradual rebuilding process.
Others played a clear role in the expectations that Teddy implied were influential in his yips. Once the yips significantly affected Teddy’s performances, he pulled back in social relationships and felt frustrated, confused, and lacking confidence both on and off the field. And yet his relationships with others also played role in pulling him out of the yips.

Here I articulate the more personal, emotional, and personified aspects of Teddy’s yips. This was the exchange between Teddy and I when I asked about his yips speaking:

*Patrick*: If you could imagine them saying anything to you, do you know what it would say?

*Teddy*: I gotcha again. ‘I got you’, in a negative way, like in a weird voice. It’s not like ‘I’ve got your back,’ it’s like, ‘you’re not leaving this, you’re nothing.’ And it’s not just negative, it’s like dark-negative. ‘You’re not getting out of it.’

*Patrick*: Oh, yeah. Like, ‘I’ve got you locked away, you can try the best you can…’


Teddy’s yips are like a bully. They taunt, ridicule, and achieve power over him, like the image of a playground bully grabbing hold of another child and laughing as he squirms to get away. Teddy’s relationship to his yips has much to do with self-identity, as he reminded in this exchange: the yips take hold of him and force him to become someone else. Teddy felt the reverberations of this in the early stages of his yips experience. I wonder if somewhere in his “dark” energy are the puzzle pieces Teddy found but did not have a place for.
Themes

The in-depth phenomenological analysis of the interviews reveals several major and minor themes which emerged from, and were consistent across, the experiences of the participants. All have been mentioned explicitly or are clearly implied within the narratives from each participant, but here we distill and aggregate them with supporting quotes and commentary.

As mentioned in the introduction and methods sections, the goal of my project is not to discover an etiology for the yips. These results should not be interpreted as such, but rather as the findings from my exploration and engagement with the phenomenon through conversation with my participants, and reflection and analysis of those discussions. These themes are meant to further explicate the overall ‘gestalt’ of the yips phenomenon. The major themes are organized according to the existential structures of body, others, time, and space.

**Body: the yips are a jarring confrontation with the anonymous body**

The relationship between athletes with the yips and their body is fraught with tension, uncertainty, eeriness, fear, and panic. The athletic moment of the yips forces the athlete to confront an aspect of their body that contributes to the overall distress and uncanniness of the yips: the body’s natural capacity to function with indifference to the desires and intentions of the person. In the yips context, this capacity is revealed in the athletic disruption, when the athlete initiates and intends to complete a movement which is well-known to the body and has been completed before as intended, and the body overrides this momentary project and instead completes a different movement.

Merleau-Ponty (2009) refers to this aspect of embodied existence as the ‘anonymous’ body. It is the constellation of bodily functions, engagements, perceptions, and actions which
mostly sits outside of conscious awareness and intentionality. The anonymous body is in constant engagement with the world before, during, and after an individual’s consciousness takes up its particular tasks. It is general and somewhat impersonal, an indifferent force of nature moving through us, and it shows little interest in the personal projects of the individual. This contrasts with the personal body, the body that I experience as “me,” as when the body joins fluidly in initiating and successfully completing flowing, graceful movements in a sporting context. The anonymous body lies outside of this alignment of body and intention. And while this gap between the anonymous body and the body we can recruit for our purposes is always with us, we are often able to repress awareness of it. Yet the yips bring this aspect of our existence to the fore in an explicit and irrefutable way. And it can be jarring, eerie, and even panic-inducing to be faced with the body’s refusal to cooperate.

We see this jarring nature in the relationship my participants have with their bodies and the athletic tasks and projects in which they engage. There was collective frustration, alarm, and disbelief at the lost capacity of the body to perform, best exemplified by James’ question, underscored with incredulity, “why don’t I have control over my body the way I used to?” This basic loss of control is at the core of the experience of the yips, seen in Greg’s inability to throw the ball over the plate, Teddy’s wild pitches when facing a batter, Megan’s spasm at the moment of contact between ball and club, and James’ errant swings. The yips body is the interrupted and inhibited body, when an athlete is repeatedly confronted by Greg’s “obstacle” and unable to recruit the body into the personal, athletic actions of the moment. The anonymous body has other plans.

This divergence between personal intention and embodied outcome characteristic of the yips is revelatory of the slippage between the personal body and the anonymous body. Merleau-
Ponty (2009) says, “Hence, there is another subject beneath me; the world exists for this subject before I personally come upon the scene, and my place in the world is already staked out for me by this subject, this captive or natural spirit which is my body itself. It is indeed not the body I currently wield in this or that way, the instrument of my personal choices, the body I concentrate on such and such a part of the world; on the contrary, it is the body as a system of anonymous ‘functions’ which situate every particular bodily concentration in the context of a more general project” (pg. 234). Yet, because in the experience of the yips body, this anonymous self is so explicitly in control, even momentarily, the yippers’ relate to their bodies as unfamiliar and opaque, creeping, mysterious, and uncanny. This is the “stranger” that James meets on the golf course, the Mr. Hyde to his more familiar Dr. Jekyll. For Megan it feels “like an out of body experience,” and in this loss of ability she even questions her identity as a professional golfer. The embodied experience of the yips is one of betrayal, and as the anonymous body exerts itself in its refusal to cooperate with the designs of the athlete, they experience a loss of ownership over what has always felt like such a seamless partnership.

Indeed, this embodied ‘coup’ is particularly upsetting to athletes because it is juxtaposed with experiences of sublime alignment between intention and bodily execution. This is the joy and ecstasy of James’ and Megan’s perfectly struck golf shot, Greg’s experience of throwing as “one of the most natural things I do,” and Teddy’s perfect game. Losing this intimate connection with the body robbed my participants of this profound experience of embodied congruence and mastery.

And yet the yips experience is more than just a loss of a previously held capacity. The tension and distress inherent in the relationship between yippers and their bodies is exacerbated by the active and intentional nature of the anonymous body as it willfully exerts itself in the
moment of yips. Those with the yips do not just lose control, but instead experience their body momentarily overwhelmed and taken over by the impersonal needs, demands, and actions of the anonymous body. Beyond a mere awareness of the limits of the personal, cooperative body, the yips is a forced confrontation with the callous interference of the anonymous body. Teddy poignantly experienced this when he had a panic attack on the mound, when his personal desires and engagements were momentarily subsumed by the impersonal, general demands of the rest of his body, when everything “went dark” and left him disoriented. James briefly acted out this experience of being overwhelmed by the anonymous body when he comported himself in his tense, shaking, bracing posture. Merleau Ponty (2009) writes, “Likewise, it can be said that the organism, as a prepersonal adhesion to the general form of the world, i.e., as an anonymous and general existence, plays, beneath personal life, the role of an innate complex. Yet the organism is not any sort of inert thing; it too participates in the movement of existence. Danger can even make one’s human situation completely overtake one’s biological situation, and the body will then throw itself into action without reserve” (pg. 86). The yips body mimics this reaction to danger, when a deeper, more primal aspect of the body takes over and acts urgently with total authority. And my participants experienced this active aspect of the yips body as an agentic presence specifically situated to foil their intentions and movements within the athletic context, as though the yips body has a mind of its own.

The experience feels like a persecution, and it compelled my participants into expressions more intense than anxiety and shame – something deeper, darker, more tortured and haunted. Megan, Greg, and Teddy personified the yips in similar ways, as something that taunts and traps people. Greg and Teddy, the two baseball pitchers, both offered “I got you,” and Megan, “Aha! I made you screw up.” They followed up with descriptions of the yips as “an evil thing” having
ownership over them: “you’re mine now.” Teddy additionally noted that our personifying of the yips put us in contact with “dark stuff.” James’s response to the question was briefer and more jarring, a whispered “I hate you.”

These are all descriptions of what Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes as the anonymous body. However, what makes the embodiment of the yips so distressing is that they reveal this phenomenon—this gap between the personal projects of the acting subject and the body’s ability and willingness to comply—in such a direct and explicit way, but without easy explanation. Typically when the anonymous body shows itself in disease or illness, we have a clear and ‘organic’ explanation for it, when the body reveals its allegiance to natural processes which cannot be controlled or reined in by our will. And yet the yips generally resist such accounts. And so athletes are left with the experience of being haunted, as though a willful ‘other’ is taking over the steering wheel. The limited scope of the interruption—in a particular sport or even a movement within a single sport—underscores the eeriness and frustration. Why, athletes wonder, can they not perform in their yips context but the rest of their life—its movements, intentions, tasks, engagements, play—is left unaffected?

In-my-head.

Building on this framework of the anonymous body’s role in the embodied experience of the yips, we can further describe the concept of being “in-one’s-head.” This idea was referenced in three of my interviews both to describe a feature of the experience and to offer something of an explanation. Greg articulated this most clearly, mentioning, “I was so much in my head that I wasn’t thinking about what my body was doing.” Megan and her husband John both proposed that the yips have something to do with ‘being-in-my-head.’ John said, “I’ve read that some
people think the yips are something wrong with your methods or stroke. I don’t buy it. I think it’s more up here (points to head).” Megan additionally noted the role of ‘in-my-headness’ as the yips experience lingered in her awareness and snowballed into an increasingly distressful phenomenon. Teddy’s framework, both for understanding and intervening in his yips, was founded in his sense that his yips occurred when he was distracted from the task immediately before him, that instead he was focusing on thoughts of other people and past experiences. Instead of being present in the moment he tried to do too much, “to control everything around (him).”

Yet this sense of being ‘in-one’s-head’ again references the relationship with the yips body, which, as described above, is founded in the experience of being blocked, stymied, and disrupted from recruiting the body to achieve desired, personally chosen ends. Being in-one’s-head is a description of a certain type of disconnected embodied experience. It references the body by excluding it from the description; as Greg mentioned, the phrase makes intuitive sense to those experiencing it because it is specifically the experience of not feeling ‘in-one’s-body.’ Note that, here, being in-one’s-body need not imply the sort of intentional, conscious awareness of breathing and of the body cultivated by Greg and Teddy; it is also the normal, everyday experience of being engaged with tasks, movements, and perceptions in which the body takes part. It is the personal body, and experiencing it, even mostly unconsciously, gives meaning to ‘being in-one’s-head’ when an athlete loses this typical fluid engagement with the body, things, and other individuals of the phenomenal field.

This disconnection from what had previously been an unthought, organic, spontaneous engagement with one’s surroundings happens when an individual experiences the disruptive anonymity of the yips body. Then, in place of this engagement with the phenomenal field, the
athlete feels untethered. A way to think about this is as a lack of experiential resources. Everything which keeps an athlete fluidly engaged with the task at hand is a type of ‘resource,’ connecting the athlete seamlessly to their environment and their modes of moving through it. This could be the grip of a golf club, the feel of the baseball seams in one’s hand, the mental rehearsal of ‘swing keys,’ the casual awareness of onlookers, the firm, confident gaze at the target of the catcher’s mitt, or, most likely, the fluid integration of all of these at once. In the athletic moment of the yips, something—perhaps a perceived lack of safety—disrupts these normal grounding resources. The anonymous body senses danger and takes control, engaging with the world and its projects on its own terms. As mentioned above, this disrupts an athlete’s experience of the personal body, leaving the ego, “I,” to connect with the few engagements which are solely its province: the cognitive fears and anxieties which both stem from the confrontation with the anonymous body and also worry about its continued exertion of control.

In this way, being ‘in-one’s-head’ is simply another face of this confrontation. It is the ‘other side’ of the take-over by the anonymous body – what the individual is left with after being pushed out from their typical engagement with the phenomenal field. And yet because the body, even the anonymous body, remains situated in a spatial and social field, the individual has the experience of being trapped, isolated, and small; to be on an experiential island whereby the people, things, and even one’s own body feel as though they are far away, or blurry, or difficult to access. In some sense it is a fully embodied experience, but rather than feeling ‘at home’ in the body, it is the experience of fear, panic, and trembling. Like Greg in the moment that was ‘too big’ for him, being in-one’s-head is to—briefly, perhaps unconsciously—sense that one’s body is in a space that is large, overwhelming, and potentially hostile, and then leave this
awareness and instead engage with the what becomes most salient: the ruminative and racing thoughts and anxieties about the situation.

Importantly, in this experience of detachment from one’s actions and movement through the phenomenal field, it is as though the athlete becomes an observer of their experience rather than an influential actor within the scene. This well describes Jeff’s experiences throughout the waxing and waning of his yips. He became just another audience member in the viewing of his golf game, being curious and surprised at both good and awful performances. This is another central aspect of being in-one’s-head: it is the experience of gazing at oneself, as though from a distance. It is from this vantage point that athletes with the yips join others in the phenomenal field in bearing witness to their yips.

**Others: The yips are revealed in social relationships**

The yips is a socially constituted phenomenon. The body that is experienced by athletes with the yips as unsettling, jarring, resistant, and uncanny is a body that is on display for others to see. This means that the yips phenomenon is not only formed within a social field and could not exist apart from it, but that after the first athletic moment of the yips—the actual disruption of movement—the lived experience of the phenomenon plays out in relationships between the athlete and those others nearby who observe the experience. This feature of the yips is partly a necessary condition owing to the athletic and gaming environment out of which the yips emerge. As we will see in the discussion below, the conditions necessary for the manifestation of the yips require that free and spontaneous play is transformed into a game, which implies and even requires others. Games have a social and cultural history, have been passed along by others, and
typically are performed in the presence and under the gaze of others. Because the yips phenomenon is found in games, it is also always found in a social field.

Yet there are other reasons to name the yips as a social phenomenon. Some of these are found in my data, suggesting that the yips phenomenon is embedded in, and only makes sense considering, social relationships. This is a central and meaningful aspect of the yips, and one worthy of acknowledgement and research; that in addition to the yips being ‘found’ in the body and the mind, it is also found in the connections between those with the yips and those others who bear witness to their performances.

Certainly the most apparent indication of the social constitution of the yips is the embarrassment, shame, and social anxiety that emerges for those with yips experiences as they attempt to navigate the sociality of athletic spaces once they have begun to yip. Megan demonstrated this immediately after her first yip, instinctively looking around, before she even reflected on what happened, to ensure no one had seen her errant shot. The poor performances of the yips already imply the presence others as they are happening, and compel athletes to shield their yips performances form view. After the yips take hold people feel their impact acutely through eyes of others. Megan stopped playing with others and assumed people whispered, with alarm and jest, about her having the yips. And her yips were always worse with others. James does not play with others when in a bad stretch of the yips, and makes accommodations in order to keep the game pleasant for others. James also played worse when around an “important” client of his wife’s. Teddy described being impacted beyond the athletic context, feeling isolated and embarrassed, and as though he were a disappointment in relationships beyond baseball. Teddy could throw fine when not facing a batter but yipped with someone at the plate. In the yips literature these social reverberations are mostly regarded as anxiety that exacerbates the yips
once they have precipitated. Yet it is a particular type of social anxiety, which is grounded in relationship and connection, compels athlete to hide themselves and their performances, and reveals a core, relational structure of the overall form of the yips phenomenon.

At least three of my participants indicated the social forces which shaped their yips. Two of my participants, Greg and Megan, explicitly mentioned the social antecedents to their yips – Greg being picked last on the playground and Megan being teased for her reluctance to hit the shot. And Teddy gave some indication of this, in his question “if I don’t keep it going, then what?” That this question comes from a place of fear implies the presence of others. It makes no sense without others who are invested in Teddy’s continued success: teammates, coaches, parents, future college coaches, the all-star team. And though I will discuss this further in the results below, it is interesting to note that the moment when Teddy regained his pitching form was situated in a supportive social setting.

While the yips phenomenon is an embodied and a psychological expression, it could not exist—could not reveal itself in the minds and bodies of athletes—without relationships. I suspect that social relationships play a pivotal role in the genesis of the yips, that these are the conduit through which a perceived lack of safety finds its way into the yips context. This has been implied in the explanations of the yips given by athletes, and discussed through the desire of athletes to impress others (Bawden & Maynard, 2001; Martin, 2016). However, the relational aspect of the yips has mostly been viewed as an environmental influence that exacerbates overthinking, choking, and reinvestment. These results suggest that social relationships are a primary vessel through which the yips are carried. A central aspect of the yips phenomenon is that it is a reaction to the fear of negative social consequences of poor performance.
**Others: Stigma.**

Contributing to the desire to hide the yips body and its performances from others is the collective stigma that is shared amongst athletes, teammates, coaches, family, and friends when witnessing the yips. The experiences of my participants suggest that social fears—especially those grounded in past experiences—play a role in constituting the yips. And these fears seem to be at least partially attuned to a real and pervasive aversion in the social field to poor performance in general and the yips specifically.

Megan gave clear descriptions of the stigma that exists in golf regarding the yips. When someone has the yips there is no space to talk about it because people fear them, like a disease. And so people are isolated in their experience of them. And other golfers might whisper and gossip about those with the yips. She noted that someone with the yips might get teased when putting, and furthermore, that her reaction to herself was partly constituted by this social stigma: “Yikes, yips are for shitty golfers, not me!”

Teddy spoke explicitly about tense interaction with others regarding his yips. His coaches were frustrated and confused, his catcher was angry and reactive, and his father insisted on finding a solution to the problem. While he implied that he compounded these social tensions by isolating himself and exaggerating the judgments of others, his social perceptions had at least some basis. If he did indeed fear negative responses from others if he stopped performing well, his yips provided some validation for these fears.

James took care to adapt his approach to the game to minimize negative reactions, wanting to avoid being “that guy” who, through egregious performance, disrupts the experience for others. And he indicated that his performances, both good and bad, impact the way his wife
views him. He wants her to see him in a good light and struggles with the consequences when she does not.

Greg’s worst fears were not realized; he was eventually allowed to return to pitching. Yet he was pulled out of the game. And while at the time it felt like a relief to be taken from the spotlight and the torment of his yips experience, he confirmed that basic sporting axiom that he learned as a child on the playground: if you are not a good performer, people will not pick you to play.

If the yips phenomenon does entail a fear that others will treat you or value you differently because of diminished athletic performance, it is not unfounded. If you are playing a team sport you are likely to be removed from the game or restricted from playing. Coaches and teammates will get frustrated at your diminished performance. People will tease you. Others will try to fix you and grow frustrated when there is no solution. Family and friends will likely not understand or know what to say, leaving the athlete feeling isolated, suffering alone. To experience the yips is to be confronted with the disinterested and callous proceedings of the anonymous body, and just as this confrontation unsettles and disorients athletes with the yips, so is it disconcerting to bystanders. This contributes to the status of the yips as something to be hidden. Most people would rather not know that such a thing exists. This helps account for the polite and collective silence of James and his friends, the contagion-like quality of the word “yips” on the golf course.

**Time: the form of the yips is distributed across time**

The yips exist across time. They are not only the athletic moment of yips—the actual disruption of movement—but instead exist as a certain form and style of being, of which traces
can be seen, heard, and named in the stories, recollections, and memories of those with the yips. It is often mentioned that the appearance of the yips is abrupt and spontaneous, which is used to suggest the yips have a biological etiology. Yet my interviews suggest that the story of each athlete’s yips makes sense as an experience across time, and that the athletic moment of yips is prepared for, that in some way prior experiences have cleared space for the yips to occur.

Merleau-Ponty is again helpful in framing this theme, and we can think of the temporal element of the yips as a type of repression, wherein the yips context—a ‘big’ stadium game, a bump-and-run shot, a run of excellent performances, or the golf course—comes to stand for something else, something in the past. Importantly, and building off the previous theme ‘others,’ this style of orienting to athletic space through time involves and requires social relationships. The yips phenomenon involves a narrowing of the meaning of the athletic context over time, so that it comes to represent a particular significance, with an emphasis on social significance, that gets repeated again and again. Merleau-Ponty says, “Impersonal time continues to flow along, but personal time comes to a halt…The traumatic experience does not subsist as a representation, in the mode of objective consciousness, and as a moment that can be dated; by its very essence, it survives only as a style of being and in a certain degree of generality. I abdicate my perpetual power to give myself ‘worlds’—in favor of one of them” (pg. 85). This aptly describes the accounts of my participants, wherein certain styles of orienting to athletic spaces and styles of relating to others have survived through time and exerted themselves to influence the manifestations of the yips. The following individualized accounts situate the emergence of my participants’ yips within past and present emotional and relational experiences. This is the personal ‘form’ of the yips and references the inherent temporal component of the phenomenon,
the way each manifestation of the yips is given its shape and presentation, and then carried through time, by personal, historical field conditions—ego, others, things.

Greg shared two frameworks for making sense of his yips that are overlapping and potentially reinforcing. He directly connected the fear that emerged on the mound in the Florida game to his childhood experiences on the playground, and, together with his other understanding of the personal etiology of the yips—the occasional habit of being distracted from the present moment, of being ‘in his head,’ and therefore disrupting his abilities—we can state a brief personal story. Greg’s yips experience was shaped when, as a child, he learned that the quality of his athletic performance in part determined his right to play, to continue doing something he loved. The ‘big stadium’ context of the Florida game tapped into this lingering fear, making the moment “too big” for Greg, initiating a confrontation with that fear, tensions, and the anonymous body, and allowing the immediate athletic situation to be imbued with personal meanings from moments long-past. This old fear was the obstacle that Greg felt he put in his way.

Megan also pointed directly to a personal framework that contextualizes her yips in past experiences. Her acknowledgement of it was brief, but she implicitly built a case for it as we talked about the history of her yips-affected shot. The bump-and-run shot with an 8-iron was one she never performed for her entire golfing career, owing to a lack of comfort. As a result, she was teased by others—we do not know who, when, and how often—for not hitting the “appropriate” shot. She resisted pressure for a long time, finally acquiescing to the suggestions of her husband—a particularly skilled performer of the shot—that she needed to learn it, though she never felt comfortable controlling the outcome. One day she went out to practice this shot and experienced a yip. We can assume that something made her avoid the shot when she was younger, too, and then it increasingly became something for which she was teased. As Megan
said, “…maybe that’s why the yips crept into that shot in particular, why it was that one that came back to bite me in the butt. It found my weakness.”

Teddy implied a framework for understanding his yips as a reaction to increased social pressure. That, once he became aware of his long run of pitching success, he started to fear the consequences of ending it, and this ratcheted up expectations in such a way as to incite new anxiety and be a factor in precipitating his yips. He also acknowledged that he lacked a complete and coherent framework for making sense of his yips. Early on in his relationship with the yips Teddy tried find one and was frustrated in his attempts, feeling that he did not know how to fit all of the “puzzle pieces” together and that attempting to do this was further deteriorating his mood and yips. I suspect that Teddy’s personal, historical framework for the yips could be elaborated by including more of the emotional content—the “dark stuff”—evoked in our conversation, and added to the framework he already has, wherein success helped stoke his fears. However, that a more coherent, personal, emotional story could be told about Teddy’s yips does not mean it ought to or that it would be therapeutic regarding his yips experience. Teddy himself said as much, that, regarding his attempts to situate his yips in the context of past experiences, “Screw the part that was shitty. Don’t worry about that ‘cause that’s not helping me.” I elaborate further on this in the discussion section.

Again, James’s account stands somewhat apart. This makes sense when considering, as I noted in James’s narrative above, that of all the interviews and associated yips experiences, James’s is the most opaque, distant, and difficult to access, both for him and for me as interviewer and researcher. Yet I speculate that James’s experience of the yips can be framed in the context of his relationship with his wife. James golfed for most of his life without the yips. He has known his wife, a golf pro, for ten years. There was a period of five years before James
experienced the yips when he and his wife enjoyed playing together. During this time James occasionally felt something was “wrong” with his swing, and sometimes his wife pointed out inconsistencies she noticed. As a result James took a few lessons from his wife, and though some of these went well, James’s wife also felt that he was not listening to her. Then five years ago he experienced the yips, and during a stretch when the yips subsided, James went to great lengths to prove to his wife that he could play well. The most important thing for him to do during this period of relief was to use that momentary flow to show his wife his capacities. That is a meaningful downstream effect of the James’s yips experience, and it at least demonstrates that his yips came to encompass his relationship with his wife. Yet if we use this information and work backwards, James’s yips make sense when situated in the increased focus and pressure of proving one’s golf game in the shadow of a professional golfer partner.

These are not explanations for, or causes of, the yips. Here, I am only suggesting that, given space to explore the complicated field conditions in which the yips arises, it is possible to build a narrative which grounds the yips in significant personal experiences and their impact on an athlete’s orientation to their yips context. Importantly, this is the temporal aspect of the yips, the way the experience is distributed amongst many moments and many athletic fields. In other words, an athlete’s relationship to the yips phenomenon, to its full ‘form,’ begins much earlier than the first yips moment, and survives as a style and comportment. Again, this style is bound up in the meaning of an athlete’s social relationships within the athletic context.

**Time: the inevitable progression of the yips.**

After the yips occur once, there is often a continued narrowing of the athletic context and a repetition of the disrupted movement, which contributes to the process by which the yips
experience is ‘embedded’ for each athlete. Everyone has a process for dealing with the yips. And this process plays an important role in laying the groundwork for how the yips are carried, in determining the nature of the relationship.

For most people the first step of this process is avoidance. Megan, Teddy, and James all demonstrated this reaction early in their relationship with the yips. Megan and Teddy continued playing while actively trying to ignore thoughts about their newly diminished performance, and James did not even register his early yips moments as noteworthy. In each of these yips experiences there was a relatively immediate repetition of the movement within the yips context. Megan repeated her chip several times before stopping, and then continued a longer-term attempt to push through the yips. Teddy slowly saw his performance degrade but kept taking the mound and was encouraged by this coach to do so, to push through it. James continued repeating his usual routine and replicated his yips experience in the transition from the driving range to the golf course.

Though these three athletes did not change their athletic approach immediately in response to the yips, they did change their social interactions by pulling back from others. Both Megan and James avoided playing with others, and Teddy avoided socializing with others outside of the baseball context. When they did attempt talk about the issue with others, as with Teddy, the conversation was unhelpful at best, frustrating or dispiriting at worst.

As mentioned in the Greg’s narrative above, his situation was different. He repeated his yips affected motion several times in that one inning but was then pulled from the game. He received support from teammates and had time and space to pull back from pitching without jumping back in.
In general it seems the embedding process involves an increased focus and engagement with the affected movement within the athletic context in which it occurred (a tight lie for Megan, the golf course for James, a game situation with a batter for Teddy) coupled with a simultaneous retreat and pulling-back from social connection and relationship, whether in the athletic context or otherwise. For Greg there was a supportive engagement with others regarding the yips experience, no change to social relationships, a removal from the context (stadium game), and space to practice the movement before returning to the context (he also had the advantage of not having a firm pitching foundation). These were some of the ‘resources’ on which he relied as he continued his relationship with his yips experience.

**Space: The yips are a whole-person contraction revealed in the body**

This theme centers on a spatial metaphor that collects together several aspects of the above themes and places them on a simple spectrum of expansion and contraction. Many of the qualities of the yips described here can be meaningfully represented for the way they vary along this continuum.

When individuals perform well, especially when they are in something like an athletic ‘flow,’ they are in an experience of self-expansion. They feel large, open, capable, engaged with the environment, and unafraid. Take Greg’s experience of the ‘moon game’ as the exemplar here. He said, “I felt full, calm, powerful and blessed, like...what could go wrong?” Greg was feeling expansive, an experience of physical and emotional safety, wholeness, and, in his case, wonder, awe, and joy. In this state his performance was a flowing, dominating one. That was a special setting that is difficult to access for most individuals on a regular basis. But it also relates to safe, playful spaces in which movement and spontaneity are supported and encouraged.
Though he was situated within the confines of a game, Greg felt playful. He did not feel constrained or limited, but fueled and nourished, and excited to explore the possibilities of his movements within the bounds of the game.

On the other end of this spectrum is contraction. This is the end on which the yips are situated. The moment of the yips, the break or interruption, involves a contraction of the individual within the athletic and social space. Sometimes this can be observed in the yips moment – the literal involuntary muscle contractions that some researchers use to diagnose the yips. The overall quality of the yips phenomenon is shrinking, making someone feel smaller, restricted, limited, and fractured. Rather than being in free and flowing interaction with others and the environment, the individual is isolated and in-one’s-head.

The image of a bully that I used in Teddy’s narrative is useful here. In some way all of the narratives had a similar feel and expression to them – of a taunting presence that takes advantage of a sensitive moment in the game to say something jarring, distracting, and personally wounding: I got you and you’re mine; I got you and you’re no longer in control; I made you screw up; I hate you. Imagine an actual person shouting one of those statements in the middle of a backswing in golf or in the moment a pitcher is bringing his arm forward to throw the ball, and you have a good image of the yips experience. A tensing up and a freezing. James even demonstrated an embodied expression of this when he shrunk himself and raised his hands above his head.

This contraction characteristic of the yips phenomenon can be observed at all loci of its progression through an athlete’s life, and is therefore a concise means of representing the larger structural essence of the phenomenon as a whole. This contraction shows itself in bodies as the literal, involuntary muscle contraction seen in the physical manifestations of the yips, which in
golf appears as a spasm in the wrist and in baseball as a tightening of the grip around the ball. There is the relational contraction observed in the pulling-back of social connection and the hiding of the yips-affected body from the gaze of others. There is the contraction and limiting of personal engagements with the world, as yips-affected athletes feel untethered to their surroundings and to others, and instead feel trapped in their heads with ruminative worry and fear. And there is also a temporal contraction, seen in the narrowing of possible futures within the yips athletic environment. Again, as Merleau-Ponty (2009) states, “I abdicate my perpetual power to give myself ‘worlds’—in favor of one of them” (pg. 85). The yips context comes to signify only one or a few possible meanings, likely ones that are cloaked in fear. In doing so the yips limit the affected individual from having other experiences of the athletic context, of seeing it as something other than a situation in which this jarring and unsettling experience might arise. Greg hinted at this contraction of possible worlds when he longingly reflected, “Right, what if I'd gone into that stadium nine years ago and said, ‘Wow, I'm in a major league stadium. I'm in Florida, I'm playing baseball, I'm pitching. What could go wrong?’ Instead of, ‘Don't walk this fucking guy’ right?” That type of broad, expansive, and awe-filled perspective was not available to him at that time because of the constraining and foreclosing nature of the yips phenomenon, which, through the anonymous body, actively and intentionally restricts multiple interpretations of an athletic context in favor of one. This limiting is an important element of the yips overall; that they are physical, emotional, and relational—that is to say: whole person—contraction from the fear of the negative social consequences of poor performance.
Reconnecting with the body and the phenomenal field

My participants represent an atypical pool within the yips community, in that all four found their way out of the yips and back into flowing athletic movements (this includes James’s “cautiously optimistic” update). This is in contrast to many previous findings which report poor prognosis for those with the yips (Bawden & Maynard, 2001; Clarke et al., 2015; Martin, 2016; McDaniel et al., 1989; Sachdev, 1992; Smith et al., 2003). Selection bias may partly account for this. I asked people to speak openly and at-length about their personal experiences of the yips. As already mentioned, it was difficult to gather participants, and as noted by Megan, she was more willing to talk knowing that the yips were behind her. Perhaps the way I recruited volunteers selected for those that had positive outcomes with the yips, making them more comfortable speaking about it.

Regardless, in this theme we see that individuals with the yips are able to find a way back to desired and flowing athletic performance. If the experience of the yips and the anonymous body is jarring and steeped in a feeling of fractured tension, the regaining of desired movements is something like a synthesis – a re-alignment and re-connecting, during which the athlete finds access to the fluid and spontaneous connections with the personal body, the surrounding environment, and others that was characteristic of their experience prior to the yips.

Consistent across all of the ‘solutions’ in which my participants engaged is a means of breaking out of the constraining, narrowing influence of the yips. The yips insist that the athletic context is unsafe and that it can never be regarded as anything but a space in which the anonymous body should prevail in opposition to the personal, performative projects of the athlete. Solutions to the yips entail breaking this cycle.
Each participant found a means of reconnecting with their fluid movement. Greg practiced a lot. He had the time and the personal space to step back from his yips experience and invest energy in building his pitching skills and identity. He received enough support in his environment and had little pressure to take the mound immediately after his yips game.

Teddy hit rock bottom and fell back into relative safety, where he was no longer expected to pitch well and eventually, to even pitch. He stopped for several months. Later his friends encouraged him to “just throw.” The free play space, encouragement, and time away from pitching allowed something “to click” for Teddy. He threw well and regained his form, and discovered some mantras to use as tethers to the present moment and his skills, which gave him a sturdy foundation on which to rebuild his capacities.

Megan closed her eyes, which allowed her to feel again the motion of her swing uninterrupted by a yip. She experienced immediate emotional relief and newfound confidence that she had an antidote to the yips. Over time she repeated the motion enough that it stuck, and she unlearned the fearful association she had connected to the bump-and-run moment of contact.

James tried a new stroke and is currently finding success. The change in motion gives him new ‘swing keys’ on which to focus and bring him ‘out-of-his-head’, provides distance from the yips-affected movements, and has allowed him new confidence.

Each of these pathways back to fluid and desired movements opposed the contracting forces of the yips. This requires a safe space in which to try to regain the lost movement. As is clear from the above description of the embedding process that follows any yips experience, most athletes return to their yips context and repeat their yips experience several times before altering their approach. This may have the result of deepening their association to that space as unsafe, in which case it may be useful to catch the yips as early after the first instance as
possible. As in, creating a safe space in which to regain the movement may require early intervention and removing the athlete from the yips context.

A ‘safe space’ is ideally one in which the athlete can experience some of the qualities of ‘expansive’ moments and movements. This requires a set of resources, which provide relief from the contraction and internal focus characteristic of the yips. Each of my participants had resources which allowed them to get ‘out of their head’—to reduce fears and reconnect with the phenomenal field—and back in fluid connection with their task and their immediate sporting environment. For Greg this was the lack of pressure, social support, and even the personal growth practices that encouraged him to be present, embodied, and awe-like. Teddy was given time away from pitching and a setting in which he had relational support and low stakes, both athletically and socially. Megan found a way to block out the scariest part of her yips experience, giving her room to find again the movement. And James was given a new set of concrete embodied instructions on which to focus, and was given these by a trusted professional.

Note that each solution involved an experience of comfort and safety removed from the yips experience, and that in this environment the athlete was able to find their movement again. Additionally, each intervention relied on other people – that others were an important part in constituting the safe space. And each intervention alleviated the tendency toward contracted bodies, relationships, and fears, instead promoting expansive comportments and movements.
Discussion

Aggregating the previous literature findings together with my results here, we can say that the yips phenomenon is a disruption of athletic movement that occurs when an individual experiences a break in the flow of what had previously been a habituated movement within a familiar athletic situation. This break has come to be known as a ‘yip.’ It is the athletic moment of poor performance. And it coincides with a socially constituted insecurity, perceived lack of safety, and fear. The athlete transitions from easy engagement with their body, others, and the objects of the athletic field to a confrontation with an anonymous body and a worried ego experiencing a loss of control. People with the yips experience a refusal of the body to participate in willed activity.

While the yip itself, the actual moment of interruption, is one aspect of the yips, the larger phenomenon extends both earlier and later in the time through the relationship of an athlete to their particular yips context. By ‘relationship’ I mean the repertoire of experiences, feelings, thoughts, and associations that mediate the athlete’s orientation to the yips space. One can catch a glimpse of this relationship in how people discuss their yips experiences, in both the content and the gestures, tones, and affect. While previous research has observed this shame, embarrassment, insecurity, and anxiety, and theorized that it as an exacerbating influence in the yips phenomenon, I believe it useful to assume, as I have here, that these personal orientations to the yips can be followed backward in time to tell a relevant story about the emergence of each person’s yips experience.

Doing this with my participants suggests that the social tensions that follow from the yips can inform narratives of the socially- and relationally-situated conditions that precede the yips – the fears of being picked last, being teased, being critiqued, or perhaps even being valued too
much for athletic performance. Some previous life events have shaped athletic spaces as vulnerable to social fear. Something about the context is experienced as unsafe, and the yips relies on this fragility for its disruptive influence.

When considering relevant framing for an individual’s yips, it useful to identify the nature and history of the fear that became linked to the yips context, to fully describe the qualities of that context, and to detail more immediate precipitating factors.

**Phenomenal field context of the yips**

To further situate the yips phenomenon within the larger phenomenal field from which it emerges, we consider here some of the necessary developments required to bring about the yips, both in the larger social-athletic context and in the athletic experience of individual athletes. This discussion is meant to expand the scope of the ‘form’ that has come to be called the yips. By focusing on the athletic moment of the yips—and the thoughts, feelings, movements, and neurophysiological signs present at or near the moment of yips—some of the larger context of the yips is forgotten, taken for granted, or assumed unimportant. This project has attempted to pull back our investigatory gaze to gain a better sense of the embodied, emotional, historical, and relational context which informs the yips phenomenon. Using the results from this study together with scholarship on games and play, we describe here an arc of yips development which details a necessary but insufficient list of field conditions for the yips phenomenon. There are two main developments, and we list them in the order they have occurred for all the yips experiences of my participants: first, the historical movement from free, spontaneous play to a game; and second, the movement from an athlete’s taking up of this sport to the emergence of the yips.
The first development in any emergence of the yips is the existence, and later transformation, of free and spontaneous play. In his work on the phenomenon of play and its influence on culture, Huizinga (2016) noted five primary criteria of play. These are criteria of play as a concept, and as such are idealized and not fully representative of all the forms of play and games that we acknowledge as ‘play’ today. The criteria include the following: first, play is voluntary; it is free or superfluous. People choose to play because they enjoy it, they are not forced into it or required to engage in it because of the demands of life. Second, play is not ‘real life;’ it is felt and experienced as something outside of the normal bounds of everyday life, something that players step into as they leave behind the concerns of real life. Contributing to this distinction with real life is that play is always demarcated from other activities in time and space. There are moments and spaces of play that are set aside from others. When one chooses to play, he or she enters these times and spaces to do so, and the play runs its course by the time the individual leaves that space. Fourth, play establishes order – it pulls together, through rules and conventions, players, spaces, and objects so that all move in concert according the intentions of the play. Meaning that the intention to play is the ‘form’ that moves through the phenomenal field of play. Finally, play is not connected with material interest or gain.

Each of the games played by my participants began, at some point in history, as a rudimentary collection of movements and goals markedly different from the highly ritualized, rule-bound sports played today. And prior to that, the activities that gave rise to these sports likely looked more like “pure playfulness.” Huizinga (2016) noted that the concept of pure playfulness does not easily lend itself to analysis due to its seeming irreducibility. Pure playfulness is the fully free and spontaneous play of animals, children, and some adults who
have retained the capacity. Pure play looks like children dancing with no one watching. Pure play is not yet ritualized or judged from the outside.

In a state of pure playfulness, an individual’s movements are tethered together only by the form of their desire: the individual performs as their next movement whatever feels right and good. Yet in order to eventually transform these types of playful movements into an activity recognizable as golf or baseball, some of these spontaneous movements need to be selected and valued relative to others. Of all the possible movements and actions an individual can execute, one basic movement or class of movements—perhaps overhand throwing motions, as in baseball, or striking balls with clubs, as in golf—is isolated, supported, or privileged above the rest. This movement is performed and repeated.

We can imagine the outlines of a primitive golfing or baseball activity in which an ‘originator’ of one of our sports attempts to hit a target with a ball, either with overhand throws or with the use of a club. If they continue engaging this activity voluntarily and without extrinsic motivation, they have entered a play space, in keeping with Huizinga’s (1955) sense of play as demarcated from other life. They choose to perform actions not directly related to survival or work, and freely choose ends—striking a target with a ball—and means to reach those ends, that only make sense within the overall meaning of their desire: to attempt, and hopefully succeed at, throwing a ball at a target, and likely from distances that made this feat challenging. In these early athletic movements we can see the consistent presence of the originator’s ‘personal body,’ the one that readily joins them in achieving the ends identified by his desires. This is partly what feels satisfying and joyful for them – they experience an alignment of body in a state of flow that help them act in the phenomenal field and be met with success, openness, and embodied freedom. Additionally, in this first experience they are alone, both literally in the space, but also
in the setting of the desire, intention, bounds of the movement, and feeling of satisfaction. The originator determined their own system for evaluating their movements.

Yet for this to become a formalized game of the sort that gives rise to the yips, other people must be involved. At some point the solo play of the originator must invite and recruit others. In our arc of yips development this entails a few necessary criteria. First, the inclusion of others in the meaningful world of the game. All the sports in which the yips emerge necessarily involve others within the valence of the game. Second, a formal set of rules is devised to govern the means allowed for achieving the game’s ends, which grow more intricate and complicated as the game develops. Third, a point system is developed as an easy measure of a player’s prowess at performing the movements and actions of the game. Finally, note at this stage the trend away from the originator’s first play context. The original desire, movement, and satisfaction, which were already selected from among many possibilities in the phenomenal field, have been further isolated and systematized; whereas in the first experience the originator was the sole arbiter of success and satisfaction, now the performance of others and a numerical metric are available as comparisons for success and satisfaction. This continues a gradual, constraining, trend – of movements, space, intentions, and goals.

To further emphasize the movement from the original playfulness to the development of games and sport, I refer to the definition of games given by Suits (1978) in his book The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia. He states, “to play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity” (Suits, 1978, p. 34). He later offered a concise definition: “Playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles”
(Suits, 1978, p. 41). This usefully frames both games played by my participants: by choosing to play either baseball or golf, they enter an action-oriented social and embodied space governed by the rules of the game, wherein each player attempts to direct balls toward a target, but are limited in their means to do so.

As time goes on these games were passed along to more players. Their popularity grew and the rules were explained and disseminated to new generations. It is into this basic sporting context that each of my participants was born. Note some of the aspects of this context. Baseball and golf exist, and they require players to perform athletic movements according to the rules and as appraised by the points system, the player, and any others present. These games are known and held by others in the social milieu. Children born into this society learn to move and manipulate objects at an early age, independently from the bounds of these games, in the mode of the free and spontaneous play. However, some of these individuals are exposed to baseball and golf and choose to manipulate objects within the bounds of the rules, goals, and performance assessments the games. In other words, they freely submit their bodies, their intentions, their emotions, and their time to the organizing structures of these sports.

Each of my participants began playing their sport before the age of 10. The rules, skills, and general habits of these games were conveyed to them by others, if not explicitly than through social observation and learning. They each practiced the particular movements required to perform their sport, and, with time, built a narrow and refined motor program—another constraining of range and variability—and the outcomes of their performances were evidence of this.

At some point between learning the game and having their first yip, each participant experienced an event—or many events over many years—which imbued their sporting context
with meanings that made them vulnerable to the yips. These experiences shaped the larger ‘form’ of their yips, the style of orienting and relating which makes sense of their particular personal and social contraction. Such experiences necessarily involve others and cultivate a fear of the social consequences of poor performance. It might be frequent teasing, like Megan experienced, or explicit performance-related exclusion, as happened with Greg. Or maybe it is the run of successful performance and associated praise of Teddy’s baseball experiences. Whatever the event is, it likely passed without much thought and does not immediately contribute to poor performance. However, when the first yip occurs it stands out as jarring and uncanny. It is repeated several times within the athletic context it first occurred. Afterward there is likely a progression of the yips, as with Megan, Teddy, and James.

To summarize these developments: free play is transformed into a game, and in doing so certain movements are selected and valued above others. This game is shared among others and passed down to new members. An individual—who later experiences the yips—is born into this social milieu and learns the game. They experience success, and some of the easier movements of the game become unthought and habitually executed. At some point these movements are affected by the yips.

Notice in this descriptive arc of the yips an overall movement from openness and expansiveness to constraint and contraction. There is a significant difference between the context of the playful origin of these games and the athletic context in which each of my participants first experienced the yips. Whereas the originators of the games were guided by their creative desires for movement and play, my participants were given, ahead of time, the scaffolding of an established sport. And this establishment included a more intricate web of intentions and judgments, to which the originators of the games was not tethered. Their movements—if we
assume an idealized, free, play space devoid of other judgments—were appraised only their own desires and sense of his capacities. In contrast, the athletic performances of my participants were assessed according themselves, the rules of the game, and the accumulated performances of those who played the game before them; performances which, among other things, helped establish the convention that certain actions within the sport are simple and ought to be navigated with ease. These include throwing the ball over the plate, hitting a bump-and-run with an 8-iron, and performing similarly on both the golf course and driving range. This, too, is an important aspect of the yips phenomenon; that in all of these athletic contexts the foundation has already been laid onto which an athlete can build—through a variety of social and athletic experiences—a particular social significance which partly constitutes the form of their yips. There is already a hook onto which these social, relational insecurities can latch. The above developmental arc underscores the complicated and meaningful cultural momentum with which any athletic context is associated, and which any yips experience inevitably entails. It is not the case that an athlete with the yips is only missing a shot or incorrectly performing a movement, it is rather that this aberrant movement is occurring within a much larger personal and social context that imbues that ‘miss’ with personal and social meaning.

**The yips and reinvestment**

Why, if the yips at least partly involves a type of fearful, ruminate, ‘in-my-headness’ mediated by social tension, does this not consistently register in studies of psychological constructs like anxiety, obsessive thinking, or reinvestment? One possibility is that the measures and assessments used to detect the presence of such personal tendencies have thresholds that are too high to register a signal from a group of yips-affected individuals, a scenario in which case...
individuals with the yips *would* share psychological traits or tendencies that predispose them to the yips, they are just too subtle to be detected by current psychometric analysis. However, I think it more likely that these assessments are not appropriately constructed to capture any aspects of the yips phenomenon; that the ability to express the yips phenomenon is not linked to a psychological trait. The phenomenon is not a static thing that can be measured, but rather a movement, a contraction. The yips have a structure and form to them, but not any characteristics that can—at least as yet—be picked up with the snapshot measurements of psychological trait assessments. To ‘see’ the yips it is necessary to have in-depth engagement in order to observe the movement of the phenomenon through the phenomenal field – the pulling back in social relationships, the briefly struck bracing pose, the dark stuff, the childhood memories, the disappointed onlookers. Athletes with the yips have had widely disparate and individualized experiences which contribute to the social vulnerability in certain athletic spaces. There are certainly structural similarities in these experiences, but they are varied enough to defy conventional analysis. If one wants to ‘detect’ the yips, the tool needed is something which can detect a type of significance, not a type of person.

**The yips and overuse**

Why does the yips affect a movement that had become unconscious and habitualized? Researchers of both dystonia and the yips note that the affected movements are always ones that have been executed repetitively many times. This has led some to speculate that the etiology of the yips involves overuse of muscles and neurological pathways (McDaniel et al., 1989). I want to suggest something else. To move from the observation that diminished capacities were once executed many times as intended to assuming that these repetitive executions are the cause of the
yips is somewhat circular. The only way to notice that a capacity has been lost is to contrast poor performance with a period of good performance. The yips phenomenon presents itself as something remarkable and noteworthy precisely because, when this contraction impacts an individual who has previously been successful with a movement, the contrast is apparent. But many individuals—novices, children—experience social and environmental constraint in athletic situations and have poor performances because of this. Yet we do not note it as the yips because no successful repertoire has been built up.

In other words: the yips need a well-established motor program to have a noticeable impact. The phenomenon needs a hook onto which it can latch its constraining and disruptive influence. Staying with the metaphor of a bully, imagine that, in order to achieve maximal disruption of the targeted athlete, this bully must time their shouts to occur at exactly the right moment in the golf swing or the baseball throw. This is impossible to do if the athlete lacks a regular and replicable pace and rhythm to their movement. The yips require relative precision in order to precisely disrupt.

**Interventions**

Above, I emphasized ‘safety’ as crucial component for successful interventions, noting that safety meant different things to each of my participants, but that for each athlete this partly allowed for an experiential tether to the phenomenal field – to feel again fluidly engaged with body, objects, and others. The goal of any intervention aimed at recovering the lost movement is to find a route back to this engagement, and free and flowing movement, such that it allows an athlete to both execute the affected motion as it had been done before and repeat this motion enough times that it again becomes habitualized. It is generally quite difficult for athletes
affected by the yips to find a predictable means of accessing their full range of movements while in the yips-affected context.

While no intervention strategy has shown significant and replicable efficacy in the yips literature, the small studies investigating Solution Focused Guided Imagery and Emotional Freedom Technique demonstrated preliminary success in alleviating the yips. In Bell et al. (2011), the use of SFGI suggests that some yips-affected athletes benefit from rehearsing positive thoughts and images of their yips context, and actively working to turn focus away from their memories of interrupted performances. In many ways this works by reframing the yips context, making it less triggering. Teddy used some of these methods when building his confidence after regaining his ability to pitch. The EFT work by Rotheram et al. (2012) offers an intervention centered on significant life events, giving athletes a space in which to recall and make emotional contact with difficult life experiences, and a supportive environment in which to receive a somatically-oriented treatment. By their own accounts of their mechanisms of action, SFGI and EFT both fit with interventional strategies that opposes personal, athletic contraction. SFGI gives athletes a present-moment focus and a feeling of confidence and expansiveness on which to tether their attention, and EFT diminishes fear responses.

Regardless of the mechanism of action of these therapies, they encourage a break in the cycle of fear and disconnection with which the yips context is associated. It may also be that successful yips interventions operate, at least in part, by giving athletes some of the safe space they need and the confidence that their suffering is being addressed by a caring individual. If part of the distressing nature of the yips phenomenon stems from social repercussions, isolation, and feeling misunderstood, then having a knowledgeable professional that listens, understands, and suggests a fix could help in resisting personal contraction. This is related to the ‘common factors’
observed in research on psychotherapy and increasingly identified as the important active ingredients in cultivating therapeutic change (Messer & Wampold, 2002). These factors are predictive of successful outcomes across therapeutic modalities and include the working alliance between therapist and patient, and the therapist’s adherence and allegiance to a particular theoretical framework. Perhaps a similar set of factors are efficacious for cases of the yips; that having a caring professional who is familiar with the yips, collaborative in determining an intervention strategy, and who exudes confidence and trust their conceptual model, helps establish the safe space conducive to recovery from the yips.

To summarize, the central factor important in intervening in the yips in such a way that the athlete regains their lost movement is creating a space in which they feel comfortable enough to engage with their movement or whatever is most salient to their yips experience. This space is likely removed from the original yips context, includes safe others with an understanding of the yips phenomenon, and, eventually, encourages the individual to gradually re-engage with their movement or yips context. The idea is that this allows a ‘reset’ of the motor program system.

I am interested in the suggestion by Martin (2016) to utilize play as an intervention. He hypothesized that baseball players with the yips might be helped by playing with several balls of different sizes, weights, and colors. Ostensibly, this provides the athletes with a variety of embodied experiences in throwing these balls toward a target, hopefully giving them some distance from the yips-context while encouraging a gradual path back to their desired motion. This makes sense as an intervention within my framework of the yips, though I add a caveat. I would be cautious in attempting too quickly to regain a lost yips-movement. As in, the goal of such ‘play’ cannot be too narrowly focused on returning to good—and socially-praised—performance. Rather, the athlete ought to be encouraged to throw these balls in a variety of
directions and with a variety of arm motions. This has the effect of introducing variability into the motor program, as well as getting athletes back in touch with moments of pure-playfulness, which cultivates an experience of fearless expansiveness in body, space, relationships, and mental activity.

A final thought on interventions aimed at recovering the affected movement. In this study I have delved deeply into the personal, emotional, relational context of the yips and have speculated on how this context helps frames for the emergence of the yips. This is useful for research on the phenomenon of the yips and is potentially helpful for those with the yips who are trying to understand and to work through the issue. However it is likely not a useful enterprise for everyone with the yips, and in some cases may be actively harmful. Even if it is true that a previous emotional experience, significant life event, or ongoing social dynamic can shed light on the nature of an athlete’s yips, that knowledge need not be required for regaining the desired movement. Teddy was clear that his efforts to discern ‘why’ his yips occurred were futile and added to the burden. And his solutions specifically involved not focusing on the past. Again, individualized intervention strategies are likely warranted.

Above all, my results here at least suggest the utility of considering the yips experience a mental health issue so that athletes can receive support for the emotional toll. Recently there has been increased acknowledgement in the athletic community of mental health concerns, with emphasis on the important distinctions between mental health issues and athletic performance; namely, that the two be treated separately and the professionals devoted to maximizing sports performances are not the only support for athletes struggling with anxiety, depression, or other psychological concerns (Neal et al., 2013). Perhaps the yips is a special case. Performance work can help, but at the very least individuals with the yips should be encouraged to have a safe and
supportive space in which they can discuss their experiences in order to limit the social contractions characteristic of the yips. As suggested in Jensen and Fisher (2012), this ideally would occur with individuals familiar with the yips.

**Final Reflections**

There are two final reflections on the yips. Because of the emphasis I have placed on the social constitution of the yips, and the indications from my participants that safe others can play a supportive role in moving through the yips, I speculate here about other, relationally-oriented interventions. I wonder what it would be like if instead of facing responses of confusion, frustration, and misunderstanding from coaches, teammates, parents, and friends, individuals with the yips were met with empathy, curiosity, and companionship. Even for those unfamiliar with the yips, what if a wildly missed throw or chip shot was met with wonder: “wow, I’ve never seen anything like that before! How did you do that? Could you do it again?” As in: the yips is not a mistake, it is a fascinating expression. I think this would moderate the typical embedding process, stopping athletes from delving ever further into their isolation and fear. And they would benefit from having partners in the process.

Now of course I know there are reasons these sorts of responses do not happen, and I am not suggesting them as practical solutions to the yips. Things which are out of the ordinary elicit confused and incredulous responses. And sports carry with them years of cultural momentum and expectations – the rules, traditions, rituals that structure athletic spaces and movements. This order cannot easily be interrupted, and so it makes since that a disruption as stark as the yips would generate all the responses we see, from removing players from the game to a growing body of literature positioned to discover an etiology for the yips and then a cure.
The suggestions for broader social interventions are more like thought experiments to highlight the social constitution of the yips as well as the sedimented nature of the play spaces in which the yips arise. If we pull back the scope of analysis from the individual and instead look at all the necessary factors required to constitute the yips, the phenomenon looks more like an expression of a particular constellation of human and environmental forces, rather than a movement disorder of the individual.

Our athletic spaces, which at some point began as playful relief from ‘real life,’ have become sedimented as an extension of real life wherein the values and meanings of the game, and the way athletes’ bodies and movements are judged according to the schemes of the game, carry consequences that are experienced as real and significant. Perhaps some element of the yips is a rejection of this reality – a declaration that “it’s not safe!” In this way, the yips are more like a barometer of overall societal safety, in which case the capacity for some individuals in our society to express the yips indicates the relative physical, emotional, and relational safety of our environments. That athletes can experience and express a social contraction in the artificial athletic spaces we have created is an instance of using threat-detecting mechanisms in what, relative to other environments, appears as the most prominent social danger.

Finally, I think the yips also says something about human consciousness and the immediacy or distance with which we interact with our environment. A quote is useful here: “Between the stimulus and the response there is a space, and in that space lies our power and freedom.” This is typically misattributed to Victor Frankl but the actual author is unknown (Salomaki, 2016). It implies that human consciousness, that little bit of processing space that exists between the environment and our response to the environment, is a positive and productive force in our lives. And certainly this is part of the story. But recall that the yips needs ‘a space’ in
which to operate. The affected athletic movements of the yips are always ones that allow a
slowing down or pause in the action of the game. It is in this space that we catch sight of the
pitfalls of our distance from the environment, that conscious worry and anxiety which disrupts
fluidity and connection with the phenomenal field. That space between stimulus and response is
also a space where we can carry past experiences and do complicated transformations of
conditioned responses. While all animals can have fearful reactions to particular stimuli, we are
capable of especially syllogistic versions of this, wherein a space which was meant to be playful
and fun and a break from real life became imbued with gravity and seriousness. Or, as Greg
stated, we can transform moments—our participation in the immediate context—and make them
larger than they need to be, encompassing more meanings, memories, feelings, and relationships
than those that are immediately given. And all the while we forget that we created this space, that
it arose out of our creative capacities and from a desire for play.

Avenues for Future Research

This study extends previous qualitative work and emphasizes the personal and historical
nature of the yips phenomenon. It provides a basic structure on which future investigations can
be modeled and these findings bolstered. As mentioned above, I intentionally chose a small
sample and the depth-oriented methodological strategies of a qualitative phenomenological
project because of my desire to describe personal aspects of the yips that do not receive as much
attention in the literature. Yet because of this my results may have limited generalizability to the
larger yips community, and to sports beyond baseball and golf. Additionally, the possible
selection bias mentioned above means that perhaps my results overrepresent the likelihood that
athletes can regain yips-affected abilities.
Furthermore, I had limited contact with my participants. One 60-90 minute discussion produced significant interview data, but may have limited in the degree to which the data revealed the type of meaning in which I am interested. It is likely that future studies can be enhanced through multiple meetings with participants in order to establish a rapport and shared language for each experience of the yips. That these interviews did not occur in an athletic context perhaps inhibited the richness and spontaneity with which participants engaged their yips experiences. Future qualitative work may benefit from longitudinal methods that occur both in traditional interview settings as well as athletic contexts.
Conclusion

In the introduction I referred to yips-like experiences that might not meet the criteria used here and in other research for a full yips experience. These are subtler versions of the phenomenon; they need not occur in athletic spaces and likely would not appear to an observer as an instance of the yips. But given the amount of time I have spent engaging with the yips—physically, emotionally, theoretically, dialogically—I have some sense that these experiences overlap with the yips, that they are manifestations of a broader phenomenon. Greg mentioned something similar, noting that the same fear that informed his yips moment can arise at other times on the baseball field, but that it is always associated with him putting excessive pressure on himself. While the outcome is different, he recognizes the same feeling. Teddy referenced this process, too – noting that when playing darts and or while conducting counseling interviews or assessments, he experiences a type of disruption and being-in-his-head that parallels his yips experiences. This makes sense, too, given a framework of expansion and contraction. If the yips phenomenon represents one specific athletic manifestation of a personal contraction informed by social forces, then similar instances of that basic process are likely to occur in other contexts. And, especially if the various signs of the yips—the muscle twitch or involuntary movement, the quickened heartbeat, the self-critical thoughts, the being-in-one’s-head, the flashback to childhood emotions, and the aberrant execution of a task—are all components of a unified ‘form’ of this personal contraction moving through the individual, then it makes sense that people would be aware of these signs in a variety of contexts. The yips are one type of personal contraction among many.

I experienced these subtler manifestations of the yips throughout this project, with many moments when I felt my yips “coming on.” I felt the twitch or muscle contraction in my right
forearm that is associated with my experience of the yips in both frisbee and tennis. But I felt it outside of any athletic context, mostly while I was reading through transcripts from interviews or other first-hand accounts of yips experiences. Throughout this project I frequently imagined scenes of playing tennis and frisbee, and pictured myself in free, flowing, graceful movements. Yet similar to some of the descriptions here, the yips lingered in the back of my mind, and occasionally as I read a description of the yips, or as I wrote a statement about the contagion-like nature of the yips, I felt my arm and wrist tighten up.

At least once during this process I experienced something closer to a ‘proper’ yips experience. My friend and I planned a midday tennis date on a Saturday. Before we met I worked on this project, and as my thoughts bounced back and forth between the yips on my computer screen and anticipation of tennis, I felt the twinge that I associate with the yips creeping into my wrist and arm. I wondered how our hitting session would go. This was a close friend, someone who has been present for at least two of my yips-experiences, which oddly, complicated the situation. While I feel open discussing the yips with him, and in the past this has helped me find my groove, I still have the sense that our playing outcomes really matter to him; as in, if we show up to have some fun and get some exercise, and we can’t do this because I can’t hit the ball over the net, well, that’d be something of a failure. He would be gracious and supportive, but I certainly wouldn’t have a firm sense that what happened was actually okay.

And the results were mixed. I felt myself move in an out of flowing motions, with varying access to the full range of my tennis capacities. I certainly started off tentative, and felt, on a few swings, the twinge or spasm in my right wrist that accompanies my yips. But as we continued to hit I fell into a rhythm that stayed for a while. Then I had a familiar experience regarding my yips: that on the ‘other side’ of the disrupted movements is something like athletic
flow. When I work through the yips and into a groove, my movements, swings, or throws are extremely loose, free, and effective. In those moments I can achieve exactly what I intend, and often reach a peak of performance that exceeds what I had previously been capable of. This happened for a bit while I played with my friend. Then we started ‘serving’ shots to each other—one of my particularly affected tennis actions—and I again struggled to get the ball over the net.

Overall during that tennis session, and perhaps since, my relationship with the yips has been tentative. If I personify my yips, it is as though we are mutually curious but ultimately unsure of each other, and that we are walking gingerly. I find myself trying to soften the yips; that rather than fight against them, I assume I can dull their rough edges with my genuine curiosity and interest, that I can disarm them by approaching with a smile and an extended hand—“nice to meet you”—and that this will lead to a truce, possibly even a friendship. It is an ongoing process, a complicated relationship.

All of this is to say: writing a hermeneutic phenomenological dissertation about the yips appears to be, at least at the writing of this conclusion, an ineffective intervention strategy for ameliorating the embodied, athletic manifestations of the yips. In looking back at my notes, I certainly had some trepidation about delving so deeply into the yips. Similar to Jensen and Fisher (2012), I partly worried that making contact with the yips phenomenon would exacerbate my yips experience. I am uncertain if it has, as I am still unsure if it makes sense to say that I ‘have’ the yips, or even that the yips ‘have me.’ If I filter my experiences through the framework discussed here, then I believe I have had enough resources to limit the frequency and intensity of my yips-moments. The athletic contexts in which I experience them is relatively non-competitive and I have no pressure to participate in them. I speak openly about the experience and even
recruit close friends to help me experiment with different movements. And I continue to situate my experience of the yips in a larger framework of personal understanding.

My notes from the beginning of the study show that, similar to much of the literature, I was more focused on the moment of the yips rather than the context that surrounds these moments. I wanted to discover and articulate a single, concise essence of the phenomenon. I recorded several hypotheses or initial assumptions, and one stands out: “the yips is a ‘no’ when what is needed is a ‘yes.’” As in, athletic movements are most successfully performed when an athlete fully engages and “says yes” to the movement, falls into the flow of the movement. And the yips phenomenon is the opposite of this. It’s a no, a refusal, right at the moment of execution. In reviewing this now, I can see this sense of ‘no’ fits with the idea of contraction. That perhaps “yes” is expansive and “no” is contracting. But the impetus for this framing of the yips came only from my experiences and the embodied sense that emerges during my yips. It was not until speaking with my participants, and hearing their stories and explanations, that my focus expanded from the athletic moment of the yips to the larger social and personal context of the phenomenon. The various ways my participants related to their yips compelled me to pull back from the yips moment and consider that the athletic disruption points to much more than an individual’s errant functioning, but also to the game itself, to past experiences, and to current relationships.

In this project I have attempted to describe and reveal aspects of the yips phenomenon and the relationship between athletes and their yips. I chose a hermeneutic phenomenological method for its usefulness in elaborating the meanings of phenomena which do not easily lend themselves to analytic, quantitative research. I intended to broaden the scope of what is typically
researched in studies of the yips, in order to add personal context to the emergence of the phenomenon.

In doing so I found that each yips experience has nuances and individualized manifestations, and I wrote the story of each participants yips into extended narratives. From these narratives I identified several themes relevant to the shared yips experiences of my four participants. These include: the yips are an experience of the ‘anonymous body;’ the yips are revealed in social relationships; the yips phenomenon is distributed in time; the yips shows itself as a whole-person contraction within the phenomenal field; expansive experiences help athletes regain their lost movement.

While the yips phenomenon has predominately been conceptualized as a disruption or deficit of the individual, in this project I have proposed that, in addition to being a phenomenon of and carried by individuals, the yips can cogently be viewed as a phenomenon located in social relationships and in our athletic spaces. This understanding takes account of the way the yips is experienced by athletes as well as how they try to make sense of the phenomenon.

Results from this study confirm and expand previous findings which noted the distressing emotional aspects of the yips. This calls for more research and a dissemination of this information to athletes, sports psychologists, parents, and coaches. The yips phenomenon is emotionally burdensome for athletes, a stress which is exacerbated by the misunderstandings of others and increased social isolation.

Additionally, this study draws attention to the role of past emotional experiences in the genesis of the yips. Whereas much of the literature suggests the yips require an organic precipitating event which is then exacerbated by anxiety, these results describe significant social
and emotional contexts for each participant that likely account, in part, for the emergence of their yips.

Future research should focus on placing the findings of different elements of the yips in the context of individualized narratives of the yips. I believe it likely that the yips phenomenon has structural elements that are conserved across yips experiences—as I have identified here—but that a full understanding of an individual’s yips experience, and therefore pathways to intervention, can only be achieved when the phenomenon is contextualized in the meaningful world of each athlete.
Appendix

Interview Questions

- Begin: reviewing the description of the prominent yips moment. Describing my interest in the yips.
- Do you have any questions for me?
- I’d like to start with a little background about your athletic history. How old were you when you began playing (sport)?
- What do you enjoy about it?
- How did you learn to play? From whom? In what setting?
- Now I’d like to transition to the yips. But before doing that, I’m curious about how you felt about the prospect of discussing the yips with me. What made you decide to participate, and how did you feel as our interview neared?
- Will you describe to me your first experience of the yips?
  - who was around you at the time?
  - in what ways did this differ from other experiences of poor performance?
- Do you have your own name for this phenomenon?
- Have you done anything to try to affect the yips?
- Will you describe the emotions/feelings you experience before, during, and after the yips?
- How does it feel right now to be discussing this?
- Will you show me the motion associated with your experience of the yips?
- Will you show me the areas of your body where you feel the yips? As you show me, will you describe the sensations you feel during the yips?
- If your yips could speak, what would they say?
- How has your view of the yips changed, if at all, since the first time you experienced them?
- Do you imagine you will experience the yips again? When and how do you think about this?
Example of Anecdote Process

Original Material for James theme ‘Jekyll and Hyde.’

Yeah. Well, that's how it feels like, you know. To reiterate, it's-it's-it's interesting to me as well that that when I go to the range, I can either start off hitting well and have a great range session or if I'm not, I can figure it out almost every time, if not every time on the range, get into a rhythm and then just start hitting great shots. Shot after shot after shot. Once I figure it out, I can pretty much get into a really nice rhythm and-and hit good shots and quality shots and- and- and be in control of my game.

Um, and rarely, rarely, not never, but rarely does that happen on the golf course.

Figure it out, yeah, but the thing that's weird, the Jekyll and Hyde thing is that there are days in there and a lot of them where I'll warm up on the range at the golf course and I'll feel great. And go to the first tee and, you know, there's nothing negative going on in my psyche at that point because I'm like, you know, I got it today. And from the very first shot, it's like, wow. And sometimes it's not the first shot, sometimes the first shot might be okay, but then the second shot. But usually it's very quick. Um, and all of a sudden, it's like you know, gone.

And if I, you know, concentrate on that that helps real well but, again, on the golf course sometimes, many times, most times...(shrugs no).... It's like I'm talking to a stranger.

Club to club to club to club, and, you know, I'll shoot scores at the driving range in my simulated round that I can't even dream about on the golf course.

That's the word that it does. It feels frustrating because it's like, you know, so I know that- that I can go, it's not like I'm hitting seven irons all day long and I'm grooving to seven iron and then I pull out a seven iron and, wow, I can still hit it.

whatever and- and I'll say that, you know, when I'm at the range and I'm- I'm in a rhythm, um, of, you know, going through a- a simulated round, I'm gonna think that- that I may hit two, three bad shots. In that round, and then if I go out and play golf these days, if I hit two, three good shots in a round, that's a good day. So, um--

That flip again. Yeah.

No, that's a great question. That's a really, really good question. Um, the bad shots I hit on the range during my simulated round would be bad shots that you would hit, you know during a round of golf say, “Wow, I’m hitting the ball really well and that was not a good shot.

The bad shots I hit on the golf course are atrocious. They’re like the kind of shots somebody who’s never played the game will-will hit. I mean, you know, the only way I could hit some of these shots worse, is if I’ve missed the ball completely. And-and actually in the game of golf, I wouldn’t
be penalized as much. Because if you swing and miss, it’s one shot, if you jack it out of bounds, it’s two so—
So, you know, but, uh, yeah. The—the bad shots on the golf course are horrendous. I won’t hit one shot like that on the range like ever.

**Edited Anecdote for James theme ‘Jekyll and Hyde’** – written toward the phrase, “It’s like I’m talking to a stranger.”

Something happens between the driving range and the golf course. I feel like Jekyll and Hyde. Everything is different. On the range, I either start off hitting well and have a great range session or, if not, I figure it out almost every time, and get into a rhythm, hitting great, quality shots and being in control of my game.

Rarely does that happen on the golf course. The thing that's weird, the Jekyll and Hyde thing, is that there are a lot of days when I'll warm up on the range feel great. Going to the first tee there's nothing negative going on in my psyche because I'm like, “I got it today.”

And from the very first shot, it's wow, I’m off. It’s not always the first shot, but usually it's very quick. All of the sudden, it's gone.

I can even go through simulated rounds on the range, simulating the pace and exact shots of playing the course. And I’ll shoot scores at the driving range in my simulated round I can't even dream about on the golf course. And I feel frustrated, because I have all this proof that I can still hit.

And it's like the range and the course are opposites of each other. Going through a simulated round, I may hit two or three bad shots. If I go out and play on the course these days, I’m lucky to hit two or three good shots. The whole situation is flipped.

Even the quality of the shots is different. The bad shots I hit on the range during my simulated round are the normal bad shots you would hit during a round of golf and say, “Wow, that was not a good shot.” But the bad shots I hit on the golf course are atrocious. They’re the kind of shots hit by somebody who’s never golfed. I mean the only way I could hit these shots worse is if I missed the ball completely. I won’t hit one shot like that on the range like ever.

And none of the things I tell myself on the range work on the course…(shrugs)…it’s like I’m talking to a stranger.
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