



Stability and Grip Pressure

By Todd Sones

In our previous installment of The Scoring Zone, Todd Sones' enlightening instruction book, he looked at the proper stance and the downswing. This time, he goes deeper into the swing, body stability, and proper grip pressure.

Stable Lower Body and Pivot On Top of the Lead Hip

This element goes hand in hand (so to speak) with the previous one concerning the downswing. Short game shots are upper-body-dominated shots, initiated from the top of the downswing by moving the clubhead first. Students often ask me what the lower body is supposed to do during the swing, and my answer is simple:

respond. You don't want to be actively shifting your lower body back or through. You want to stay stable, but let your legs respond to what your upper body is doing.

When you need to turn your chest back, your hips and thighs won't be frozen. They'll move slightly to accommodate the movement of your upper chest. And when you swing down through the ball, you want to feel like you're pivoting around a post stuck in the ground and coming up through the top of your lead hip.

It's easy to see when this goes wrong. If your tendency is to make an aggressive shift with your lower body toward the target, this will force your

upper body to fall back – and the club will bottom out too early. This is the other "L" death move, "lateral," I mentioned before.

To feel the correct movement, I like to ask students to picture turning and handing a heavy sandbag to somebody in front of them (below), or turning to dump a bucket of water on the ground in front of the ball. Both of those moves require the lower body to provide support and stability – not be super active and moving around.

Grip Pressure Increases Through Impact

The last principle touches on something you've probably heard

talked about before: grip pressure. You've probably heard teachers or players talk about keeping a light grip pressure for feel, or keeping a constant grip pressure throughout the swing.

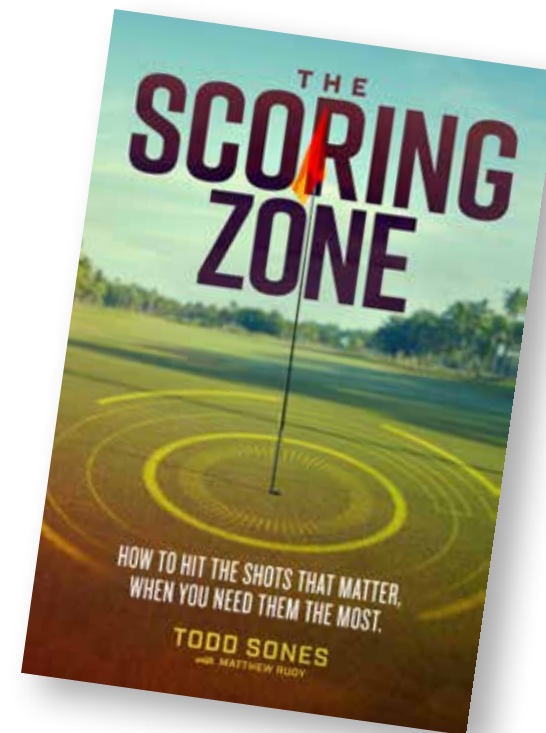
I prefer a different principle, because I think it helps promote the right movements from your arms and wrists through the downswing. It also helps make sure the clubhead is stable and square through impact. Take your normal grip and hold the club in a light-but-controlled tension level, but as you make your short-game swing down through impact, increase your grip pressure.

Most players tend to hold onto the club too tightly at address all the way up to transition, which usually forces them to let go as they strike the

ball, losing control of the clubhead. If you measured your grip tension on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the club almost falling out of your hands and 10 being the club getting crushed in a vice, I'd suggest using 3 tension at address through transition, increasing to 6 or 7 at impact.

This goes against what you might have heard or read about in short game instruction over the years. But after years of teaching and examining my own short game technique, I've come to understand how important this concept is.

A visit from one of my low single-digit handicap players a few years ago is a perfect example of what I'm describing. My student flew in from the East Coast because he had



been having a terrible time with what he described as a case of the chipping yips.

We started the lesson working on the exact fundamentals I've been describing in this column. Even after improving his setup position and

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Bag Toss 1



Bag Toss 2



Bag Toss 3



Loose Grip



Firm Grip



Sink More Putts

By Chad Johansen

Three-putts. Everyone has had them. Everyone hates them. Missing short putts will drive most every golfer absolutely crazy. Now is the time to start thinking about how you can exact more reliable results with your putter from inside eight feet.

Proper Fit

Before we discuss form and technique, it's important to have a putter that fits. It's interesting that most golfers will spend the time and money to get fitted for a driver and irons, but not a putter. The average length of a putter used on the PGA Tour is 34 inches long, a full inch shorter than the first putter Karsten Solheim created for Ping. While we all don't play like Tour pros, the point is that even the best-made putters don't suit everyone, and a brief meeting

with your local PGA professional will make sure your putter has the correct length, lie, loft, and grip for you.

The four main points of one's putting form and technique that can affect your success are face angle, impact point, attack angle, and tempo.

Face Angle

It is very important to have a square face at impact in order to get the ball started on the desired line. Try this simple drill to ingrain square impact. Start with a straight-in, flat line from just four feet out and make several putting strokes without a backstroke. Just push the ball into the hole. This will help you feel the putter face squared up at impact, and you should see every ball rolling into the hole. If you miss to either side it means the putter face was not square.

Impact

The point where the face impacts the ball is crucial to hit solid putts that start online. You have to hit the center of the putter face every time. The "Two Tee Gate" is by far the best drill to make sure you are hitting the center of the putter face. Tiger Woods made this drill famous because he does it every day. Add it to your routine today.

Avoid hitting the tees during your putting stroke, and you will strike the ball with the center of the putter face.

Attack Angle

Attack angle is another key to consistent putting. Too often players make contact with the ball at the bottom of the putter face. This is an indication of too much upstroke at contact. For the best results, your putting stroke

should include a slight rise angle through impact in order for the ball to roll end over end.

Try this drill to improve your attack angle: Stack two poker chips, and make a putting stroke to see if you hit the top poker chip while the bottom chip remains still.

Did you whiff? Happens all the time. That just means you have a too severe rise angle. If both poker chips move it means you hit down on your putts. Make that top poker chip go forward while the bottom one is still and you will start hitting solid putts.

Tempo

As it is with every golf swing, tempo is very important in putting. So many times I see golfers either accelerate too much or decelerate in their putting. Add this drill when you practice putting to improve your tempo.

Try putting four-footers with your eyes closed. This will require you to

focus more on feeling the weight of the putter head as it moves through your stroke. With your eyes closed you will feel the over-acceleration or deceleration.


Great Drills

My favorite drills for putting use the Perfect Putting Line. You will get instant feedback on five different drills designed to improve your putting; it's why I invented the Perfect Putting Aid, and have over 100 players on the PGA Tour that rely on it. Visit www.perfectputtingaid.com for complete details, and get the ball started online and you'll make putts instantly.

Lastly, it's always good to practice putting under pressure. To simulate this element place five tees around a hole and go around the tees twice so you take 10 putts. Start from three feet out and count how many you make from that distance. If you scored a 10 then move to

four feet. Repeat the drill moving out one foot at a time after scoring a perfect 10. Set a goal and practice with pressure. After a few sessions of this drill you won't think twice about sinking a four-footer during your round and more putts will start dropping.

Practice, Practice, Practice

It's no coincidence that the lowest round of your life probably included your best day on the greens. You may not have hit every fairway, but I suspect you sank most of your putts. To experience more great rounds, create a practice routine incorporating drills that involve the four areas discussed above and you will start seeing improved results out on the course. Remember, repetition builds results. 

Chad Johansen is the PGA head professional at Blackberry Oaks Golf Club, and developed the Perfect Putting Aid.





Good vs. Great

What Separates the Elite from the Rest?

By Chris Oehlerking

Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives. Choice, not chance, determines your destiny.”
— Anonymous

In competitive golf, what separates great players from merely good players? All of the professionals on the PGA Tour are highly skilled, but what separates the top one percent from the average Tour player? How have they been able to separate themselves from the field? Why are they so consistent in their performance, and what defines their competitive edge?

A certain level of functional skills, or “hard” skills, are required to be good at any competitive sport. In golf, these hard skills include the various golf strokes: full swing, putting,

and wedging. Good players must be able to make solid contact while also controlling the direction, trajectory, and distance of their shot. Ultimately, they must be able to predict where their ball is going to end up with reasonable accuracy.

What separates great players from merely good players is the “soft” skills that are required to compete at an elite level. Those soft skills include the ability to practice effectively and purposefully, a readiness and eagerness to compete, an understanding of tactics, and the mental fortitude necessary to recovery from adversity.

In 15 years of coaching, one thing I have observed is instructors prioritizing helping students develop a pretty swing. This is choosing style over function, and I will admit that I’ve been in this category myself at times. If a player can consistently

produce results, then there is really no need for them to make a technical change. But swinging the club and playing the game are two different things. A person can be a very good golfer with just the necessary hard skills. But elite, high-achieving competitive golfers must be very disciplined in regard to their preparation, strategy, physical conditioning, mental toughness, and tactical skills.

When a student in our academy is interested in reaching the next level, we examine these areas of their game to help determine where they can gain a competitive edge.

Effective Practice

Great players are more intelligent about what, when, and how they practice. When determining what to practice, they are able to accurately identify the areas of their game that need

improvement. This is done through statistical analysis and reflecting upon rounds that were recently played.

Great players also know how to practice. They have a plan and are specific in their intention. Practice sessions should be divided into specific tasks, and each task should be given full attention. Lastly, great players know how to measure their progress. They can objectively measure their current level of progress in any given situation and adapt their practice plans accordingly.

Most driving ranges are littered with the “scrap and swing” golfer who is mindlessly bashing ball after ball. This is most often a waste of time that won’t accelerate learning. However, an effective practitioner employs intentional strategies that allow the player to measure his/her progress.

Readiness to Compete

When watching professional golf on TV, viewers rarely see the enormous amount of preparation that players

make behind the scenes. This preparation includes practice rounds, note-taking, dialing in their yardage book, deciding upon a strategy for each hole, stocking of the bag with snacks and fluids, gathering appropriate weather gear, selecting equipment for that given course, and management of their time in the pre-round warm-up. It’s a lot more than just showing up and playing.

Mental Skills

The most consistent elite athletes have maturity, wisdom, and the ability to manage their mind in ways that elevate their performances. Top performers are able to get themselves “in the zone,” which is that place where time slows down, alertness is heightened, and they are operating in the present moment. As they move around the course, each shot is a new opportunity.

The best mental practice I’ve been exposed to revolves around the practice of mindfulness. Dr. Arthur Hoffman, a professor at Rush University, trains our

college prep athletes. Their mindfulness practice includes learning how to focus on the present moment while also paying more attention to their experiences. This enables them to more easily let go of disappointments, frustrations, and anger, and helps them learn to not be affected by the self-criticism or self-doubts that inevitably arise. Certainly, these mental skills are necessary to perform at the highest level.

When things are going wrong on the course, and you realize you don’t have your best stuff, great players are able to stop the bleeding and salvage a respectable score. They must have previously considered this scenario and have a plan in place, preferably one written down in their yardage book. This is because losing control on the golf course can cause players to panic, which then leads to losing their presence of mind and ability to access the necessary wisdom in that moment. A player may begin to make poor decisions.

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Effective Practice



Readiness to Compete



Mental



Tactile





Yoga for Golfers

By Anne Connors

The 2019 golf season is quickly approaching. How can you, the golfer, prepare your mind and body to have your best season? Could it be a new golf instructor? The most current hybrid? The latest trendy golf gadget promising a lower score?

Why not make it your own body!

Fitness was traditionally never a concern for golfers, but in the last 10 years, players like Tiger Woods, Rory McIlroy and Jordan Spieth, just to name a few, have proven that, simply said, a fitter body equals a better round of golf.

Yoga can be a big part of your fitness regimen.

When golfers have mobility limitations in their shoulders, mid-back or hips, they compensate with their low backs and knees, which not only hampers play, but often leads to pain and injury. Yoga focuses on balance, alignment and symmetry. It creates space in the body, allowing for greater rotation and increased power.

Incorporating just a few simple yoga poses as a pre-golf warm-up can optimize your physical and mental performance. Here are three – use the photos for proper positioning, and stop if you feel any pain – to get you started:

Better Breathing

An improved breathing technique allows the golfer to “quiet the mind.”

You’ll have more solid balance in your stance, plus greater mobility in the swing itself.

That will, with repetition of the exercise, gain you more stamina and strength, which should result in a more powerful swing – and longer drives – and the ability to last the entire round.

It also adds up to better overall fitness, equaling a reduction in injuries and quicker recovery if you are injured.

The Half-kneeling Torso Twist

This yoga exercise increases torso and shoulder turn over a stable lower body, creating more mobility during the takeaway and finish.



Begin by kneeling with the right knee down and left foot forward. Hold a golf club overhead and lift through the rib cage, holding in your abdominal muscles. Take a breath, then exhale and rotate toward your left leg.

Relax your shoulders and maintain the lift in your arms and

spine. Turn to the front and repeat five to eight times.

Switch sides and repeat.

The Extended Table

This yoga exercise builds core strength so golfers can maintain an athletic posture, creating a more consistent swing.

Begin on all fours and draw your navel toward your spine, providing additional support for your back. Lift your right leg up, the hip pointing toward the floor, with your left arm forward, extending through the fingertips. Exhale while pulling in, and inhale while stretching out.

Repeat five to 10 times, then switch sides and repeat.

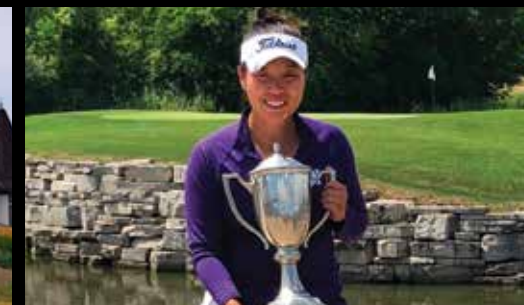


Anne Connors is a Titleist Performance Institute-certified personal trainer and certified Katherine Roberts’ Yoga for Golfers YFG Instructor.

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Club Champion

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average player would probably benefit far more than even the Tour player would. Because to get fitted and have a club that suits their length, lie, shaft, flex, material, and grip size ... those factors make a huge difference for the average golfer to be able to reach their potential."

Another big difference between Tour players and casual golfers is having the time and resources to devote to improving their game. Leadbetter adds, "Players don't have a lot of time to work on their golf swing these days, so to actually fit a club to their particular swing can get really great results. Obviously, Club Champion fitters are the best at it, and with their stores around the country, people have access to all this information."

According to Haney, instruction starts with the most fundamental element of your golf game – equipment. If he's fighting his students' equipment, he can't get a true read of the problems. "If somebody's slicing it or hooking or pulling or pushing it, I want to make sure there's not something in their equipment contributing to that," Haney said. "If you don't get the equipment right first, then you're going to have to over-correct in order to get a ball flight change and you don't want to do that."

Golfers who have experienced the gains and improvements after a fitting rave about the benefits. Gary Lichenstien, who was fit with a TaylorMade driver and Callaway irons, says, "My distance off the tees has increased by 20 yards consistently, on occasion even more. My average score has dropped about four to five strokes on average. I feel over time, I can still pick up a few more strokes."

When Club Champion says you'll add 20 yards off the tee, they mean it. Whether a golfer is looking to buy new clubs or just upgrade his or her current set, Club Champion guarantees that an investment in premium club fitting will improve his or her game. Fittings range from \$80 for wedges to \$350 for an entire bag. Their Perfect Fit Guarantee includes free loft and lie adjustments and a lifetime warranty against manufacturer defects.

Stability and Grip Pressure

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sequencing, he still seemed to yip at impact. I decided to take some closeup video of his hands through impact to see what was going on. When I did, you could see that the handle of the club was literally coming out of his hands at impact. He clearly didn't have control over the clubface as he was contacting the ball.

I asked what he was working on in terms of tension in his hands. He said he was trying to use constant, light grip pressure, as if he was holding a live bird—Sam Snead's classic tip. It's something I had certainly told students earlier in my career.

But the reality of clubface control is more toward a tight grip than a loose, uncontrolled one. I asked my student to firm up his grip pressure through impact, so that he was squeezing at a 7 when the clubhead got to the ball. In a matter of one ball, the yips were gone.

He just needed to feel that control.

The amount you need to increase pressure depends on the kind of shot you have in front of you (page 19). For all shots, you'd start with about a 3 on that 1 to 10 scale. On a putt, you might only increase to a 4. For a driver, you'd increase to an 8. For short game shots, you'd want to increase more for shots that provide more resistance because of the lie. That means a 6 or 7 for a shot from deep grass or from the sand.

Go to a short game practice area and experiment for yourself to find the variables that work the best for you. But the overarching point is that you want to forget about the idea of a consistent, soft grip pressure.

Although it might sound like an oversimplification, I can promise you it isn't. Every miss you experience in the scoring zone comes because of a breakdown in one of these fundamentals. When you have command of them, you're well on your way to building the confidence all great short game players have.

*Todd Sones, author of The Scoring Zone, owns and operates Todd Sones' Impact Golf School at White Deer Run in Vernon Hills. 847-549-8678
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Good vs. Great

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Yet, if you planned prior to this moment, writing down statements and externalizing these thoughts in your yardage book, then you will be better prepared for such moments. Your yardage book should also include positive affirmations, or better yet, reminders that help you get back on track physically and mentally. These reminders can include your favorite go-to weapons, a "plan B" strategy, or even an alternate swing shape or thought. It can be helpful to simply remind yourself of specific cause and effects. For example, when you hook the ball, what is typically the cause of such a ball flight? If you have planned and practiced this scenario beforehand, then at least you will have some comfort in knowing that alternative solutions exist.

Tactical Skills

Many golfers know this concept as "golf course management," but I prefer the phrase "tactical skills" because it's an accurate description of a carefully planned and calculated strategy that resonates more clearly to people. I once heard Hank Haney say that when Tiger Woods was dominating, nobody realized how smart and disciplined he was in devising his strategy for a course.

When creating your plan, you must understand how the course is playing that day and how to effectively use your strengths to minimize the likelihood of you having to hit uncomfortable and low-probability shots. Each shot is its own moment. You have to determine what choices you have, assess risk versus reward, check in with how confident you are with those choices, and then make a decision that weighs probability and circumstance. Once decided, elite players are fully committed to that decision and are OK with the result no matter the outcome.

If you are wishing to upgrade your game to that next level, give these "soft skills" some attention. You will be glad you did.

Chris Oehlerking is the managing partner and senior coach at The Golf Practice, which has three north suburban locations.

Profiles

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Founder Rob Maguire gives credit for the tour's success to the enthusiasm of league members.

"It's been an amazing story that I'm proud to be part of," he said. "We started the tour with the single concept of offering a fun competition that players of all different skill sets could enjoy and work toward owning trophies and gift cards. Today, the league is thriving as we continue to locate the area's best golf courses to host the events; we have five flights so that everyone from a scratch player to a 19-plus handicapper can participate, and with larger participation we've kept the green fees low for all."

Along with individual stroke play tournaments, the tour schedules best-ball competitions and even a team match play Ryder Cup-style event to be played this year at Whistling Straits – site of the 2020 Ryder Cup matches.

"While the concept of the tour originally focused on friendly competition, it became apparent right away that the tour is as much about making friends as it is about competition among friends," McGuire said.

The top 15 players in each local flight, assuming play in at least 50 percent of the season's events, are awarded the opportunity to compete in the National Tour Championship played last year in Hilton Head, S.C. That event pairs Chicago tour members against competitors of other Golfweek Amateur Tours from across the country.

Besides keeping track of scoring averages and points earned for playing in events, the tour keeps players interested year around with newsletters and monthly raffles. "Our players like being engaged with each other even during the offseason," McGuire said.

The popularity of the Chicago tour, in fact, has spawned the Chicago Senior Amateur Tour, open to players 50 and above. This season's venues include Bowes Creek in Elgin, The Preserve at Oak Meadows, and Cantigny in Wheaton.

Membership fees to join the league start at a modest \$100 and include a goodie bag, a national golf magazine subscription and a USGA handicap.

More information on the Chicago Golfweek Amateur Tour is available at www.amateurgolftour.net.

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