

# Bob's Living Golf Book

**Bob Jones**  
**(The Recreational Golfer)**

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Also by Bob Jones

*Better Recreational Golf*

*Better Recreational Golf*  
*(Left-Hander's Edition)*

*The Golfing Self*

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*Six Fundamentals of the*  
*Recreational Golf Swing*

Available at  
[therecreationalgolfer.com/blog](http://therecreationalgolfer.com/blog)



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## Introduction

Good golf is easy. Though no one intends to play golf badly, they do so because of bad habits. This book is about building the good habits that enable recreational golfers to play easy golf, good golf.

There is a lot of material in here, much of it either things you have never heard before, or new ways of looking at old things. It has taken me years to absorb all of this, and I am still working on much of it. You won't take it all in during one reading. Browse through the book and pick out what interests you most. But if you keep coming back, you will always see something you didn't see before that will help you play in a new way.

This is an evolving document. New things will be added and new interpretations of old things will come along. Check back in every so often to find out what's new!

Play well, and have fun.

Note: Text in blue indicates new material. Text in red indicates major emphasis. "Links" in red signify forthcoming videos. (I-5) refers to section I, topic 5, etc.

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## The Nutshell

The eight items listed below must be mastered in order for you to play good golf. There is no compromise.

1. The swing is the basic stroke in golf. Short game and putting do you no good if you take too many strokes to get up to the green (I-5). A reliable swing is based on mastery of these three principles:
  - a. Rhythm and tempo (A-1)
  - b. The handle leading the clubhead (A-5)
  - c. Keeping the clubface square (C-10)
2. Once the ball has reached the green, the hole must be closed out without delay. That depends on mastering the arts of:
  - a. Chipping close (E-1, E-2)
  - b. Approach putting close (F-4)
3. Golf is a game, not a series of shots. To play well you must master your mind through:
  - a. Visualization (D-3)
  - b. Preparing your mind (B-1)
  - c. Not driving yourself nuts (D-10)

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## A. Golf Swing Principles

### 0. The Basic Concept of the Golf Swing

**The movement of the golf club, not the movement of the body, defines the golf swing. When the club moves correctly, the body responds to the requirements of club movement.** (This is true as well for every shot, not just the full swing.)

When you [eat with a fork](#), you do not run through a checklist of fork techniques. Based on your knowledge of how the fork needs to move, the fork directs your forearm and hand to pick some food off the plate, and lift the fork to your mouth so the food can be inserted. The fork tells your body what to do.

In the same way, correctly moving the golf club tells your body what to do.

Watch a face-on view of a professional golf swing to learn how the club is supposed to move. [Jeff Maggert](#) and [Steve Stricker](#) are good examples. Do not watch the golfer. Watch only the club. That is what you want to copy.

This swing concept was originated by Ernest Jones in the 1920s. In his day, this method was popular and influential, but faded following Jones's death in 1965. The concept has been kept alive by Arnie Frankel, Vivien Saunders, and Manuel de la Torre.

[Modern research by Garbrielle Wulf](#) at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas has validated the Jones method by showing that thinking about what the *club* is supposed to do (external focus) rather than what the *body* is supposed to do (internal focus) is "more advantageous for performance and learning." [For peak performance see \(D-2\).](#)

## 1. Rhythm and Tempo

The marriage of rhythm and tempo is the foundation of your swing. [Controlled experiments](#) have shown that correctly applied rhythm and tempo significantly increase the accuracy of full swing shotmaking. Learn this part first, because nothing else makes sense until you get it right.

Rhythm and tempo are terms we borrow from music, so we must turn to music for their definition and for guidance on how to apply them to golf. Rhythm in music is "the alternating tension and relaxation in the duration of tones."<sup>1</sup> Tempo is the rate at which the music progresses—the time it takes to get from one portion to the next.

In golf, rhythm relates to the relative duration of the different parts of the swing, normally of the backswing and the forward swing. The rhythm of the golf swing is three parts back, one part forward to the ball. This 3:1 rhythm is a constant that applies to every golfer. Tempo is the overall time it takes to go

from takeaway back to impact. It varies by the individual. Taken together, tempo is the temporal frame within which rhythm operates.

**Your optimum tempo is the fastest you can swing through impact and consistently hit solid shots (centered contact on a ball-first, ground-second trajectory).** A tempo that is too fast will not give your swing the time it needs for all its elements to appear when they should and receive their full expression. This is an error to guard against. Few golfers swing the club too slowly.

Find your tempo within the context of proper rhythm. Download a metronome app and set it to 200. Play the app and swing along, counting ticks to yourself: 1 is the moment of takeaway, 2, 3, and 4 take you to the end of the backswing, and impact is at 5. **This is the 3:1 rhythm. Hit a few shots at this setting then speed it up a bit, maintaining the rhythm. Keep hitting shots at different settings until you find the setting at which you hit your best shots. That's your personal tempo.**

Since you can't use an artificial device on the course, you'll have to find your tempo by feel. Before you approach the tee box, swing your driver at a speed that lets you feel everything that is going on in your swing. Try a faster swing if you want to, but if you no longer have that same encompassing feeling, that swing was too fast. Back down as necessary. Do this every few holes to keep a lid on your tempo, which tends to speed up as the round progresses.

The advice you find in golf instruction books that if you're a hard charger you need a fast tempo and if you're laid back you need a slow tempo says nothing more than the author has little understanding of this topic. Ignore that advice.

## 2. Aim Your Swing

A bit later I'll explain how to aim yourself (B-7) to the shot. But there is one other thing you have to aim, and that is your swing.

Think of your swing as a wheel, with you as the hub and the clubhead on the imaginary rim. The wheel needs to be aligned so a line drawn from rim to rim is parallel to a line going from the ball to the target. That is the concept of aiming your swing.

Address the ball and imagine a line on the ground about six inches long, centered on the ball, and pointing toward the target. Your goal is to take the club back along that line, and swing through on that line.

Since the club swings through the ball on an arc, it won't actually travel through the ball along a straight line that's six inches long—more like an inch on each side. But if you think it does anyway, your mind gives instructions to the body to align the swing toward the target at the moment it counts.

## 3. Swing the Club With Both Hands

Well, that sounds obvious, doesn't it? But there are instructors who say to swing the club with the arms, some say with the body, and both say the hands are just for holding on.

Remember, the swing is all about how the club moves, and the club can't move itself. [The club tells the body where it is supposed to go; the educated hands take it there.](#) The arms and the body then respond to the movement of the hands in such a way as to assist the hands in moving the club correctly. This sounds circular, but when you try it, you'll find out that it's not.

This is not say you swing the club only with your hands. Use your arms and your body fully as well. It is just that the hands, not these other movers, do the leading.

The hands through impact should be active but in a leading sense, not in a hitting sense. This leading motion is best performed by the left hand, but while correct, can feel weak. The

right hand then jumps in at the last second to save the day, only to end up ruining it.

Trying to retrain our brain to accept a "backhand" motion as the correct one is bound to fail. That's because of the extreme difficulty of setting up a new habit that is counter to everything we have learned about doing it otherwise. It is much more effective to set up a new habit that *bypasses* the habit you're trying to avoid, so the bad one never has a chance to come up.

The bad habit is the urge to hit with the right hand. The bypass is to swing with the hands working as one unit, rather than the left hand and the right hand cooperating in some way. A prosaic but apt description is to think of them as one clump of hands hold-*ing* on to the club. In this way the right hand is never given the job of hitting the ball, nor of rescuing the weaker left hand. Thus the club will swing through the ball undisturbed.

## 4. The Length of the Backswing

Take the club back no more than the farthest point where you still feel a connection between the clubhead and the ball. It is exactly like [taking a hammer back](#) to hit a nail. You will take the hammer back only so far as you feel that you can return the hammer to the nail accurately to give it a good whack.

A backswing only needs to be so long. That doesn't mean you should have a short backswing, only that a backswing longer than it needs to be doesn't add anything and might even subtract. If swinging back to the limit of your connection feels like you have shortened your backswing too much, look in a mirror. You'll see it's still plenty long enough.

## 5. The Handle Leads the Clubhead

The handle and the clubhead [move in the same direction](#) throughout the swing. Every good golfer does this.

When the clubhead moves away from the ball, both the handle and the clubhead move to the right, all the way up to the end of the

backswing. In the forwards swing, they both move to the left. But too often, for the sake of a powerful strike, the right hand throws the clubhead into the ball, which makes the handle actually move backward just before impact.

To observe this, swing through impact very slowly and flick the clubhead forward with the right hand. Watch the club pivot, sending the handle backward, to the right. This is the mistake. The clubhead, now ahead of the handle, actually slows down, and the clubface gets out of square.

Try again, swinging very slowly through impact, keeping the handle moving in the same direction as the clubhead. The clubhead keeps accelerating and remains square. That's what you want to do.

If the handle leading the clubhead is new to you, it might feel like the handle is much farther ahead of the clubhead than it really is. Done correctly, the handle will be only a few inches ahead of the clubhead at impact. If you deliberately overdo this move, the handle *will* be way ahead of the clubhead, which leads to push slices.

To learn the correct technique and its feel, make half swings with your left hand only. In this way it is nearly impossible for the clubhead to overtake the handle. You will get a very clear feeling of the left hand and the handle leading the clubhead. When you move on to full swings with both hands on the handle, think of both hands as one, leading the club all the way through the ball.

Getting this bit of technique right is one reason why I emphasize swinging the club with the hands. It is the hands that cast the club at the start of the downswing, and the hands that throw the clubhead into the ball through impact. Only by training the hands to do the right thing can they be prevented from committing these two major errors.

## 6. The Finish

Although the purpose of the swing is to hit the ball, the swing does not end when the ball is struck. It ends at the finish. The finish is not merely what's left over. Attaining a good finish is the goal to be sought.

You have finished correctly when the club carries you to a place where you are relaxed, upright, and in balance with your weight almost entirely on the left foot and your belt buckle facing the target. Your arms will be folded into a restful position. Feel yourself arriving at this position before you even start your swing.

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## B. Pre-Swing Things

### 1. Preparing Your Mind

After you have selected your shot and your club, and you know what you're going to do, stop thinking about any of it. [Step up to the ball and think, "Relax". It is important to note you are relaxing your mind, not your body. If you relax your mind, your body will follow. All technical swing thoughts will vanish, all thoughts of hitting the golf ball vanish, and your body will be drained of unwanted tension. Begin your swing, letting that feeling of relaxation continue to the very end \(D-2\).](#)

[It is possible to relax the body and not the mind, but this change will only be temporary. As soon as you begin moving the club, tension you were trying to release will rush back into your body, mainly to your hands and arms. Relaxation begins in the mind and continues in the mind.](#)

### 2. Being in Position

Ken Venturi, winner of the 1964 U.S. Open, was the originator of many keen insights on golf technique. He once said, "Good players do not get out of swing. They get out of position. You put them back in position and their swing comes back." Legendary English golf

instructor John Jacobs made a similar observation.

By position, they're referring to the setup: grip, stance, posture, ball position, and aim. When these are the same every time, the same swing will produce the same shot. If those positions are always a bit different, and the differences do not have to be great, the same swing will produce different shots, many of them unintended. What's more, if you're too far out of position, you can't even make the same swing.

The setup is more than just getting your body into position. The setup not only prepares you for the stroke, the setup contains the stroke. Your setup should let you feel the stroke in its entirety. This might be more easily perceived in the putting and chipping strokes, but it is vital that you feel it when setting up for a full swing, too.

### 3. Holding the Club

The more confident we are when we hit a shot, the greater the chances of it turning out to be a good shot. Confidence building begins the moment we pick up the golf club.

If I were to teach a person to play golf from the very beginning, the first thing that I would teach would be how to hold a golf club so it would be a friend in their hands.

When the club is held correctly your hands warmly envelop the handle, and while you can feel its weight, the club does not feel heavy, stiff, or out of balance. The club does not call attention to itself. You feel that you and the club is your partner.

This overall feeling is created by how the hands join together, where on the handle you place them, [how they are oriented](#), and by your grip pressure.

[Place your left hand on the handle as if you were shaking hands with it. The right hand then covers the left: the pocket formed by the right hand folding fits in a cozy way over the left thumb, and the right little finger rests on the fingers of the left hand, so that in](#)

[combination the hands come to feel like one working unit.](#)

Hold the club at its balance point. If you adjust the placement of your hands up and down on the handle near an inch from the top, you will find a spot where the club does not feel heavy or stiff. It feels just right. That's where your hands go on the club.

Golf instruction books tell you where the Vs created by the thumbs lying next to the hand should point to, which is usually where the author of the book likes them to point to. The proper alignment of *your* hands is found by [lowering the club and waving it gently back and forth in front of you a few times in a wristy way that keeps your hands in front of you. When you stop, your hands will be in the orientation that fits your personal body mechanics. Memorize what this position looks like, because it might not be your first inclination when you take hold of the club.](#)

To get the proper grip pressure, squeeze the handle so you feel tension in your fingers—not too tightly, just so there's some. Now back off to the point where the tension just disappears. That's how firmly you should hold the club.

[So follow those four steps before any shot:](#)

- [1. Hold the club up vertically in the air and close to you \(never with the clubhead resting on the ground\) and assume your grip—left hand first, then right hand.](#)
- [2. Find the balance point.](#)
- [3. Orient your hands by looking, not by feel, to see they are in the right place.](#)
- [4. Set your grip pressure.](#)

### 4. Posture

Good posture allows the swing to flow easily. Work on it and do not take it for granted.

First of all, stand up straight. Stretch your lower abdomen upward, and stretch your upper torso upward, then relax your shoulders. When you bend over, bend from your hips, letting your knees bend, but not too much. Do not let your abdomen collapse. You

should feel like you are still standing tall. Your neck can relax a little bit. The line going across your shoulders needs to be parallel to the line going across your hips.

Your posture over the ball should not feel stiff or studied. It should feel light, easy, and full of the potential for movement.

## 5. Stance

Stance in golf refers mainly to the placement of your feet. There isn't too much that can be said definitively about the stance, but there are guidelines.

The feet should be separated by a distance that feels comfortable to the golfer. However, a stance that is too wide or too narrow can prevent a good swing from operating efficiently. There is little need for the width of your stance to vary with the club you are using.

A line connecting the heels (not the toes) should be parallel to the line from the ball to the target. Stances with the left foot set back (open) or the right foot back (closed) can pull the swing out of alignment and should be avoided.

The feet can be angled outward slightly, but too much or too little adversely affects how the body turns.

Distribute your weight evenly over the soles of your feet, favoring the weight a bit forward (C-1). Old instruction books advocate placing the weight back on the heels. Do not do that.

Perhaps the only universal principle of the stance is for the feet to come down in the same spot underneath you every time you take your stance preparatory to a swing.

## 6. Ball Position

When the ball is always in a different place at address, the same swing won't hit the ball the same way. Too many golfers aren't aware of this or don't give it sufficient attention.

For balls hit off the ground, the front of the ball should be just behind the spot where your swing bottoms out. When using a driver tee

the ball so the front of it is just inside the heel of your left shoe.\* Memorize these positions and make sure the ball is there before every shot.

Your posture (B-4) determines how far away you stand from the ball. Take a few swings without a ball and observe where the clubhead passes over the ground in front of you. That's where the ball goes. This distance varies with the length of the club. Generally, recreational golfers stand too far away from the ball, not too close to it.

Avoid the tendency to place the ball more forward in your stance and farther away from you as the round progresses. You do this because it feels like you're setting up for a more powerful strike, but all you're doing is getting yourself out of position and out of balance (C-1).

Your stance and posture combined should feel comfortable to you, such that you would enjoy staying in that position for a good amount of time, yet it should create in your mind the potential for powerful movement. If your setup position does not give you these feelings, that is a sign you have put yourself in the wrong position.

\* Playing every shot inside the left heel, as advocated by some Tour players in their instruction books, is only for Tour players—unless, of course, the bottom of your swing is over there.

## 7. Aiming Yourself

Line yourself up in the direction you intend the ball to go; a straight shot helps you only when it goes in the right direction.

Stand behind the ball on a line toward your target. Approach the ball without taking your eyes off the target. When you get beside the ball, turn toward it, still looking at the target, and set your right foot. Now you can put the club down, look at the ball, and step into your stance. Make sure the clubhead does not twist when you step in.

At the range, check your aim by stepping into what you feel to be a properly aimed stance and dragging an alignment stick against your heels. Step away from the ball and look downrange. The stick should be parallel to the line from your ball to a target you have selected. Once you are getting this right you can start hitting balls. But align yourself to a target each time, in this way, before you hit a ball. This is how you get good at aiming yourself, and how you make aiming a habit for when you play.

### 8. A Pre-Shot Checklist

After you have selected the shot and the club, and are ready to make your stroke, run this checklist in this order:

1. Grip. (B-3)
2. Aim. (B-7)
3. Ball position. (B-6)
4. Stance. (B-5)
5. Posture. (B-4)
6. Mind. (B-1) (Actually, mind should come first, but until you are quite experienced in this regard, the duration of your concentration will not be long enough to cover the entire setup procedure.)
7. Begin your swing.

Until this sequence becomes a habit, say these words to yourself on the range or on the course before you hit *any* shot—drive, a pitch, or putt. Do not blame a bad result on not controlling the things you can control as well as any professional golfer.

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## C. More Swing Things

### 1. Balance

Hitting the ball well requires precise contact. If you lose balance sometime before contact, it will be difficult to find the ball again with the precision required. This does not have to be a falling-down loss of balance, but just enough to carry the club away from where it

needs to be. A tempo that is too fast will throw you out of balance, too (A-1).

At address, have your weight evenly distributed from front to back (so you can rise up on your toes without having to shift forward), and evenly from side to side. When the swing is over you should be able to stay in your finish position (A-6) for several seconds without wobbling. If you are off balance at one of these two spots, you will likewise be off balance in the middle of your swing, too.

Practice balance by swinging the club with your eyes closed.

### 2. The Takeaway

Start the club back smoothly and slowly. Do not snatch it back. The purpose of such a takeaway is to avoid inducing tension at this moment, which would set up the rest of the swing for failure.

Begin the takeaway with a gentle push by the left hand. Do not pull the club back with your right hand.

### 3. The Straight Left Arm

Keeping a straight left arm means to set up with its natural bend and to maintain that same bend from takeaway through impact. It does not mean to make it ramrod straight like Ben Hogan did. A good way to get this part right is to keep the handle of the club as far away from you as you comfortably can when you swing back.

Why is this important? First, bending your left arm shortens that lever. Now you have to straighten it out again on the forward swing, adding an unnecessary complication to your swing. Second, keeping the left arm straight creates width in your swing, which allows the full power of your swing to be applied to the ball. That doesn't add distance, but bending the left arm does subtract distance.

### 4. Elbows

Several fine players, Ben Hogan and Mickey Wright among them, have emphasized the



importance of keeping the elbows together during the swing.

At address, the arms extend in their natural shape. They are not forced to be truly straight, nor are they bent unnaturally at the elbow. If you stand and let your arms hang down, that is what they should feel like when you take hold of the club.

At address, there will also be a feeling of the elbows being connected in some way. That feeling of connection needs to remain from takeaway through impact. True, when you take the club back the right elbow folds and the elbows do not thus maintain the same distance from each other, but it should *feel* like they do. In this way the radius of your swing (left arm + clubshaft) stays constant so you don't have to go hunting for the ball as you near impact.

### **5. The Center of the Clubface**

Your score is strongly related to the number of times you hit the ball on the center of the clubface. Once you get this skill down, you have pretty much cracked the nut. There is no magic move for doing this consistently, though. There is only practice. Lots of it.

Begin by learning to be a stickler about ball position (B-6). You can't expect to hit the ball on the same spot of the clubface if it is not sitting on the same spot of ground. Also, the handle must lead the clubhead (A-5) for the clubhead to approach the ball with the same trajectory and depth (D-9) each time.

Start building this skill by chipping with a 7-iron. Learn to hit the ball on the center with this small stroke (E-1). Hit hundreds of chips just to get this part right. Use a 7-iron. Once you've mastered that, step up to hitting pitch-and-runs with an 8-iron. This will be a longer stroke, but work at it until you achieve the same accuracy of contact. Hit hundreds of those and if you've got it, move up to 50-yard pitches with a sand wedge. Then to 100-yard pitches with a 9-iron. Then to full 9-iron

shots, working your way through your bag, one club at a time.

This sounds like a lot of work, but getting good at something takes a lot of work (H-1).

### **6. Don't Hit Down, Don't Hit Up**

You hear that you should hit down with your irons. Bad advice. You hear that you should hit up with your driver. More bad advice. True, the iron will be on a slight downward trajectory at impact. True, the driver will be on a slightly upward trajectory at impact. But clubhead trajectories are influenced by ball position (B-6), not by something you do with your swing.

In the swing through the ball, the club arcs downward, bottoms out, then arcs upward to the finish. If the ball is in one place it will be caught with the clubhead moving slightly downward (irons), or in a different place, moving slightly upward (driver).

If you can't do that, there's something wrong with your swing. The same swing is able to hit a 9-iron and a driver (H-17).

### **7. Distance**

Thoughts of distance plague every golfer. Your friends might ask you, "How far do you hit your 7-iron?" How far we hit a particular club is completely irrelevant. If my 7-iron goes 145 yards and the guy I'm playing with hits his 165, we should be playing from different tees. "How often do you hit the green with your 7-iron," is much more to the point.

Hitting the ball a long way is a talent that not everyone has. Accept your limits, whatever they are. Keep in mind that the vast majority of recreational golfers do not shoot high scores because they lack distance. It is because they lack accuracy up to the green, and skill around the green. Even so...

**Your maximum distance comes when you hit the ball on the center of the clubface (C-4) with a swing governed by your optimum tempo and the 3:1 rhythm (A-1). You**

increase your chances of doing those two things when you relax and stay relaxed throughout the swing (D-2).

Two things you might think help you hit the ball farther, but never do, are (1) starting the forward swing too fast, and (2) trying to add some extra hit just before the clubhead meets the ball. Don't do those things. **Start the club down at the same speed you took it up.** And for that extra hit at the bottom? The speed generated by **relaxed acceleration** will give you plenty of hit.

### **8. Ben Hogan's Three Right Hands**

One of the most dangerous quotes casual readers take away from Ben Hogan's book, *Five Lessons*, is, "As far as applying power goes, I wish I had three right hands." Yes, he said that, but he was talking about the left hand being in the proper position at impact (with a flat or even bowed left wrist) so the right hand could not overpower the left and "twist the club over." As long as the handle leads the clubhead (A-5), you'll be doing what Hogan wanted.

### **9. The Depth of Your Swing**

The depth of the swing refers to how far down, in relation to the ground, the lowest point of the swing is. That is, do you take a divot, and how deep, or do you sweep the ball off the grass? Whichever one you prefer, it has to be the same every time to create consistent shots.

Let's say you're about to hit a pitch shot and take three practice swings. One goes through the grass, another barely brushes the top of the grass, and the third thumps the ground a bit. Those are three different swings that send the ball three different distances. In the short game especially, you must learn how to come through the ball at the same depth every time.

### **10. Is Your Clubface Square?**

At any point in the swing, stop, keep your hands exactly where they are, turn to face

them, and drop the clubhead straight down to the ground. The clubface should be as square as it was at address. Use this technique to find out where in your swing the clubface is getting out of square. Once you have found that place, it is fairly easy to figure out what to do to keep the face square at that point.

### **11. Play With Your Own Swing**

"I'm going through a swing change," someone says to you. If your swing is really bad, maybe changing it is a good idea. But most likely your swing is just fine. It's based on your (not anyone else's, not that of the 25 year-old Tour pro ranked eighth in the world) strength, flexibility, athleticism, habitus, conditioning, and conception of movement. Figure out how *you* swing the club to get good shots. Once you've figured that out, stop tinkering. Continuing to add little tweaks never lets you leave the technical phase for the feel phase because you are in effect always starting over. Take what works, perfect it, and leave it alone once you have.

Regarding those swing tips you see in golf magazines: clip them out and give them to your opponents.

### **12. How To Reverse Direction**

It was said in B-1 that the only swing thought you should have is to relax and that thought should occur before the swing begins (B-8). The one second or so it takes from takeaway to impact is more than enough time for your mind to go wandering. If yours does, save that thought for just before you begin the forward swing. At the moment your backswing ends, say, "Relax" and begin the forward swing. There is no need to pause. Think of it as you're moving.

The technique of beginning the forward swing is up to you. I would suggest shifting your weight to the left foot as the first move, but whatever you choose to do, do not be thinking about it. Create a drill that makes

your move automatic, so the thought of relaxing is all that is on your mind.

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## D. Mental Guidance

### 0. Preparatory to All Mental Guidance

For the mental part of the game to work for you, you must develop your mind in a structured way. Knowing how to concentrate is a skill that takes practice, just like hitting a golf ball does. The method of developing your mind is explained fully in my book, *The Golfing Self*. Please see that book for instructions.

#### 1. It's the Swing, Not the Ball

One thing that makes golf so difficult is the ball. You might have a brilliant swing, but once you try to hit a ball with it, somehow everything changes.

The reason for this is very simple. When you swing through the air, you're not aiming at anything. It doesn't matter where the clubhead goes. All you're thinking about is making a free-flowing swing. But step up to a ball, and now it matters *a lot* where the clubhead goes. We swing carefully so as not only to be sure we hit the ball, but to hit the ball on the center of the clubface—admittedly a demanding task with a clubhead moving so fast.

Some day, go to the range and hit an entire bucket with one thing in mind—just swinging the club. Do not think about hitting the ball. Take at least three free-flowing practice swings before each shot, just feeling that swing. Then step up to the ball and right away swing the same way you just did those three or more times. An indication you did that will be your finish position is the same as when you swung at the air. Where the ball goes or what kind of contact you made is less the point than did you make the same swing.

This concept applies to the short game, too, and to putting. Every time you hit the ball your mind needs to be on the feeling of the swing, not of hitting the ball.

Changing your mind so it does not respond to the ball is hard work. It takes as much effort and training as does learning the physical part of swinging the golf club. But unless you take this step, you will never get all you can out of your shotmaking skills, and you will never really have confidence in them when you play.

#### 2. Swing Thoughts

When you are conscious, your mind will be thinking about something. This is how the mind works and you can't change it. All you can do is have it thinking about the right thing given the circumstance. To repeat what was said in B-1, the one thought before you begin to swing is to relax. Maintain the feeling that thought brings about through-out the swing. Putting your mind on any-thing else is detrimental. If a technical swing thought comes into your head, that is a just sign you have not truly relaxed your mind. **Do not listen to teaching pros or prominent "golf psychologists" saying it is all right to have a technical swing thought. They are wrong.**

#### 3. Visualization

This is one of the most important sections of the book, and for me the most difficult one to write. It is an important section, because visualizing invests you with the ability to have the shot come off like you intended. When you are addressing the ball, ready to make the stroke, have a feeling that the shot has already been hit successfully and all you're doing now is bringing that shot into the physical world. The way you do that is by visualizing.

Visualizing necessarily implies a process of looking, of seeing. And that's true. You can't visualize with your eyes closed. It's also true that vision is our dominant sense and we interact with the world around us primarily

by sorting through the images we receive. That does not mean, however, that visual images are the only things vision allows us to sense.

Once you have control of a variety of shots from the tee, fairway, around the green, and on the green, the course can start speaking to you. By looking without analyzing, you will see a shot that you believe in because it lies within your capabilities. A particular shot presents itself back to you as well as a feeling of how to hit that shot.

For example, let's say I have a chip shot of about 60 feet. So I just look. I get a sense that I should hit it with an 8-iron. I know a sand wedge isn't the right club, and probably not a 6-iron, but a pitching wedge might work, and so would an 8-iron, but what I see says, use the 8. This is not a technical conclusion, but an intuitive one, albeit grounded in technique.

I keep looking and get a nearly palpable intuition in my abdomen that means I have been imbued in some way of how hard to hit the ball. (New research shows that the enteric nervous system, located in the gut, communicates emotional states to the brain. It could also be a center of unconscious perception.) This intuition is not a visualization of how long the stroke should be, or how much force I should apply, or anything like that, but a feeling of being connected with what that shot with that club requires. Somewhere within me lies the knowledge that this shot calls for an 8-iron to be hit over here and in this manner. I could never explain what it is I know I should do, nor do I know where in me this knowledge resides. It is definitely not in my conscious mind. To bring this knowledge into my conscious mind, analyze it, and evaluate it, would destroy the union between me, the club, the ball, and the course. I would be back where I started.

At the same time, I have the satisfied feeling of having hit a good shot to the right spot before even having stepped up to the ball.

Riding on that feeling, I align myself, take my stance, and play the shot without hesitation.

These feelings emerge on their own when your mind is calm and focused. They cannot be made to happen.

This process of visualization applies everywhere on the course, from tee to green. You look and let the course bring the right shot back to you, along with the feeling of how to hit it. Do not visualize by picking a shot you like and projecting it outward to the course. The right shot for you is out there, and by looking with an open mind, it will be made clear to you. Instead of "Be the ball," like Ty Webb said in *Caddyshack*, I'm saying, "Be the course."

Even though this method is based on intuition, it is grounded in technique. You will never see a shot you don't know how to hit. That's a reason right there for expanding your shotmaking skills.

This method of visualization requires constant attention. Make it a habit to visualize every shot you hit, even at the practice range, or on or around the practice green.

#### **4. Pressure**

There's no pressure when you know what you are doing. Hit shots that you know you are good at.

There's no pressure when you attach no more importance to this shot than any other. You create pressure by saying to yourself, "If I get this chip close I can make par," or even worse, "If I don't get this chip close, I'll make bogey." Say instead, "Hit the chip," and let it go at that.

#### **5. Start Your Swing In Your Mind**

A golf stroke begins with movement of the mind, not of the body. Get your mind ahead of the body from the start by creating a feeling of movement in your mind before you move your body in any way. This is a generalized feeling of movement, not specific to your

swing, but of which the physical start of the swing is its realization.

### **6. The First Shots of the Day**

The first shot of the day is a difficult one. Regardless of how well you were hitting while warming up, this is the first shot that counts. Stay calm by taking a slightly slower swing with a slightly shorter backswing. Don't go full out until you've settled in to the round.

Likewise, the first shot off the fairway can make you uneasy. Take one more club and put a gentle swing on the ball.

### **7. Play With a Positive Mind**

Stand over the ball knowing that this shot is going to turn out well. If you don't feel that, pick a different shot or club that you believe in.

Enjoy your good shots; ignore the bad ones. As soon as you have seen where the ball you just hit ends up, your mind should let go of golf until you arrive at the ball for your next shot.

If you have a run of good holes, keep it up. There's no reason why you can't have one more—but don't anticipate.

When the round is over, ask yourself, are you happier now than you were at the start? Did your playing partners enjoy having you in their group? Are you at peace with the way you played? If your answers to these questions are yes, you had a good day.

### **8. End-Gaining<sup>2</sup>**

When golfers begin thinking that the purpose of the golf swing is to hit the golf ball, they have become an end-gainer. They're trying for a result directly rather than following the best way to achieve that result.

For example, at the range you have just hit an unsatisfactory shot so you try a little tweak you think will let you hit a better shot, or at least avoid the bad one. But when that doesn't work so you try another tweak, and so on,

leading yourself farther away from the desired end rather than closer. This is end-gaining.

The end-gainer keeps doing what feels right, but which is functionally wrong, instead of doing what is functionally right, but which, because of lifelong habits, feels wrong or ineffective. Even though we might know intellectually what we should be doing, the familiarity of habit forces us into the same mistakes again and again in spite of ourselves, or, more to the point, because of ourselves. In all those corrections you made to hit a better shot you might have thought you were doing something different, but you were most likely repeating variations of the same mistake.

The solution to this problem is, first of all, to find out what is right. Then proceed from the beginning of a movement until just before the part that needs changing is reached. At that point, stop. Do not let a response occur that leads from there to the wrong feeling, and thus to the wrong movement. Do this many times, until the response to proceed incorrectly has disappeared. At that point you may now insert the correct movement and start teaching yourself the correct response, which has a new feeling that you must learn to be comfortable with.

**The insidious habit of end-gaining is what and prevents golfers from improving.** Whenever your shotmaking, whether drive or putt or in between, is not satisfactory, end-gaining is very likely a cause.

### **9. Talk To Yourself**

Before you hit a shot, try telling yourself, out loud, what you're going to do with it. Maybe in not so loud a voice that everyone hears it, but out loud so you can hear yourself. For example: "I have a 6-iron. **The pin is on the right, but it's behind a bunker, so I'm going to play for the center of the green and take my two putts.**" This is a solid plan, positively stated, that encourages you to do your best.

What you're doing is validating your thinking out loud. This is what touring pros do with their caddy. They talk out the shot. Hearing out loud what you're thinking makes the thought more real. It gives you more confidence in a good idea. It also casts clear doubt on a bad one—let's think about this some more.

You likely don't have a caddy, but hearing your thinking out loud is the next best thing.

### 10. How Not to Drive Yourself Nuts

1. Hit an easy shot with a simple outcome. Don't make any shot a big deal. Just get an idea, check that it's a good one (D-9), and hit the ball with no worries (D-4).

Then,

2. After you hit this one, don't think about it, good or bad, and don't think about the next one until after you've arrived at the ball. Spend the interval schmoozing with your buddies (D-7).

When you get to your ball,

Go back to step 1.

3. When the last putt is down, the round is over. Now you can add up your score. While you're playing, it's not important.

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The next two sections cover the game from about 80 yards in. The point is to get the ball as close to the hole as possible or even in it. [Though you will never have a professional-level swing, there is no reason why you can't develop a professional-level short game. Begin by mastering the basic strokes of each shot type \(E-1, E-3, F-1\). From that point, get playing lessons to learn a bagful of shots that give you a solution to any problem around the green \(H-19\).](#) Though the game from close in is art, the more of it you can reduce to calibrated technique, the more certainty and less guesswork you will give to yourself in applying your art. (E-2, E-4, F-4).

Statheads say to shoot lower scores you have to hit more greens in regulation. Easier said than done. But if you just get the ball up to the green in regulation, on it or not, a good short game and a good putter will secure those pars.

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## E. Chipping and Pitching

### 1. The Chipping Stroke

Chipping is the easiest shot to get good at, and the one that pays off the most directly in lowering your score.

What is a chip shot supposed to look like? Stand about ten feet off the edge of a practice green and toss a ball underhanded toward a hole. You will likely toss the ball low, just enough to get it on the green so it can roll the rest of the way. That's what a chip should look like. All that's left is to figure out which club and which stroke does that for the shot you're facing.

Go through this process when you chip:

*Preliminaries:*

- Read the green. Plan a chip shot as if it were an approach putt, because it will roll across the green the same way.
- Aim the shot carefully. There's no reason to get the distance right but end up three feet to one side.

*Setup:*

- Grip down to a place right next to the metal shaft. This gives you maximum control of the clubhead.
- Let the handle rest softly in your hands, and keep it that way throughout the stroke.
- Lean slightly to the left, with the ball in the center of your stance. Your feet can be close together.
- Relax your mind. This is an easy shot.

*The stroke:*

- **Think only of brushing the sole of the club over the top of the grass, just as you do with your practice swings.**

- The lower body can move. Let the right knee break gently toward the ball in concert with the club moving into the ball.
- Do not put any “hit” in your swing.
- Keep the club low to the ground and the clubface pointing at the sky on the follow-through.

When developing your chipping stroke the important things are: to make the length of the stroke the same every time, to hit the ball on the same spot of the clubface every time, and to feel the ball coming off the clubface the same way every time.

## 2. Chipping Strategy

Getting the distance right is the prime consideration in chipping. The 7-iron through lob wedge, for example, provide seven lofts which, if the lofts between clubs are evenly spaced, produce seven evenly spaced and predictable distances. With just a little work on the practice green you can determine what those distances are for each club. Write them down and carry the list with you. Pick your club based on the total distance to the hole, not the ball-to-green distance and the green-to-hole distance as you frequently hear.

Chip to a place that will leave you with the easiest following putt. That might mean not aiming at the hole at times.

Use your putter when the ball lies on closely mown fringe. When the ball is sitting up in higher grass, no more than two feet from the fringe, you can still use your putter if the grass is not so thick that it will grab the ball. If the ball is in a cuppy lie, take out a lofted wedge and chop down gently on the back of the ball.

When chipping from a location that is above the level of the green, use one more (less-lofted) club for every three feet of elevation difference. From below the level of the green, use one less (more-lofted) club for every three feet of elevation difference. If you can run the ball up a closely mown slope, consider using a hybrid iron.

When chipping off a downhill lie, put the ball outside your right foot and think of chopping down lightly on the back of the ball with your most-lofted wedge. When chipping from an uphill lie, swing under-neath the ball directly into the slope. As the slope adds effective loft to the club, use a less-lofted club than the distance would indicate.

In rare instances a ball can be perched on top of the grass on greenside rough. Hit this chip with an 8-iron, using your putting stroke. Be careful not to disturb the grass in any way lest the ball fall down into it. When the ball is suspended halfway down into greenside rough, poke your finger down into the rough to see where the bottom of the ball is so you don't fluff the ball or blade it. Chip out with a sand wedge using your normal greenside chipping stroke. Be sure to follow through. Use a lob wedge to chip a ball resting on the ground in greenside rough. Take the club back sharply upward and swing down steeply, in an attempt to thump the ground underneath the ball with the sole of the club. You can't really do this, but when the sole hits the ground just behind the ball, it will slide underneath the ball and pop it out.

If you have to chip over something, like a bunker, but [stop the ball quickly](#), play the ball back of center. Let your wrist hinge as you take the club back, and return to the starting position coming into the ball. Hold that position after you hit the ball (Phil Mickelson's hinge and hold). End the stroke with the clubface pointing straight up to the sky.

If you have to chip under something, like a tree branch, then over something, like a bunker, and stop the ball quickly (whew!) play the ball along the inside edge of your right foot. Hit down sharply on the back of the ball with a sand wedge. The follow-through will be very short. Because the ball is back in your stance, it will fly low, and because you hit it sharply, the ball will have extra spin. Aim a bit to the right of your

target, because the ball will go left of where you are aimed.

### 3. Pitching Pointers

Think of a pitch shot as tossing the ball onto the green for two putts. This attitude makes the shot a lot easier to execute. Flag-hunting is only for when you get really good at it.

Think of the pitch as a giant chip with little wrist action. Take the club back and through with your arms straight and no wrist break. Actually, your wrists do break, but it should *feel* like they do not. This is a much safer stroke than one that is deliberately wristy. When the club comes through the ball, think of sliding the sole of the club underneath the ball. You slide the sole over the grass in your practice swing, so do the same thing when you hit the ball. There is no need to hit down and take a huge divot with a pitch.

This video shows you [how to hit the shot](#). Hit it with your 7-iron through lob wedge. This shot is very easy to learn and repeat. To get different trajectory and run-out results, vary the ball position, the club you select, or the length of the swing.

Keep your grip pressure light throughout the stroke. Swing easily. Let the club do the work. Rather than hitting the ball, let the sole of the club slide underneath the ball.

If possible, do not take a full swing with a wedge. From short distances, accuracy both in direction and distance is what you're striving for, and part swings do a better job at that.

Sometimes you want to hit a pitch that runs. Use a lesser-lofted club and hit the ball easily with a sweeping stroke. The combination of less loft and an easy hit keeps spin off the ball, allowing it to run when it lands. To hit a pitch that stops quickly, open the clubface slightly and hit the ball normally. Aim a bit to the left because the open club-face will send the ball to the right of where you are aimed. You'll need a longer swing, because the ball will fly higher, but also shorter, than normal.

Sometimes a pitch is the wrong shot to play. If you have a wide open look at the green from no more than about 50 yards, take out an 8-iron and hit a pitch-and-run, a much easier and safer shot.

### 4. Calibrate Your Pitching Game

Go to the range with your wedges and get in front of a marker in the range that is, say, roughly 60 yards away. Take out a sand wedge and pitch to the marker with a half swing. Hit four or five balls with that same length swing and the same force.

If they go too far, or not far enough, keep moving to other mats until you find the one from where you pitch exactly to the marker with that wedge and a half swing. Then take out a rangefinder and find the distance to the marker. That's how far you pitch your sand wedge with a half swing.

Now do the same exercise with the sand wedge and a three-quarter swing, hitting to a marker a little farther away. When you're finished, you have two guaranteed pitching distances with your sand wedge. Write them down in your notebook.

Repeat both exercises with each of your other pitching clubs. I have six: 8i, 9i, PW, 52, 56, and 60.

When you're finished, get a 3x5 card and write down these distances, in descending order by yards, with the club and swing combination alongside that gives you that distance. This card goes into your bag for reference when you play.

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## F. Putting

### 1. The Putting Stroke

In a putting stroke in which the wrists do not break, there is only one lever, comprised of two arms and the putter. The pivot point of this lever assembly is the large bone at the base of the neck, which Paul Runyan called



the suspension point. Therefore, when you swing the putter, you are swinging a lever that runs from your neck to the sole of the putterhead, pivoting from the suspension point.

Review the section on posture (B-4). The principles that apply to the full swing also apply to the putt.

The putter shaft and the forearms should form a straight line as seen from the side. This makes it easier to move the putter on a straight path.

When setting up, it is easier to square up the putterface to the starting line with the blade in front of the ball. The ball can interfere with your visual sense of alignment. After you have lined up the putterface you can lift it over and behind the ball.

The takeaway will be less disturbed if you suspend the putter ever so much off the ground before you swing it back.

**Concentrate on moving the sole of the putter, not the putter's face, back and forth.**

Keep the putter as low to the ground as you can, especially on the follow-through, to prevent your wrists from breaking. Letting the left wrist break backward is a serious fault.

Move the putter back and through with an even rhythm and let the putter sweep gently through the ball. There is no "hit" in the putting stroke. Every stroke, regardless of distance, should use the same rhythm and tempo.

Hit the ball off the sweet spot consistently. That gives you greater control of distance. You also don't have to hit the ball very hard to make it go a long way.

## 2. Short Putts

Short putts are the ones from four feet and under. Never just walk up to the ball and hit it. Always take a look from behind. Find a spot on the green a few inches in front of the ball on your starting line. If you make that two-inch putt, you'll make the three-footer.

This eliminates the need for using an alignment mark on your ball.

Do not ease a short putt toward the hole. It should approach the hole at the same speed as a twelve-footer would.

Keep the clubhead low going back and low going through.

After the ball has been struck, do not watch the ball roll toward the hole. Listen for it to fall in. This does make a difference.

Keep the process simple and putt without delay. Once you're ready, step up to the ball, line up your putter, and go. Just as with a full swing, the only thing on your mind should be the feeling of your stroke (D-1).

Hit the putt without expectations. By thinking to yourself, "I just can't miss a putt this short," you increase your chances of missing. And never, never, let the score you will make if the putt goes in, or does not, cross your mind.

## 4. Triangulated Approach Putting

Three-putt greens are most often caused by leaving the first putt too far away from the hole, either too short or too long rather than too wide. Control the distance of approach putts by varying the length of the stroke using a method I developed and call **Triangulated Approach Putting**.

Walk to a spot (**the apex**) halfway from the ball and the hole, and nine feet (three steps) away at a right angle to the left of the ball-hole line (**the baseline**). After only a bit of practice, you'll be able to walk directly to this spot.

Take practice strokes while looking back at the ball. When the putter touches an imaginary line from your eye to the ball (**the eye-line**), keep making that stroke, and notice the particular stretching sensation you have in your lower torso on the backswing or perhaps the way your arms brush your torso.

Once you've found this sensation, and it should take only three or four strokes to find it, walk up to the ball, set the putter down,

and make a stroke that recreates the sensation you found.

Sometimes adjustments are required because of external factors. If the putt goes downhill, or if the greens are faster than the ones you practice on, place the apex at a spot short of halfway to the hole. If the putt goes uphill overall, or the greens are slower, walk to a spot somewhat beyond the midpoint of the baseline. Experience develops a sense of how much of an adjustment to make.

A key external factor is the putter you use. If this method does not work for flat putts on your practice green, place the apex closer to the baseline if you are leaving putts short, or farther away if they are all too long.

This method depends on keeping internal factors constant: the ball gets hit off the sweet spot consistently, swing tempo is always the same, and the sole distance generator is the length of the stroke.

I'm not kidding, folks. This works.

## 5. Putting Strategies

Golf is a two-putt game. Getting those two putts starts before the ball is even on the green.

Play into the green so your first putt is uphill. Some greens slope severely from back to front. If the pin is in back, take one more (less-lofted) club and hit the ball to the middle of the green with an easy swing so the ball flies low and runs when it lands. If the pin is in front, play a higher shot that lands and stops quickly, or play short of the green for an uphill chip and an uphill putt.

When a green slopes markedly to one side or the other, try to be hitting into it from the side of the fairway the green slopes toward. For example, if the green slopes from right to left, hit your approach from the left side of the fairway. If you can fade the ball into the slope (in this case) to keep the ball from releasing away from the pin, even better.

Now your ball is on the green. When hitting a long breaking putt, imagine a line

going from your ball straight to the hole. Do not let the ball cross that line before it gets to the hole.

Double-breaking putts can be thought of as two putts in one. Read both breaks, and notice where the switch occurs. Your goal is not the hole, but a spot near the switch where the ball can catch the second break with enough speed for the green to deliver it to the hole. Since the ball will be rolling fast over the first part, play that part of the putt for less break than it looks. Find a practice green that lets you hit double-breaking putts. They really aren't that hard once you understand how to manage them.

When putting on a tiered green from the higher tier to the lower tier, pick a spot on the edge of slope on the fall line to the hole. Hit the ball so it gets to that spot with just enough turns left over to catch the slope and roll straight down to the hole. When putting from the lower level to the higher level at an angle to the slope, the ball will not go to the hole in a straight line. Its path will get deflected across the slope in the direction it is crossing the slope. For a putt travelling up the slope from left to right, for example, you must compensate by moving the starting line a bit to the left.

The charge or die debate applies only to short putts. Greens that are in first-class condition lend themselves to die putting. If your touch is good, play the ball to die at the back of the cup. Greens of lesser quality can be bumpy around the hole, knocking a slowly rolling ball off line at the last moment. On greens like this, get the ball to the hole with some speed left over.

That said, it is never wrong to leave a 30-foot putt a foot short. It is never right to leave an eight-foot putt an inch short.

## 6. Reading the Green

Get a secure sense of how fast you like the ball to be traveling when it gets to the hole. Plan to have the ball approach the hole that fast

regardless of the length of the putt. This speed defines the line to the hole for break-ing putts.

From about eight feet and closer the line is more important than speed. From beyond that distance, speed is more important. You are less likely to get the read exactly right with a long putt, but if you get the speed right, you will have only a short putt left and sometimes luck takes the ball into the hole.

When reading the green for an approach putt, the most important portion is the area within about five feet from the hole. The ball will be rolling slower there and be more subject to the influence of green contour. What you want to avoid is getting the distance right but having unnoticed slope near the hole carry the ball away.

Make your first read from the low side of the putt to see if there is any change in elevation. Then read the line from behind the ball with two exceptions. Read both uphill and downhill putts by looking uphill, and on sunny days, read with the sun at your back. Looking into the sun flattens contours as does looking downhill.

Putts break less when the green is slow, if you are putting uphill, or if the ball has speed. Putts break more when the green is fast, when putting downhill, or when the ball is travelling slowly.

There will be putts you know have break in them, but [you aren't sure in which direction](#). Stand behind the ball on a line to the hole. Take one sidestep to the left and look at the ground. Go back to the spot directly behind the ball, take a sidestep to the right, and look at the ground again. On one of those sides the ground still appears to be flat. On the other side, you can see the ground sloping away from you. You've found the break. That's the direction the ball will go while rolling to the hole.

Short putts can look level from close up but not be. Take a look from about twenty feet away to see if the overall slope of the green will make a difference.

In general, reading the green for line need not take more than a few seconds. If you spend too much time looking, you'll start confusing yourself.

In hot weather, greens will dry out as the day goes on, making them play faster. Greens that are always in shade will not speed up as appreciably.

Getting more experience reading greens by playing more doesn't really work since you have to keep moving along when you play, and can't take the time, if you missed the putt, to read the putt again to see what you did wrong. The answer is to seek out different practice greens in your area, ones with slopes and undulations. Find as many new looks as you can that you can study. If you always practice on the same green, you'll run out of new putts to read because you've memorized them all. And flat greens don't teach you anything.

In the end, you must read and hit a lot of putts and remember what happened, good or bad, to become a good reader of greens.

## 7. The Forefinger Interlock Putting Grip

Golfers use special grips for putting to keep their hands under control. But if this is not a problem for you, there's really no need to hold the putter differently from the rest of your clubs. If it is a problem, try a grip I developed called the [forefinger interlock](#). It joins the hands in a way that both arms can hang the same length, allowing a pure pendulum swing to be made. It also prevents the right hand from taking over the stroke and doing untoward things.



Slip the left forefinger in between the right forefinger and middle finger and slide the hands together with the last three fingers of the left hand lying on the right palm. Lay the handle on these fingers. Close both hands around the handle, with both thumbs pointing straight down the shaft. The right hand in this grip holds the handle much lighter than the left hand does.

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## G. Playing the Game

Your score is not created by a string of good shots. It is created by a string of the right shots, because golf is a *game* that you *play*. For two golfers of equal skill, the one who knows more about how to play the game will win most of the time.

### 0. Pre-Shot Process

Before you hit any shot, go through the process described below. Not every shot will require you to take all of the details into account, but the all steps must be gone through in the listed order.

*Assess your lie.*

On the tee, find a place that is level from your feet to the ball, and is not chewed up by divots (so you have secure footing). Through the green, check to see what kind of access you have to the ball. If your ball lies in thicker or higher grass than usual, lies in a slight depression, or rests on very hard ground, it might be difficult for you to get a club on the ball with a normal shot. Is the ground moist? Check the slope of the lie. A non-level lie will affect your setup and your aim point.

*Notice course conditions.*

How far away is your target? Is there an elevation difference between it and your present lie? Is there any wind? What obstacles along the way are there? What hazards are near the target area? What is the margin of error near the landing area?

*Find your shot.*

The shot is composed of landing area, club to be used, and trajectory of the ball. You find all this through visualization (D-3).

*Set up.*

See B-8 for full swings, E-3 for pitching, E-1 for chipping, and F-1 for putting.

### 1. In-Round Swing Maintenance

[See sections A-1, B-8, and I-6.]

### 2. Arrive

Too many good iron shots are wasted because they fall short of the green. From the fairway, always have enough club in your hand so can hit an easy shot into the green instead of thinking you have to power up the one you selected. Here's how that is done.

Your shot into the green has to get to the hole, or even past it. The ball has to arrive. Unless the pin is in the back of the green, or the green slopes severely from front to back, always play for passing the pin. Even when pitching, fly the ball to the flag with authority. Don't sneak up on the hole.

If you have a GPS rangefinder, choose your club by figuring out which club you would use to hit the back edge of the green, then take one club less than that. Most GPS rangefinders will show you the distance to the back.

If you have a laser rangefinder, notice that flagsticks are generally marked to show the whether they are in the front, middle, or back of the green. If the pin is in front or the middle, add five yards to the distance to the pin. If the pin is in back, base your club selection on the indicated distance.

Of course, factor in wind, turf conditions, green elevation or depression, and how you're hitting this particular day. Need I say you need to know how far you truly hit each club (I-7)?

Do not think that arriving means you must always shoot into the green. There are times

when you have a clear look at the green but a layup is the better option (G-24) .

In general, always hold enough club in your hand so you don't have to strain to get the ball there.

### 3. The Target

For shots from the tee and the fairway, your target is the patch of sky through which the ball must pass to land on the intended spot of ground. Look up. Your job is to hit the ball in the air. Gravity brings it down to the right spot.

### 4. Special Shots

Sometimes you'll need to hit something other than a standard shot. It could be one that curves, or has a different trajectory, or has more or less spin. To hit these different shots, don't change your swing. Change your setup. The setup adjustments you need to make—opening or closing the clubface, moving the ball position—do not have to be very big to achieve the desired effect. Most of all, special shots should not be played on the course unless you have practiced them and [you have learned to hit them with confidence](#).

### 5. When You're in Trouble

The shortest distance to the lowest score is not always a straight line. When you're really stuck, use up one shot to get out of trouble and into a place where you have a clear shot at the green. It's going to take you two shots to get on the green anyway you do it, so why not make them two easy shots? Concede the bogey; don't set yourself up for a double or a triple.

Ask yourself this question if you're about to hit a heroic shot to get out of trouble and avoid conceding that extra stroke: have I *practiced* this shot I'm about to hit and *know* I can pull it off in this situation? If the answer is no, maybe, or probably, don't do it.

One solution to being in trouble is to not get in it in the first place. Trouble on the

course is to be avoided. That's why it's called trouble!

### 6. Working the Golf Ball

Knowing how to fade and draw the ball are important skills (H-20). Unless you are very good at them, do not use these shots to curve an approach shot into a pin. Your range of error is too great. Use these skills instead when you are off the fairway and need to bend the ball around an obstruction to get the ball back in play while still advancing it.

### 7. Play From the Right Set of Tees

Playing from tees that are too long for you do two things to the detriment of your game. Your scores will be too high, and that's not fun. And because a course that's too long requires you play at the limit of your game or beyond it, bad habits develop as you strain to keep up.

If there are more than four par 4s on which you have to play a 4-iron second or longer to get to the green, those tees are too long for you. Just because the tips are there doesn't mean you have to play from them.

If you do not break 100 regularly, use the red tees. If you do not break 85 regularly, use the white tees. Use blue tees only if, in addition to scoring below 85, you regularly drive the ball 260 yards or more.

### 8. Don't Hit Your Fairway Wood...

...when you would be hitting into trouble by trying to reach the green with it. Hit a 6-iron and a pitching wedge—two easy shots instead of one difficult one followed by who knows what.

### 9. Life Is Short - Go For It

It's one thing not to play stupid shots on a golf course. It's another to avoid playing shots with an element of risk that you are otherwise qualified to play. Say the pin is 80 yards away and behind a bunker, but you know how to hit an 80-yard pitch whenever you want to.

Go for it! Hit the pitch at the pin, instead of off to the side to avoid the bunker but be leaving yourself 35 feet from the hole.

One part of making all your practice worthwhile is to play shots with your improved shotmaking that you would have avoided earlier. That's why you practice, isn't it? Playing a full-sized game is the only way you grow as a golfer.

### **10. The Practice Swing**

You don't have to use a practice swing, but if you do, make your practice swing be a real swing, the one you're going to use to hit this shot (E-1). If all you do is make a gentle, loosening-up swish, it's better not to do it at all.

Watch the people you play golf with take a practice swing. Then compare that swing with their swing at the ball. For the ones whose two swings are different, I'll bet they aren't very good ballstrikers.

Whether or not there is a ball in front of you should make no difference in how you swing the club. If it does, either you're End-Gaining (D-8), or you don't have a swing you really trust.

### **11. Wind**

By understanding a few basic concepts, playing golf in the wind should not be difficult.

A headwind, contrary to popular thinking, does not knock down the ball. The aerodynamics of underspin against a headwind actually lifts the ball up. The ball spends its energy going upwards, not outwards, and falls shorter than intended. Hitting harder doesn't help. Harder hits create more spin, which lifts the ball even higher. The solution is to take a longer (less-lofted) club and swing easier. The lower trajectory, with less spin, will bore through the wind. Be aware that headwinds exacerbate curvature. A draw turns into a hook, and a fade turns into a slice.

Crossing winds do knock down the ball. In a crosswind, use a longer club, and hit toward the wind, letting the wind carry the ball back toward the target. Hitting away from the wind and curving the ball back into it is only for experts.

Tailwinds both carry the ball along, adding carry, and suppress the ball's elevation, reducing its carry. In a light tailwind, the first effect outweighs the second. The same club as normal should be used, but with an easier stroke. In a strong tailwind, the leveling aspect of the wind dominates the ball, so the ball must be hit with a shorter (more-lofted) club that will get the ball up in the air.

### **12. Uneven Lies**

When you play off an uneven lie, the ball won't go in the direction your stance is aligned to. Shots played off an uphill lie, or a lie with the ball above your feet, will go left. Shots played off a downhill lie, or a lie with the ball below your feet, go right. These effects are difficult to counteract. It's best to just allow for them. (H-20)

### **13. Have a Plan**

On a course you play often, you should know exactly how to play each hole. Don't just play one shot after another. On par 4s and 5s know where to hit your tee shot so you have the best look at the green for your second. For your shot to the green, know where it's safe to miss the green and where it's not. Overall, always have your next shot in mind when you're planning this one. Golf is a 'next shot' game. Hit the shot at hand to a place that will make the next shot as easy and productive as possible.

As you walk down the fairways when playing a course for the first time, identify these spots for the next time you play there. Of special importance is to write down which club to use on every tee. On some par 4s and 5s, that might not be your driver.

#### 14. Giving Away Strokes

Recreational golfers give away strokes by doing these things:

- Having to hit recovery shots off the tee shot.
- Playing over water unnecessarily.
- Not really looking at the golf course ahead.
- Swinging when you're not confident yet.
- Getting angry.
- Playing for the distance, not for accuracy.
- Missing the green with a short shot.
- Not aiming greenside chips carefully.
- Not taking lessons.
- Not thinking about this shot *and* the next one, too.

#### 15. When to Leave Your Driver in the Bag

- Is your expected score on this hole a par?
- Think of the longest club you feel confident about hitting into a green. Will your average drive get you to at least the distance from which you can hit that club?
- Do you need to hit a driver to have a short iron or less into the green?
- Think of the trouble off the tee. If you hit into it with a driver, can you still make one stroke over your expected score with average play?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, tee off with something besides the driver. Unless, of course, you are very straight with your driver.

#### 16. Warming Up

The pre-round warmup should have definite objectives. It's not just hitting balls.

Start on the practice green. Chip a ball or two with each of your chipping clubs just to get reacquainted with them. Practice a few 20-foot putts to learn the speed of the green. Practice a few 2-foot putts to get used to the ball going in the hole.

Now, take a brisk walk for a few minutes to literally warm up, and then head to the range. Get loose and limber before you start hitting balls. Figure out a routine for this and follow it.

Then, with whichever club you want to use, take swings (no ball) to review rhythm and tempo (A-1). Rhythm is always 3:1, but your tempo can vary slightly from day to day.

Next, practice your aim (B-7). Aim at a target downrange, put an alignment rod against your heels, and step back to see how you did. Keep at it until you're dead on each time.

Now you can start hitting balls. Aim at a target, and do nothing more than make a smooth, graceful swing with clean contact that ends in a calm, balanced finish (A-6). Watch the ball until it hits the ground. Take your time. Move slowly. Take a few practice swings before you hit another ball. Don't be in a rush.

Practice special shots. If there's a corner off the third tee you can cut, practice hitting that shot a few times, along with other out of the ordinary shots you know you'll need on certain holes.

End by playing the tee shot and the second shot you'll be hitting on the first hole.

You're ready. Now go have fun.

#### 17. How to Play Par 3s

Always tee up the ball by just enough to get the ball off the ground. Never pass up the chance to give yourself a perfect lie.

Determine the yardage to the pin and add seven yards. Say the distance is 148 yards. Your 150-yard club will be short. Take one more club. This is especially true if there is trouble in front of the green you have to clear.

Consider laying up on a long par 3, chipping on, and taking two putts. This prevents you from taking a 5.

The night before you play, spend some time writing elegant, artistic 2s to put on your scorecard the next day. If you respect the 2, you will be rewarded. I'm not kidding about this.

### **18. How to Play Par 4s**

These are the hardest holes. Being in the fairway off the tee is more important than being long off the tee.

Your second shot must arrive. Make sure you have plenty of club in your hand to hit it with. If the pin is 145 yards away and that's the farthest you hit your 7-iron, hit the 6.

Realize that some par 4s are too hard for you. Play those holes to get on in 3 and take two putts.

### **19. How to Play Par 5s**

These holes are where you make pars. Unless you can reach the green in two, length off the tee is not important. Get the ball in the fairway off the tee and keep the ball in the fairway with your second, while leaving an easy shot into the green with your third. A par-5 hole is long, but always remember you have three shots to get there.

### **20. Breaking 100**

1. Leave your driver home. Tee off with the longest club you can hit straight.
2. From 50 yards in, put the ball on the green. Anywhere on the green.
3. Nine bogeys + nine doubles = 99. Avoid triples and quads.
4. Your swing needs more work than your short game.

### **21. Breaking 90**

1. Tee off with the longest club you can hit straight. That might or might not be your driver.
2. Get down in three, never four, from 50 yards in.
3. Get down in three, sometimes two, from beside the green.
4. Four pars + eleven bogeys + three doubles = 89.
5. Your swing needs more work than your short game.

### **22. Breaking 80**

1. Some holes are still too difficult for you. Play them for bogey, not par.
2. The tee shot in the fairway is the most important shot.
3. Emphasize approach putting and getting down in two from inside 30 yards off the green.
4. Par all of the par 5s, half the par3s, and half the par 4s.
5. You have a good swing. Put extra attention on your short game.

Note: If you are the verge of breaking any of these landmark scores but just can't seem to get over the hump, investigate your game to find the one shot that if improved would save three strokes. Then get a lesson to fix it.

### **23. Elevated Tees**

When hitting from an elevated tee, the usual advice is to take one less club for every 50 feet of elevation. It's better to do the opposite. Take more club and punch the ball toward the green with your pitching stroke (E-3). This shot keeps the ball low and gets it on the green quicker. A low shot that is off line won't drift as far away from the green as a higher shot will, and if there is wind, the ball won't be blown off course as far as a shot with higher flight.

### **24. Laying Up**

Play golf boldly. Challenge the golf course with the skills you have. On the other hand, you have to pick your battles. Laying up means avoiding distant trouble. For example, if a par-3 hole has water on the right and rear, and a bunker on the left, consider hit-ting short of the green and chipping on. If you're a good chipper you'll get more 3s than 4s, and never a 5 regardless.

The same is true from the fairway. Playing short when the green is fraught with hazards saves you strokes in the long run. The farther away the green is the wiser it is to lay up.



## 25. You Gotta Know Your Limitations

The last thing we want to do is get lured by the scorecard into playing shots we can't play well. The length of the hole we are about to play can do just that—encourage us to hit shots beyond our capability in order to get home.

Figure out what is the maximum distance you can achieve reliably in two shots, one from the tee and one from the fairway, and build your game around that distance. If the hole is longer than that, and we're talking about long par-4 holes, avoid straining to get on the green in two. Play to your maximum reliable distance and chip on to have a par putt and a bogey at most.

Playing this way will put fewer double-bogey on your card, and a few more pars.

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## H. Practice and Improvement

You do have to spend time practicing to get good. But remember we took up golf to play it. Make that your focus. Practice informs play, not the other way around.

There are three reasons to practice: to learn a skill, to maintain a skill, and to correct mistakes. When you hit balls, be very clear about which one you're doing.

If there are drills you like to do that have led you to improvement, do not stop doing them once you achieve your goal. What got you there is what keeps you there. Even concert pianists practice their scales every day.

### 1. Repeat Ability

A number of years ago I read the most honest piece on golf improvement I have ever found. It was written by PGA pro Bob Madsen. Bob gave me [permission to reprint](#) it on my blog, and I will summarize it here.

Doing anything well is based on being able to it repeatedly. We're not looking for iso-

lated success, but consistent success, Madsen called it "repeat ability."

And how do get repeat ability? Madsen says, "Here is the recipe. Find something you know you can do and do lots and lots of it. Then, go for a LITTLE, tiny bit more. If you want more repeat ability so you can dazzle your friends and really leave the golf course refreshed, practice succeeding. Succeed over and over and over again."

You have to earn it your success. Madsen says, "You've got to work your way up. You've got to earn consistency. It is well worth the effort."

### 2. Your Scoring Potential

Play a round where you can hit a mulligan whenever you make a seriously bad\* shot. Play your mulligan and pick up your first shot. By doing this, you get rid of your bad shots and play a round with only the average or better ones. The score you get is an indication of your scoring potential.

You might be surprised at how low of a score is within your reach. A round like this makes clear what improvements are needed to shoot scores like that for real.

If a particular mulligan isn't much better than your first try, you need to work on that particular shot. If your mulligans are generally much better, you just need to learn to hit your second shot first. That is a matter of gaining confidence in what you do.

\* When I say "seriously bad," I mean it. The more honest you are with your mulligans the more information this experiment will give you.

### 3. Mental Practice

When you go to the range to practice, think of it as both a mind range and a driving range. Develop your mind as well as your technique. Take as many practice swings as you like until you feel you are performing your technique properly. Then pick a target and visualize a shot. Remember to aim yourself! Now turn

off your thinking mind as you step up to the ball. With that feeling of quiet confidence (B-1), swing the club. This is mind training.

#### **4. Targeted Short Game Practice**

A good short game is essential to playing well, but there is so little time to learn all the skills there are. The solution is to learn only the skills you need.

If you play a variety of courses, you know that each course requires a different kind of short game. Shots you find yourself hitting on course A are not the ones you have to hit on course B. The solution is to make note of those shots and learn a short game for each course.

For example, course A features par 4s that you don't always reach in two. To get your par, you have to chip on from about twenty yards and sink the putt. Sometimes the pin is in front and sometimes the pin is in back, so you have to learn how to hit a long chip that stops and a long chip that runs.

Sometimes the fringe near to the green can be tightly mown on one course and, another can have two-inch rough. Learn how to chip from each type of lie.

Many courses have greens that are raised slightly from the playing surface instead of being level with it. Learn how to chip onto a green that is a foot or two above where the ball is lying.

And so on. Spend what little time you have learning shots you know you'll have to hit instead of skills in general. What if you play a new course and your short game isn't up to the task? Make a note of the new shots you need to know and go learn them. That's one thing that makes golf so much fun.

#### **5. Hitting the Ball Straight**

If a slice or a hook is giving you fits, or even an unwanted fade and draw, you can fix it by taking a careful inventory of what it is you're doing. Go through the following sections in this order to diagnose the problem. Once

you've figured out what the error is, correcting it is pretty easy to do.

Orienting Your Hands (B-3)

Is Your Clubface Square? (C-10)

The Handle Leads the Clubhead (A-5)

Ball Position (B-6)

The Center of the Clubface (C-5)

#### **6. Hitting the Ball in the Right Direction**

Once you are hitting the ball straight (H-5), see:

Aiming Yourself (B-7)

Aim Your Swing (A-2)

#### **7. Patching Holes**

1. Find the most glaring deficiency in your game and get a lesson in how to fix it. Practice until you have that hole patched up, then identify the next one and get it fixed. And so on. One at a time.

2. After the round is over make a note of the shots you hit poorly. The next time you practice, practice those shots so you have them under control for the next time you play.

#### **8. Random Practice**

One way to practice is to hit ball after ball of the same shot. Repetition. When you keep going after you start making good shots, the quality of your shotmaking can decline because your mind gets dulled by the excess repetition of what researchers call block practice.

A better approach is to switch to something entirely different after you have made those first few good shots. Give your mind a new problem to solve. When you've solved it, move on to a third thing, then back to the first one and so on. This is called [random practice](#). It is more in line with how our brain interacts with the world, and is closer to how golf is played—each new shot is different, and you get only one chance at it.

Don't get me wrong. This does not mean you don't need to hit a particular shot lots of

times to get good at it. You do (H-1). I mean don't try to learn how to hit a fade with your 5-iron by hitting 100 of them in a row. You can have some short term success with that approach, but have you ever gotten into a groove and hit one good shot after another and thought "Now I've got it!" and after you stop for a few minutes and try it again you're back where you started?

By changing shots often your mind stays fresh because it always has a new task to work on. This allows your concentration to stay engaged, which makes practice more effective.

### **9. Hitting a Plateau**

If you have reached a plateau in your game and just aren't getting any better, you have most likely reached the limit of your understanding of what golf is. You need a new conception of what is possible. It's time to learn how to play a new game. Any good teaching pro can take you there.

One thing that will help you is to play with better players so you can see what better play is. Watch what they do that you don't, then find out how to do what they do.

### **10. Have a Playing Lesson**

After you have basic skills under control, that is, the ball goes where you intend most of the time, you get better by learning shots. Instead of getting lessons on swing technique, get lessons hitting different shots, especially ones in the short game. The more different shots you can hit, the more solutions you will have for whatever problems the course throws at you.

So during the lesson, go out on the course, set up a shot you're having particular trouble with, and say to the pro, "What shot should I hit from here, and how do I hit it?" You can cover five or six different shots each time and they will be the most valuable lessons you ever had.

### **11. Long Game Practice**

Whenever you hit a bucket of balls, half of your time should be spent on practicing a specific thing. Just working on your swing isn't specific. Work on your tempo. Work on a smooth takeaway. Work on not getting your right hand take control. Work on keeping your clubface square. Etc. Find something specific and work on it. Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day. Work on one piece of your swing at a time, and eventually it will all come together. Trying to get it all figured out at once just won't work.

As far as the clubs you hit goes, hit mainly 7-, 8-, 9-irons and the pitching wedge. These are the scoring clubs from the fairway. Hit a driver every now and then, never more than two in a row. I mean it! After two drives, put the club down, no matter how the shots came out. This is where you practice your pitching game, too. Don't neglect it.

If you know how, hit a few fades and draws, but don't get carried away. And if they aren't working, stop and do something else—like getting a lesson on how to hit them.

Hit a few high shots. Hit a few low shots. If you're on a grass tee, give yourself a bad lie a couple of times and hit out of it.

Do not be shy about teeing up every ball when practicing irons. By taking the ground out of play you give yourself one big thing less to worry about so you can focus more on your swing.

### **12. Putting Practice**

Practice your stroke, and 2- to 4-foot putts at home; practice approach putts and green-reading on the practice green. Don't practice 6- to 8-footers. All you do there is practice missing.

Practice putting with one ball, wherever you are. This prevents stress on your back, since you don't stand bent over for so long hitting ball after ball from the same spot.

At the practice green, hit a particular putt only one time; never hit a do-over. You only

get one chance on the course, so train your mind to take each putt seriously, even in practice. Hit mostly straight-in putts. Hit breaking putts only while practicing green reading.

Practice short putts by placing a water bottle in the hole. Hitting something that is there (a bottle) is much easier than hitting something that isn't there (a hole). Frequent practice hitting the bottle trains your unconscious mind to respond to the hole as if there were a bottle there even when there isn't.

At home, practice contacting the ball on the sweet spot (F-1). That contact has its own sound and feel. Hit short putts, hit long putts—use your 40-foot stroke to hit the ball against a backstop—to get used to contact-ing the sweet spot with strokes of different lengths. In addition, practice to maintain the feeling of the basic rhythm of your stroke.

### 13. Chipping Practice

Practice chipping with one ball. Drop the ball, pick a target, and chip to it. Now pick up your putter and go putt out, just like you do on the course. Chipping is about getting up and down. Don't practice the up part without practicing the down part, too. Besides, nothing inspires you to become a better chipper than by having to hit six-foot putts after a lousy chip.

Practice chipping to holes at different distances until you get up and down four times in a row. Chip from different lies by just giving the ball a toss and chipping from where it ends up.

### 14. Lower Your Handicap by Five Strokes!

Often you'll see this headline on the cover of a golf magazine: "Lower your handicap by five strokes!" And then an article tells you just what to do. Except similar handicaps are not created equal. Two people with the same handicap might need to improve in different ways to lose five strokes.

After every round, write down every stroke you took, hole by hole, and isolate the shots that cost you strokes needlessly. Then look at those strokes closely. For example, if one of your problems is chipping, is it because you don't make good contact, or you seldom get the distance right, or you have one chip shot you hit every time but which poorly serves the great variety of chips you are called on to hit?

Or from the fairway, are you missing greens mainly to the left, or to the right, or short, or is there no pattern?

Whatever they are, identify and solve *your* problems, not what someone who wrote a magazine article thinks your problems are.

### 15. Allocating Your Practice Time

You might have read about the ideal way to allocate your time at the range between long game, short game, and putting. And every time you read something, it's different from what you read earlier.

Actually, it's pretty simple. Give each phase equal time. If you have an hour to spend, hit balls (including a few pitches) for twenty minutes, chip for twenty minutes, and putt for twenty minutes. You need to be equally good at all three phases of the game. And notice that this breakdown puts you around the green for forty minutes. That's how it should be.

[Within this framework, practice the shots you hit well, to maintain your skill, as well as shots that have been troubling you lately, to get better at them \(H-24\).](#)

If you want to get deep into practice, look at this [professional practice plan](#) written by PGA pro Neil Wilkins (on the landing page, click the Practice Plan link). Adapt it to your needs, do it twice a week, and watch your scores go down. Note: working through even a reduced-size variation of this plan takes much longer than one hour.

## 16. Practice at Home

No one ever got good at anything without practicing every day. You might have heard Ben Hogan's famous line, "Every day you don't practice is one day longer before you get good." Visit the range to correct yourself and improve. Practice at home every day so you don't forget what to do.

Practice slow-motion swings, feeling the movement of the club and your body's response to it. Make some pitching and chipping strokes, emphasizing brushing the ground with the sole of the club. Stroke a few putts toward a marker against a back-stop. Hit a few four-foot putts, and a few that would go 40 feet, all meeting the ball on the sweet spot. All of this takes just a few minutes, but that's enough.

## 17. Learn to Hit Your Driver

You get so much advice (even from me) about leaving your driver home and teeing off with a fairway wood because the driver is so hard to hit well. That's good advice for a while, but why not learn how to hit the darn thing?

The problem with a driver is that it's the most unforgiving club in your bag. Any swing flaws you get away with using a 7-iron come out front and center with the big dog. So it's not so much learning how to hit this club as it is learning a good swing. That's what lessons are for. (Hint.)

To develop your driver swing, work with it along with a 9-iron. Warm up with the iron until you are hitting solid shots one after the other (If you can't do this, you're not ready for the driver, are you?) Then hit three or four drives. Take a break, then start up again with more 9-irons, maybe four or five, then a few drives. Repeat many times.

The reason for the 9-iron is that you don't put a distance swing on it, just like you never want to do with your driver. But if you only hit your driver, you'll start trying to hit it as far as you can, which is a major reason why you can't hit the driver in the first place.

One more thing? Please do not be seduced by articles in golf magazines about how to add 30 yards to your drive. If your driving is fine right now, you don't need that advice. If your driving is not fine, that article won't help you. That's what lessons are for. (Hint for the second time.)

## 18. Repeat a Golf Lesson

Say you had a golf lesson at the end of which you were hitting the ball pretty well. Then in a week or so, in spite of practicing, your improvement disappeared. What to do? Ask the pro to go over it again.

No teacher will think there's something wrong with you because you didn't get it first time. Actually, the pro will be pleased with you because finally here is someone who really wants to learn.

Truth be told, no one gets it the first time. Only the ones who aren't proud too admit that become better golfers.

## 19. Learning a New Short Game Shot

The first task in learning a new short game shot is to get the ball flight you want and to have the ball behave the way you want it to upon landing. With pitching, for example, learn to loft the ball onto the green—anywhere on the green—and roll out gently.

The second task is learning how to hit the ball in the direction you want it to go. Learn to hit a pitch shot at the flag, for example, instead of just getting the ball on the green.

The third task is learning to hit the ball the distance you want it to go. Learn to hit the pitch to plus or minus five yards of the distance to the flag.

[The best way to discover a new short game shot is by having a playing lesson. Go out on the course with your teaching pro, drop a ball in a spot where you have trouble, and ask what shot to hit from here. Odds are it will be something you would never have thought of yourself.](#)

## 20. What Every Good Golfer Can Do

Here are skills every good golfer has. How many of them do you have?

- [Hit an intentional fade](#)
- [Hit an intentional draw](#)
- [Hit with the ball below your feet](#)
- [Hit with the ball above your feet](#)
- [Hit from an uphill lie](#)
- [Hit from a downhill lie](#)
- [Hit the ball higher than normal](#)
- [Hit the ball lower than normal](#)
- Hit the ball to a 9-iron distance with your 8-iron and 7-iron
- [Hit out of a fairway bunker](#)
- [Hit out of a greenside bunker](#)

## 21. How I Learned to Chip

Since I don't hit every green (who does?) I decided there were pars for the having if I could become good at chipping. Now it's not that I didn't know how to chip, but my chipping was rather indifferent because it was more guesswork than anything else.

So, I signed up for a chipping lesson. At the very start I said to the pro, "Let's pretend I've never hit a chip shot before and that I have no idea what to do. Teach me from the ground up." He broke down the stroke step by step, and showed me which clubs to use, when, and why. I took careful notes after the lesson was over.

I practiced hard for the next three months, learning how to play the stroke the way the pro taught me and calibrating my chipping game. I am now a very good chipper.

Sometimes it pays to stop doing something the way you think it should be done, and start over to learn how to do it the right way.

## 22. Swing Without A Ball

Swinging the golf club and hitting the golf ball should be the same things, but for most of us they're not. It will serve you well to make frequent swings without a ball in front of you so you can focus on what you're supposed to

be doing with the club without being distracted by a ball.

Here's what Cary Middlecoff had to say:

*"I can factually state on the basis of personal experience that practicing the full swing with no ball there to hit can be at least as valuable as actually hitting practice shots. What this does is facilitate a free release through the hitting segment of the swing."*<sup>3</sup>

Some of those swings should be in slow motion as well. About half speed will do. That enables you to feel the fine points of your swing that you want to perfect. Test: can you make three *identical* slow-motion swings in a row?

## 23. Building a Game

Practice the Nutshell, and items highlighted in red. Apply what you learned by going through the shot types below in the listed order and spending a year getting very good at each one.

- Irons (7-PW)
- Chipping
- Driving
- Putting
- Pitching

In five years you will have become a good golfer for the rest of your life. Do we have a deal?

## 24. What Shots Should You Practice?

[There's just too much to practice in this sport. With the limited time you have, practice only the shots you really need to hit.](#)

[When you finish a round, look at your scorecard to review the holes you parred, and the holes on which you got a double bogey or worse. Write down every shot you took on these holes. You will see patterns.](#)

[1. Practice the shots that help you make pars. These are your scoring shots, which you need to maintain or even improve.](#)

[2. Practice the shots that led to the higher hole scores. If you need to, get a lesson to learn how to hit them.](#)

You shoot lower scores in part by hitting your good shots more often and by hitting fewer poor ones. This practice strategy takes you in that direction.

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## I. Game Support

### 1. Don't Play Faster, Play More Efficiently

Slow play. Need I say more? A foursome with an open course ahead shouldn't take more than four hours to play eighteen holes. **A few seconds saved by everyone doing little things efficiently on every hole or before every shot add up significantly over eighteen holes.** No one is asking you to rush—just to be more efficient.

Take clubhead covers off and leave them off. Fiddling with them takes time. Don't worry, clubheads without covers won't suffer any damage being carried around the course in your cart.

Know where everything in your bag is so you don't have to poke around every time you need something. You should know where you keep tees, golf balls, ball markers, etc., are in so you can get to them without delay.

Play from the right set of tees (G-7).

When someone is teeing off and it's your turn next, be standing beside the tee box, ball, tee, and club in hand, ready to go, rather than way over there by your cart.

Be realistic about how far you hit the ball. Don't wait for the group ahead of you to clear if you really can't hit into them. On the tee, consider letting shorter hitters tee off first (if they can leave their egos at home).

From the fairway, when someone is hitting and you're next, begin your pre-shot routine when that person hits their ball instead of waiting until after their shot has hit the ground. In other words, *be ready*.

You get one (1) practice swing (G-10).

Recreational golf is a social game. Have your conversations, when you are walking,

and not when the person you want to talk to is getting ready for their shot.

After you play your shot, clean your club and put it back in the bag only if you are waiting for someone else to hit. Otherwise, start walking right away, carry your club, and put it away when you get to your ball. If you're riding in a cart, get in the cart with your club and go.

If you have hit the ball five times and it's not on the green, pick up your ball and drop it on the green when you get there. If you have hit the ball eight times and it is still not in the hole, pick it up and cease play on that hole.

When looking for a ball that might have gone into high grass, remember that the ball is always 20 yards closer to where you hit it from than you want to believe it is.

If someone else's ball might be lost, play your ball first, then go help them look.

When you get to the green, put your bag or cart on the side of the green nearest the next tee.

Read your opening putt as soon as you get on the green instead of waiting until it is your turn to putt.

Don't spend too much time reading the green. Your first impression is most likely correct. Don't spend time tweaking the alignment mark on your ball, especially if the putt is a long one for which distance is much more important than line.

After your approach putt, putt out instead of marking. Mark your ball only if you would be standing in someone's line when you hit yours.

Falling behind the group ahead of you? To catch up, the first two players to hole out should go to the next tee and tee off, leaving the other two to putt out and handle the pin for each other.

If a faster group is coming up behind you, let them through in this manner: Your group tees off, then waits for the following group. That group tees off. Stay at the tee box until

that group has hit their second shots. Then your group may start down the fairway.

It comes down to this. Paying your green fees does not give you the privilege of holding up the course behind you by playing at any pace you choose. Some courses have marshals who can ask you to leave if you're a slowpoke. A kinder way to look at it is, by giving back a bit of what we think we might be entitled to, everyone benefits from the overall good that's created.

## 2. What's In Your Bag?

The rules let you carry fourteen clubs, but there is no requirement that you do so. Every club needs to earn its way into your bag.

You need a putter, no question about that. (How about two—one that is toe-balanced, for approach putts and one that is face-balanced, for short putts?)

The longest club should be the longest club you can routinely hit off a tee and into the fairway. That might not be your driver, or even a fairway wood. Pick the club that works. (G-2)

The next club should be the longest club with which you can hit off the ground and get the ball in the air. From there, fill in down to your pitching wedge as you see fit.

You need a sand wedge, but add other wedges only when it is clear you have a need for them and you have learned, through practice, how to use them effectively.

Give some thought to carrying a left-handed club (a 9-iron is a good choice) when playing a course with deep bunkers or lots of trees. It prevents you from having to do something weird when a right-handed stance is not possible.

An option for a sand wedge is a [Ben Hogan Sure-Out](#). You can pitch with it, hit it out of bunkers, and that huge amount of metal will not be denied when hitting out of thick rough or weeds.

Try playing with a small set once in a while. Because you have to manufacture shots and

think carefully about what you're doing, this is a fun way to play. See what you can do with this set of eight clubs:

- Driver or 3-wood
- 5-wood
- 24° hybrid
- 6-iron
- 8-iron
- Pitching wedge
- Sand wedge
- Putter

## 3. The Grips on Your Clubs

The grips on your clubs should always be clean and have a tacky feel. Grips like that stick to your hands so you don't have to hold on so tightly, allowing you to have a light grip pressure. Wash them with warm, soapy water before you play. And while you're at it, clean the clubfaces.

Put new grips on your clubs every year. It's cheap and it pays off.

## 4. The USGA

The United States Golf Association (USGA) is the governing body in the United States for rules of the game in regard to tournament golf. It is not, however, in charge of your golf.

1. The handicapping system was designed to equalize play between individuals of varying skill. In tournaments, this is important. But if you never play in tournaments, there is no reason for you to establish a USGA handicap. And playing for a handicap when there is no reason to can make the outing a lot less fun. Instead, establish a "hole" handicap to measure your skill. This means for on many holes out of 18 do you play your best golf—10, 14, something else? A hole handicap measures both your technical consistency and your mental stamina. So if you're a 16-hole golfer, that's pretty good. If you're an 11-hole golfer, you have some work to do.

2. In 2016, the USGA ban on anchored putting became effective. Even though anchored putting had been around for years



without anyone being bothered by it, when major championships started being won by pros who anchor, that was too much for the USGA. But you are a recreational golfer. It's *your golf*. You own it. If you want to anchor your putter, especially if non-anchored putting makes your back hurt, go ahead. Heck, you can anchor your driver if you want to and I won't say a word.

3. The Rules. The Rules tell you how the game is played. Play by them if you want to; I recommend it (except for anchored putting). If you want to hedge the rules to your advantage, or just ignore them, fine with me. It's your golf. But if you moved your ball out of an old ball mark on the green to get a smoother putt, the putt you sank afterward was for double bogey, not the par you thought it was.

The official rule book, however, is complicated and arcane. If you play by these [Rules of Recreational Golf](#), you will play an honest game and have a good time.

4. As for Rules of Etiquette, I am with the USGA all the way. There are no exceptions if you want to play golf with me a second time.

### 5. Statistics

There are so many statistics in golf now. Which ones tell you what you really need to know about your game? What should you keep track of when you play? The answer is, none of the ones you've heard about, like fairways hit, greens in regulations, number of putts, you name it.

This stat is the only one you need to keep as you play: **how many strokes did it take to get the ball on the green or green-high?** That's it. Just that one number. Include penalty strokes in the count.

The secret to low scoring is to get the ball up to the green as quickly as possible. Get that number down 42 and you should be breaking 90. A 38 means you threaten 80 if your short game and putting are good enough.

For the rest of it, your hole score minus that number shows how you did around the green. Now you have two numbers, and that's all you need to know about the state of your game.

### 6. Physical Maintenance During the Round

Four hours or more is a long time to be engaged in an outdoor athletic activity. You have to take care of yourself to be as strong at the finish as you were at the start. Bring water with you and sip a few ounces on every tee. Research has shown dehydration causes deterioration in physical skills. Fill your container up again at the turn if you have to. Also have something to eat while you play. Trail mix with nuts and candied fruit is a good choice. Have a handful every few holes.

Stretch every four holes or so to stay limber during the round. You can stiffen up without knowing it. Stretch again after the round is over to warm down so you don't get stiff.

### 7. Iron Distances

Your irons are your scoring clubs. It is imperative that you know how far, really, you carry each one. An easy way to figure that out is to have a session with a launch monitor. Measuring your driver, 5-, 7-, and 9-irons should be enough. You can interpolate your other irons.

Put this information to the test by going to the course and dropping balls beside sprinkler heads with distance labels. Take only one shot from wherever it is. It is likely that you will have to revise your calibrated distances downward a few yards. Now you have your true playing distances.

### 8. How Long Is Your Step?

Sometimes you need to step off distances. The tees on a par-3 hole are not beside the stone marker buried in the tee box at the official distance. Your ball in the fairway is at some distance from the nearest sprinkler head.

Taking a step that you *think* is a yard long isn't good enough. Here's how to do it right.

Go to a regulation baseball field. Walk from third base to home, counting your steps. Walk naturally; do not try to walk with a measured stride. Do this several times to make sure your steps are consistently long. Divide the number of steps into 30 (90-foot base paths are 30 yards long). The result is the length of your step, in yards.

If your normal step isn't one yard long, you might want to make a chart to tuck into your golf bag showing how many yards one step, two steps, etc. are so you don't have to do math when you're playing. There's enough to think about already!

## 9. Good Manners

Good manners are based on showing respect for other people and not calling attention to yourself. If you don't do the first one very well, take up bowling. If the second one is hard for you, get into show business.

- Do not make noise or move around when someone near you is making their stroke.
- If a ball you hit is heading for players in front of you, yell, "Fore!"
- Make sure greenskeepers ahead of you are aware that you are about to hit.
- Check the ball before you hit it to make sure it is yours.
- Leave cell phones turned off. Give your attention to the people you're playing with.
- Be aware of where everyone else's ball is so you don't accidentally get in the way of their shot.
- Replace your divots in the fairway.
- Repair ball marks you make on the green by pushing the edges of the gouge toward the center—and repair one other.
- Lay the flagstick down on the green. Do not drop it.
- Tend the pin by pulling it out, then resting it back on bottom of the cup liner but against the back side of the hole. Stand at an arm's length from the hole. If the wind is blowing,

hold the flag so it does not flap and disturb the person who is putting.

- Do not step on the line of another player's putt.
- Do not chip or putt until other players have marked their ball and removed it from the green.

## 10. Avoiding Low Back Pain

Golf, like any other sport, can lead to injuries. Though not the only injury that occurs, the most common injury in golf involves low back pain (LBP). In recreational golf, LBP is caused mainly by excess stress placed on the lower back because of mechanical flaws in the swing. There are several steps recreational golfers can and should take to avoid this injury, which can affect all other aspects of a person's life.

The first step is to narrow the angle between the shoulder line and hip line at the end of the backswing. A large "X factor" places unnecessary stress on the lower back for the sake of hitting one less club into the green. It's not worth it.

Next, you can take a more upright stance, (B-4), reducing stress generated by bending over too much.

Third, adopt a finish position that has your back upright, and not bent backward or to the side.

These three adjustments alone make the golf swing much easier on your lower back. But that's not all there is to it. You have to be in shape. Golf is an athletic activity. The muscles that support the back need to be appropriately strengthened, and be flexible, too. Do these [five strengthening exercises](#) and these [five flexibility exercises](#) regularly.

Before the round, warm up properly (G-16). As has been said before, stretch on very fourth tee during the round to keep yourself from stiffening up as time goes by. When the round is over, stretch briefly as a warm down so you don't stiffen up when you suddenly become inactive.

This [comprehensive but somewhat technical article](#) from the medical literature explains in detail the relation between golf and LBP. It would serve you well to read it.

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## J. Quotes to Live By

“The average golfer’s problem is not so much a lack of ability as it is a lack of knowing what he should do.”

Ben Hogan, *Five Lessons*

“To improve your golf the first stage is not necessarily to change your swing, but to learn to do your best swing more often.”

Vivien Saunders, *The Golf Handbook for Women*

“It is true that if you cannot putt you cannot win, for no hole is won until the ball is down—but good scores are only made possible by good play up to the green.”

Percy Boomer, *On Learning Golf*

“I can outhit many men, much to their embarrassment, for suddenly they are pitting...their strength against mine. That’s foolish. They aren’t competing with my strength; they’re competing with the efficiency of my swing.”

Mickey Wright, *Play Golf the Wright Way*

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1. Lee, William F., *Music Theory Dictionary*.
2. Alexander, F. Matthias, *The Use of the Self*.
3. Middlecoff, Cary, *The Golf Swing*.

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