You want to put your opponent under pressure right away, get your nose out in front,” says Ian Poulter, one of the best match-play competitors of his generation, with an undefeated record in Ryder Cup singles (8-3 overall). “In match play, you have to attack every pin, and when you get a lead, keep your foot on the accelerator,” he says. At the 2010 Ryder Cup, that meant defeating Matt Kuchar in 14 holes. So much for British manners. “From the first tee shot your adrenaline is going, and you want to get rid of your opponent as quickly as possible,” says Poulter, who has won more than three times as many holes as he has lost in Ryder Cup singles. “After every shot the clock is ticking, and it’s a lot easier to win holes early than late. Don’t give anything away from the start. That’s how you become a player who’s tough to beat.”

PUTTING IS THE DAGGER

Sure, bombing it 300 yards will always be fashionable, but great short putting is what will win you matches. And becoming virtually automatic from five feet and in is a skill any player can learn, regardless of physique, handicap or even technique. “I don’t care what your stroke looks like, good putting comes from the mind,” says Dave Stockton. “Visualize the exact line you want your ball to take and then pick a specific spot on the cup where you want the ball to enter—don’t just think about playing it straight and ramming it in. Go through a routine that keeps you looking at your line, not staring down at the ball. Then just let it go. When you pick a very specific line like that, you don’t need to be perfect for the putt to drop. The hole will start to look bigger and bigger to you, and you’ll get excited about the chance to make the next one instead of worrying about missing it.”
UP BIG?
DON’T COAST

BY MATTHEW RUDY

The unique pressures of match play can bring out the best—and worst—in a player. Leading instructor Tim Mahoney says avoid falling into one of these three match-play traps:

(1) getting caught up in what your opponent does;
(2) coasting with a lead; and
(3) getting discouraged.

“It obviously matters what your opponent does, but you can only control what you do,” says Mahoney, the director of instruction for Troon Golf. “Play to your strengths. If you’re a fairways-and-greens player, don’t turn into a pin hunter to try to make something happen,” he says.

“Playing your game and avoiding mental mistakes transfers the pressure to your opponent.”

Building a lead or falling behind each presents challenges. “It’s natural to be more cautious with the lead and force your opponent to take risks,” Mahoney says. “But being conservative should apply only to the target and club selection. Once it’s time to hit, make an aggressive swing.” Mahoney adds: “When players get a lead, they tend to guide shots or focus on just avoiding disasters. They start thinking about the next thing, like the next match. You have to keep playing.”

HAVE A SAFETY DRIVE

BY RON KASPRISKE

Whether you’ve reached a crucial point in the match or you’re trying to get back in it, driving your ball in the fairway can be the difference between free drinks and picking up the check.

Instructor Michael Breed, host of the Golf Channel’s “The Golf Fix,” says when you have to hit a serviceable drive, focus on your balance; you’ll do a lot right. “What I tell my students is, make a practice swing and feel what’s happening to your body. Feel what it’s like to stay in balance,” Breed says. “If you can maintain your balance, the club will tend to meet the ball in the center of the face.” Staying in balance also will improve your rhythm, he says, which always helps prevent wild tee shots.

On the flip side, going 4 down might get you thinking about the ride home. Challenge yourself to stick around long enough to get a break. “That’s especially true if your opponent has an unorthodox swing,” he says. “Timing is crucial in a compensating swing, and pressure makes timing hard to control. One foul ball can get you back in the match.”

HAMMOCK: JOHN UELAND  •  LIFESAVER: LOU BEACH
Here we offer some verbal do’s and don’ts for your next big match:

Your 18-handicap opponent just hit his 12th fairway in a row:

BAD – “I don’t know how you time that swing of yours.”
GOOD – Simple compliments: “Solid,” “Beauty,” “Perfect.”

On the first hole, your opponent slices his tee shot O.B.:

BAD – “Hitting 3.”
GOOD – (Silence.)

Your opponent chunks an iron shot on the par-3 17th into a lake:

BAD – “Did you catch all of it?”
GOOD – “Keep playing, buddy. You’ve seen me putt.”

You’ve won the match:

BAD – “You’ve got potential. Just work on that short game, OK?”
GOOD – “That was fun. I got lucky.”

Hitting the ball solid and straight will help you outlast almost any opponent, so make the ultra-reliable knockdown your go-to shot. Paul Azinger (right) was undefeated in singles matches in four Ryder Cups largely relying on the knockdown. Australian teacher Dale Lynch, who works with Aaron Baddeley, says the shot is particularly useful in less-than-perfect conditions. Here, Lynch analyzes Azinger’s knockdown action.

© Paul plays the ball near center in a narrow stance, makes a good turn going back and a full wrist set.

© He drives his legs toward the target and swings down and through the ball. Note the firm left wrist here.

© His balanced, three-quarter finish comes from swinging at 75 percent—a key to lower ball flight.
Most golfers give short putts to be polite, but sometimes those little gifts have more thinking behind them. Brian Crowell, a PGA pro at Glen Arbor Golf Club in Bedford, N.Y., on a match he once played: “My opponent gave me a three-footer to halve the first hole, and the generosity continued until my putt to go 2 up on No. 8 slid two feet past. Expecting to hear, ‘Pick it up,’ I was shocked that I had to putt—and missed it.” Crowell admits: “The match was all square, but he’d psychologically taken the upper hand and went on to beat me.” His advice? Enjoy a conceded putt, but before you leave the green, roll one in. You’ll show you’re not expecting gimmies, and you won’t get caught facing your first short putt when there’s a hole on the line.

Sport psychologist Dick Coop recalls another shrewd technique. “When a player leaves an approach putt short, you give him the next one, but when he rolls it by the hole, you make him putt it,” Coop says. This can pay off late in the round when a player knows subconsciously that a putt left short will be rewarded with a gimme. Of course, putts left short also have no chance of going in. “This is an example of a golfer shaping another golfer’s behavior, which the great ones will do,” Coop says. “It’s like the player who takes charge on the first tee and says, ‘I’m playing such-and-such ball’ or ‘I’ll flip the tee to see who hits first.’ That guy’s saying, ‘This is my match.’” If you sense this happening to you, Coop says, try smiling and saying, “Save it. It’s not going to work on me.”

— BY PETER MORRICE

TOUR TALK

What’s the key to being a great match player?

A DON’T LOSE TO PAR!

When a guy makes par or bogey and still wins the hole on me, that’s when I’m kicking myself.

— SEAN O’HAIR

A ONE HOLE AT A TIME.

If you’re down, your goal is to win that hole. Get one hole, then the next.

—PADRAIG HARRINGTON

A BE THE SPOILER.

If your short game’s sharp, you’ll be tough. You’re never out of a hole.

—CHAD CAMPBELL

PLAY REPLAY

BY GUY YOCOM

Having played on nine international teams for the U.S., Stewart Cink knows that a key to success in match play is to keep the format fresh. When Cink is playing with his friends at home near Atlanta, they add twists to their games that heighten interest and keep Cink from having to give a ton of strokes. Twist No. 1 is called Two-step. Cink explains: “Wherever my shot ends up, they get to pick up my ball, take two steps in any direction and drop it. That can mean heavy rough, even a bunker.”

Twist No. 2, given to Cink by sport psychologist Morris Pickens, is called Replay. In lieu of handicap strokes, Cink’s buddies can require him to replay a pre-determined number of shots per round, depending on the difference in skill levels. “If I hit a shot stiff, I can count on them making me replay it. Even tour pros have a tough time hitting it close twice in a row.”

Both games come with a twist to the twists. “We don’t always play for money,” Cink says. “Sometimes we play for push-ups, the loser having to do them on command within 24 hours after the match. That can mean in front of all our buddies at the clubhouse. It can be pretty embarrassing.”