

The Basic Golf Swing

"Good scores are only made possible by good play up to the green."
– Percy Boomer

SPECIAL NOTE: This essay, [along with a companion video](#), comprise a new conception of how to swing a golf club. The essay explains, the video demonstrates. Neither of them stands alone. Both of them must be read and seen to obtain the total content and to understand my message.

The golf swing combines two motions—a swinging motion and a turning motion. The hands, arms, and shoulders swing. The torso, hips, and legs turn. These two motions proceed in a coordinated manner. Dividing the swing into parts is done only to present the differing techniques that must be applied at each of its stages. The golf swing is really just one whole movement.

The 3,000 words below describe the fundamentals of a working golf swing—a swing that hits the ball straight with adequate distance. They are like notes on a page of music. You bring them to life in your own way by using your strength, your flexibility, your physical structure, your understanding of what it means to hit a ball with a stick, and in the end, your imagination.

The one thing to keep in mind above all else is that these are instructions for building a golf *swing*—something that swings. If you think the objective is to wind up and give the ball a good smack, you will fail.

Grip. Try this. Stand up straight then bend over slightly from your hips, letting your arms hang down. This is their normal, or

neutral, position. If you rotate one of your forearms, and then let it go, it will snap back to its normal position. If you rotate one or both of your forearms out of their normal position when you assume your grip, they will return to normal at some point during the swing, taking the clubface with them. Place your hands on the club with these facts in mind. Here's how to do it.

Sole a club on the ground in its address position, supporting its handle with a cradle made by the fingers of the left hand. Add the fingers of the right hand to the cradle lower down on the handle so the handle now rests at the base of the fingers of each hand. If you overlap, place the little finger of the right hand on the back of the left hand in its overlapping position. Close the left hand around the handle, then close the right hand over the left hand. If you do all of this while maintaining a relaxed feeling in both forearms, you have a grip that conforms to how you are built, and which will play a major role in keeping the clubface square. Form your grip this way before every shot.

The location of your hands on the grip is important, too. Move your hands up and down the handle until you find the precise spot where you have an awareness of the clubface that registers in your right hand. Placing your hands too high on the grip makes the club feel heavy and out of balance. Placing your hands too close to the shaft makes the club feel stiff and unresponsive.

Hold the handle securely, but not tightly. Monitor your grip pressure throughout the round. It can tighten up without you noticing it.

Ball Position. To hit the ball the same way with the same swing, the ball must be in the same position in relation to your stance. Find the ball position that is standard for you by swinging an iron and making a divot. Without moving your feet, bend over

and place a ball on the ground where the divot starts (Figure 1). Notice where that spot lies in your stance and put the ball there every time you make a full swing at a ball that is on the ground. The ball even a half-inch out of position can make a difference.



Figure 1. The ball is placed in your stance behind the spot where your divot starts.

To place the ball the right distance away from you, hold the club in in your right hand with that arm hanging straight down. Sole the club behind the ball. Complete your stance. That is how far away the ball should be. If you ever feel as if you are reaching for the ball, it is too far away.

Sometimes you have to alter the ball position forward or back to play a special shot. Make an adjustment of only an inch at most. More than that and you will have to adjust your swing to get to the ball, which adds uncertainty to the shot.

Your body changes from day to day in how relaxed it is and in

how limber it is, both of which change where the club finds the ground. Thus, ball position needs to be refigured during your warm-up before you play. Any difference you might find will be small, but important.

To tee the ball with irons, tee it in the same place as you do when the ball is on the ground, and only high enough to give yourself a good lie. With hybrids and fairway woods, tee the ball up about a half-inch, and one ball forward of center. A general rule with the driver says that the top of the clubhead should be even with the equator of the ball, and that the ball should be teed up on a line extending from the ball to the inside of the heel of the left foot. You might need to make adjustments based on where your swing delivers the driver's clubhead through the hitting area.

As the round progresses there can be a tendency to place the ball more forward and farther away from you, whether it is teed up or on the ground, because it feels like you're setting up for a more powerful strike. All you're doing is getting yourself out of position.

Stance and Posture. Begin by standing upright. Distribute your weight evenly over the soles of your feet from your heels to the end of your big toes. This is easier to feel when you are not wearing shoes. Place your feet at a distance from each other that feels athletic. Placing your feet too far apart hinders your turning. If your feet are too close to each other, your balance will be affected. Turn out each foot slightly.

Bend from the hips so the weight distribution on the soles of your feet does not change. Your hips will have to move backwards at the same time they bend. Do not let your abdomen collapse by slumping your lower back as you bend forward. Your knees will bend slightly, but do not allow that to

lower your hips. They should feel high at address and stay high throughout the swing. Your calves should remain vertical.

Arms. When you are at address, let your arms hang down freely from the shoulders in a state of complete relaxation. Do not think they are in a limp, immobile state. It is a calm state that is primed for powerful action. Remember that power in the golf swing comes from speed, not effort. Maintaining a state of complete relaxation in your arms from start to finish, especially through impact, contributes greatly to attaining the swing speed you are capable of. If you ever have a chance to swing with a launch monitor, you will find that you get a higher swing speed when your arms are relaxed than if you try to muscle your way to swing speed.

The forearms now are of particular importance. Learn to swing so they stay in the normal position, the position they settled into when you took your grip. See Drill 3. Sometimes you hear about the importance of forearm rotation, but that is misleading. The forearms should not rotate by themselves. It is the whole arm that should rotate, and rotate from the shoulder joint. The forearms must not rotate. All arm rotation in the golf swing occurs in the shoulder joint.

Aim. You can't hit the ball north if you're facing northeast. A teaching pro once told me that a large percentage of his lessons to correct a swing flaw turn into a lesson in aiming. When you are not aimed properly, the unconscious mind knows this and tries to compensate, but that attempt is rarely successful. Get it right to begin with.

Stand behind the ball and hold out the clubshaft horizontally, aiming directly at the target and covering the ball. This defines your target line. Find a spot on the ground along this line about

three to four inches in front of the ball to be used as an aiming mark. Keeping your eye on that spot, walk to a place beside the ball and put the club down behind the ball so the grooves on the clubface are square (perpendicular) to the four-inch line. Step into your stance at a right angle to the grooves.

Much of your setup (grip, stance, posture, aim, ball position) doesn't change once you have found what works. Your perception of being aimed correctly though, can and will drift over time. Check your aim every time you go to the range by aiming at something, with a club or an alignment stick laid on the ground behind you. Pull the stick against your heels with the golf club you are holding, and step away for a down-the-line look at where the stick is pointing. It should not point at the target, but slightly to the left of it and parallel to the target line. Always make this check the initial part of your warm-up when you go to the course.

When you are in your stance, check your aim by sight by turning your head to look at your target. The contour of your nose can be seen as it partially blocks the vision of the right eye, making a curved frame. The target will always be seen in the same spot in relation to that frame when your aim is correct. With practice you can find that spot.

Placing the Clubhead. When you address the ball, touch the sole of the clubhead lightly to the top of the grass, still feeling the weight of the club in your hands. When you take the club away, it will come away smoothly. If the clubhead is resting with all of its weight on the ground, you feel the weight of the club for the first time as you take it away, which creates tension as your hands react by clamping down on the handle.

Your Mind (part 1). When you are in your stance and ready to

swing, conscious thoughts about your swing, or your objective, are your worst enemy. Give your mind something else to do by saying to yourself, "One, half, half, half...", in a relaxing way. This mini-meditation will banish stray thoughts for the time it takes to make your stroke. With practice, you can feel the calmness set in. At that point, let your mind ride on that calm feeling and begin your swing without hesitation. This procedure should take only a few seconds.

Setup Procedure. More golf shots are ruined by variations in the setup from shot to shot than by swing flaws. Developing and using a comprehensive setup routine before every shot assures that you won't make those kinds of mistakes. You have read how each component of the setup works. Now it is time to put them all together.

Setting up is not a haphazard procedure. There is a definite order of events. Find your aiming line. Step up beside the ball and place the clubhead. Step into your stance, left foot first, then right foot, get into your posture, and form your grip. These last three things happen almost at the same time. Look downrange to check your aim. Calm your mind, and start your swing. This entire routine should not take more than about 15 seconds.

This setup routine can be used for full swings and long pitches. Short pitches, chips, and putts all have their own procedures.

Takeaway. Starting the swing from a dead stop can create tension in the swinging elements. A slight forward press (a small movement toward the target immediately preceding takeaway), perhaps more in the mind than in the body, and sets up a rhythm that helps eliminate tension by giving the swing a

running start.

Carry the club back with the hands, without rushing, on what feels like a straight line, even though it actually starts arcing inward right away. If you put a 2x4 on the ground and set up with the toe of the club against the edge of the board, the club will make a brief scraping sound in a correct takeaway. If the sound is sustained, or there is no sound at all, you are starting the club back too much outside, or inside, respectively.

Backswing. Much is made of the order of movement of the various parts of the body in the backswing. If the body is completely relaxed, each of the turning elements will naturally respond to the movement of the swinging elements at the right time.

The backswing is a continuation of the takeaway that blends swinging and turning. The point of the backswing is to establish a swing plane, put the club into position for the forward swing, and create a rhythmic link in the sequence of the swing that the forward swing plays off of.

The left arm stays at full extension, like it was at address, all the way to the end of the backswing. Don't worry about hinging your wrists. The weight of the clubhead in motion will take care of that. Feel as if you are swinging the club upward and behind you, not as if you were lifting it or pulling it up.

At address, your elbows should have a feeling of being connected to each other. During the backswing feel that they remain close, even though they separate as the backswing progresses and won't be close to each other again until after the ball has been struck.

Do not rush the backswing. That disrupts both your tempo and your rhythm.

As you would take a hammer back only so far to hit the nail,

end the backswing at a place just before the feeling of connection between the clubface and the ball disappears. A bit of experimentation will show you what I mean. Always finish your backswing by bringing the left shoulder into contact with your chin. This detail is important.

Reversing Direction. The most critical moment in the swing occurs when the club starts back toward the ball. At the end of the backswing, there can be a brief pause, but not a stopping, somewhat like what a baseball tossed straight up in the air does when it changes from going up to down. Like the baseball, which starts its downward journey slowly from the force of gravity, start your hands and arms down in the same way. Just before the backswing finishes, say to yourself, "Relax." Then swing the club down (without pausing or stopping). This keyword is meant to prevent you from forcing the club down at the start of the forward swing, which is the most disastrous move in golf.

When your wrists are fully hinged at the end of the backswing, there will be an angle between the clubshaft and the right forearm. Preserve that angle as you start down. The release of this angle (below) is a major creator of clubhead speed. Do not release it too soon.

Simultaneous with the hands coming down, the left knee swings to the left to begin the leftward rotation of the turning elements. Do not make the movement of the left knee a deliberate one. It is merely what moves first.

Lag and Release. As the forward swing progresses with a free swinging motion of your arms, the weight and momentum of the club swinging down and forward will cause the clubshaft-forearm angle you have maintained (lag) to begin releasing on its

own when the hands get to about hip height. The hands play no role in the release. Do not let them make it happen or hold onto the angle too long. At the moment the lag begins to release, your right knee should be moving freely toward the target in concert with the clubshaft. This movement allows the turning elements to swing the clubhead through the ball in line with the target so the ball goes off in the direction you are aimed to. Feel that the knee and clubshaft are moving together in a coordinated way. If one outraces the other, a good shot becomes unlikely.

 [See the video.](#)

See this Anne van Dam video:

 [See the video.](#)

Left-handed golfers should watch this video of Eric Axley:

 [See the video.](#)

Through the ball. Now is the time that maximum speed is created. With the relaxed arms swinging, the body turning in a coordinated response, and the lag releasing, you will get all the speed you are capable of.

Ideally, the clubhead will approach the ball from the inside, swings through the ball along the target line for just a few inches, then arc back inward. To get the club swinging along the target line through the ball, in addition to the movement of the right knee you can imagine, as you address the ball, a line drawn on the ground extending from the front of the ball toward the target for a few inches. Your unconscious mind will give orders to the body to swing along that line at the right time.

The most important technical fundamental of the golf swing occurs at this stage: *the hands lead the clubhead through the ball* (Figure 2). Every good golfer always does this. No poor golfer ever does it. This technique helps keep the clubface in

alignment (if the clubhead gets there first the clubface is almost guaranteed to be out of alignment), delofts the clubface to provide more distance, and guarantees that the clubhead is still accelerating (not slowing down) at impact.

Finish. The finish is not what is left over when the swing ends, but is one of the most important positions of the swing. It is what the swing is aiming for. Accomplished golfers, before they play their shot, imagine what a good shot feels like, and that



Figure 2. The hands lead the clubhead, but only slightly, through impact.

feeling goes all the way to the finish. Most other golfers imagine what they must do to hit a good shot, which is a rudimentary conception of the swing that stops when the ball is struck. Watch how well golfers who hit consistently good shots finish, and how indifferently lesser golfers finish, and you will understand what I mean.

Swing freely through the ball to a free finish, your belt buckle

facing the target, up on your right toe, relaxed and in perfect balance.

Rhythm and Tempo. Rhythm and tempo are the foundation of the golf swing. *They are the glue that holds your swing together. Until you get them right, nothing else matters.* Rhythm is the relative duration of different parts of the swing. Tempo refers to the overall duration of the swing.

Swing only as fast as you can to hit the ball squarely on the center of the clubface consistently, and with authority. That is your tempo.

Swing back calmly and start the forward swing at the same speed you took the club back. Gravity, turning, and the unassisted release of the clubshaft will increase the speed of your swing up to and through the ball. That is your rhythm.

Your Mind (part 2). There is a lot of detail in the instructions you have just read. Practice until it becomes second nature. All that should be in your mind the moment before you begin your swing, and throughout the swing, is Nothing.

Drills. The following drills teach you the techniques described above. Do them every day in the order listed. They can all be done indoors, without hitting a golf ball. It takes only a few minutes to go through the entire list. There is a video that shows you how to do each one.

(1) **Takeaway.** Address the ball and take the club away for a few feet. Lock your forearms and wrists and bring the clubhead back to the ball by rotating only your torso, to see if the clubface is still square. During takeaway, the clubface has a greater chance of getting out of square than at any other time during

the swing. If the clubface is no longer square, your forearms rotated. Keep trying to find the feeling of the non-rotating forearms that keep the clubface square.

(2) Setup and Takeaway. Develop a setup routine in this order: aim, stance, ball position, grip, mental calmness, posture. Get into it and take the club away. Practice this regularly to make it your habit. That way you never have to think about whether you took care of everything and in the right way.

(3) Swinging the Arms. Without a club in your hands, take an address position with your arms hanging straight down. Then swing your arms back and forth in a golf swing motion, without putting tension in your arms or your shoulders. This drill teaches you both the feeling of your arms swinging freely without force, and what it feels like to swing fully without rotating your forearms.

(4) Hands Leading the Clubhead. Swing a sand wedge back to where your hand is at hip height, holding it with your left hand only, and let gravity alone lead the club in the other direction. This drill teaches you the feeling of the hand getting to the ball before the club head does. After a while switch to swinging with your right hand only, and further on with both hands, with the same objective. This drill and Drill 3 deserve daily attention to get their lessons into your swing. Do not be surprised if the transitions takes months. They did for me.

(5) Half Swings. Swing halfway back and halfway through without stopping. This drill allows you to practice four things simultaneously: the arms and shoulders and swinging in complete relaxation, the forearms not rotating, the hands leading the clubhead through the ball, and the right knee moving left in concert with the clubshaft.

(6) Finish. Take a half swing back and a full swing all the way through to the finish, ending up with your belt buckle facing

your "target" and your right foot on its toe-tip. Hold the position. This drill teaches you that to arrive at a good finish, you must do right things beforehand. The finish position is what the swing is aiming for. Hitting the ball is something that happens along the way.

Do not abandon these drills once you have learned their lessons. Practice them forever. What got you there is what will keep you there.

Now go [watch the video](#).

A PERSONAL STORY

Our sport is like no other. Would you want to go to the plate against a major league fastball? Go over the middle to catch a pass on an NFL football field? Try to get to the basket by going around LeBron James? None of that would work out very well. Golf? Let me tell you.

In 1968, I was in Edinburgh and made a trip to the small town of St. Andrews to play the Old Course. Back then, the golfing vacation to Scotland hadn't yet been discovered, so all I had to do was walk up to the starter's shack, pay the green fees, rent a set of clubs, buy a sleeve of balls, and wait for the group on the first tee to finish teeing off. Then it was my turn.

The course ate me up until I got to the 17th hole, the famous Road Hole, a hole that has been described as the hardest par 4 in golf. The short way to get to the green, but not the safe way, is to hit over the railroad sheds in the corner of the dogleg. I knew about that shot, and hadn't come all this way not to try it. A 3-wood, the best tee shot I hit all day, flew over the sheds into the fairway.

Something I did not know about was the Road Hole bunker, a little thing to the left side of the green that is the most fiendish bunker in all of golf. Professionals have taken four shots to get of it. So in my ignorance I pulled out a 3-iron and fired away. A beautiful shot landed short of the green and bounced on.

I rolled in the 20-foot putt for a birdie on the Road Hole—a score that any pro playing in the British Open would give his eyeteeth to have. That experience is mine forever because of having chosen to play a sport where things like that can happen.

The reason I wrote this piece of instruction is that good golf is fun, and is not that hard to attain if you put in the work on the right things. And who knows? Someday you might find yourself in the right place and have the golfing equivalent of hitting a 3-run homer in Yankee Stadium.

Play well, and have fun.

Copyright January 2022