

Teaching Theories of the Game's Greats

When golf began there were few teachers, players learned on their own or caddies acted as instructors of the game. The "St. Andrews swing" - named after the home of golf - was the predominant technique employed up to the 20th century. It consisted of a long, flat, swing of the club around the shoulders and a slashing action derived from an ultra loose grip, with a huge swaying body turn away from and through the ball, and a slinging motion of the clubhead through the ball with the wrists, hands, and shoulders. It was very much a "hitting" action rather than a "swinging" action. Like the way Arnold Palmer hits at the ball and Ernie Els swings at it. The "St. Andrews swing" evolved in good measure as a result of the clubs used in that time, which were very shallow faced with supple wooden shafts, and difficult to manipulate. The ball was also not elastic as it is today, but made of leather stiffed with feathers and later, hard gutta percha.

Modern golf techniques really began in the early 1900's with Harry Vardon, the great English champion. He was credited with popularizing the standard way to hold the club - the "Vardon grip." He also began to swing the club more upright, rather than around his shoulders, and had a tempo and grace that were the envy of his peers. He could hit fairway woods consistently 15 feet from the hole, and was so accurate off the tee he was very rarely in trouble. He won the British Open six times, still the record, and wrote an instructional book called *The Complete Golfer* in 1905. Vardon was the bridge between the old ways and the new.

Bobby Jones built on Vardon's techniques and was the ultimate swinger of the club for his times. His timing and tempo were superb, and he was also a good teacher. In the 1930's after he retired, he made a series of instructional films for Warner Brothers that are still classics, and have been aired on the Golf Channel. Jones wrote a book called *Bobby Jones on Golf* in 1966, which summed up his life experiences with the game. He was able

to convey the methods well, without a lot of technical mumbo jumbo. He also spoke to the mental side of the game and something called "courageous timidity" (a term he borrowed from Harry Vardon's contemporary, J.H. Taylor) which is the courage to keep trying in the face of bad luck and disappointment, and the timidity to appreciate and appraise the dangers of each stroke and to make wise decisions.

In the 1930's and 40's Percy Boomer brought more great insight into the golf swing. He said that "Every good shot is the outcome of a satisfactory psychological-physical relationship. It is this relationship that gives control and consistency." He also said that "You must be mindful but not thoughtful as you swing," which means when you are playing have one simple thought in mind, like "Tempo" or "Turn" and not a million things at once. The practice range is the place to be "thoughtful" - not the course. He also said that a "good golfer feels his shot through his address," meaning that when you place your feet on the ground in preparation for the shot, your body settles into place as well, and you are getting ready to "go," like a boxer having the proper footwork necessary to throw a powerful punch. Boomer was famous also for his image of swinging inside a barrel to create the sensation of the proper body and shoulder turn.

Ernest Jones was another teacher of that era, who preached "swinging the clubhead." What he meant by this is to concentrate on the clubhead itself, since it is what actually makes the ball go anywhere. Thinking of swinging the clubhead rather than worrying about what all the body parts are supposed to do provides the simplest and fastest way for a golfer to reach his or her potential. Brute strength means nothing if the club cannot be delivered to the ball in the proper way. Modern teachers such as Jim Flick advocate the same message - concentrating on the clubhead as the instrument that makes the ball go where we want it to. Ernest Jones also proved that two healthy legs are not

mandatory for playing good golf. After losing a leg in World War I, he was able to shoot in the 70's with an artificial leg.

In the 1940's and '50's came Ben Hogan, one of the greatest ball strikers the game has ever known. His books *Power Golf* (1948) and *Five Lessons: The Modern Fundamentals of Golf* (1957) were highly successful, if perhaps too technical for the average golfer to grasp and use productively. From Hogan we got the idea of "swing plane" being so important to a golf motion. That is, the angle in which the club goes backwards and then forward through the ball should be almost identical if the golfer is to find consistent success. To quote Mr. Hogan, "It is utterly impossible for any golfer to play good golf without a swing that will repeat." He also believed that there is no reason why any golfer with reasonable physical coordination can't shoot in the 70's if he or she only practices the proper golf moves.

Jack Nicklaus wrote his book *Golf My Way* in 1974 and stressed many of the fundamentals his own teacher, Jack Grout, engrained in him: 1) the grip, 2) the set up (for example, with a 5-iron stand 20 inches from ball with a 12 inch wide stance, with a driver 30 inches, 15 inch stance), 3) steady head 4) proper footwork 5) full extension back and through the ball, and 6) quiet hands. Jack also said that tempo + rhythm = timing, and that this creates good shots because your sequencing of movements has to be correct. He also covers physical conditioning in the book, the short game, and the aspect of how to practice properly.

Tiger Woods, perhaps the best who has ever played the game, authored his own book, *How I Play Golf*, in 2001. It covers all aspects of the game - full swing, short game, and mental approach. It also has wonderful full swing shots of Tiger that people 100 years from now will study the way we study the swings of Bobby Jones or Harry Vardon today.

There are other theories to playing the game. You may or may not have heard of is the "Natural golf" system, which was inspired by the late Moe Norman. He was one of the purest ball strikers the game has ever known, but he was an eccentric, and Canadian, so most people have never heard of him. He spoke of "feeling" the swing, and "owning" it. This aspect of "feel" is a common thread with most teachers, and no better examples of them can be found than Bob Toksi (a member of the USGTF, by the way), Jim Flick, and the late Davis Love, Jr., who all talk about "feel" as one of golf's bedrock truisms, but one most golfers don't really grasp fully.

There is also a philosophy of making mechanics the keystone of the swing, which is absolutely essential, but I believe sometimes players pursue this at the expense of feel and the intuition required to play half shots and creative shots.

For the particular needs of women, Annika Sorenstam, Nancy Lopez, Judy Rankin, and Vivien Saunders all offer good instructional books. Women can achieve just as much success playing golf as men can, but there are general differences in strength and physique that cannot be dismissed lightly. I also believe women are generally more open to suggestions for improving their game, whereas "machismo" and stubbornness prevent a lot of men from realizing their potential.

The Short Game

If I were to tell you one thing to make you a better golfer it would be to practice the short game - pitching, chipping, and putting, since statistics show that 65% of all shots are taken from inside 100 yards, with 35-40% of those shots involving putting. That is why touring pros spend so much time working on their short game. They know that "scoring" is what matters most and not

how far they hit the ball. The short game is its own "game within a game" and Tom Watson (*Getting it Up and Down: How to Save Strokes from Forty Yards and In*), Gary Player (*Bunker Play*), and Raymond Floyd (*From 60 Yards In: How to Master Golf's Short Game*) have all addressed it in their own books. Dave Pelz is today's premier short game guru, most notably working with Phil Mickelson in the last couple of years. In the first sentence of his *Short Game Bible*, he writes: "In golf, how you play inside of 100 yards is the prime determinant of how you score." Believe it. Take lessons from me and I'll help you figure out your own "short game handicap."

Putting is very individualistic, but again, there are certain things all good putter have in common. Dave Pelz goes into a lot of the mechanics of the stroke and things that affect the way the ball travels on the green. Vision is also very important in golf, and the way you focus on the ball effects the way you hit it.