

BETTER
Recreational
GOLF

Improve Your Game in the Time You Have

by Bob Jones

(Left-Hander's Edition)

with photographs by
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Fundamentals

Consistency—the Holy Grail of golf. “Just give me a consistent swing,” you say, “and I can play this game.” But I’ll bet you play consistently right now. You might swing the club the same way time after time, and get consistent results, but are they the results you want? What you want is to hit your best shots consistently. To do that, master the following four fundamentals.

The first fundamental is having a calm mind over every shot, which will allow the body to function in the way it has been taught. A tense or agitated mind creates doubt and worry, which prevent your body from performing at its best.

The second fundamental is the setup. A good result comes only from a good start. Your setup can lead you into a good stroke or doom the shot before you’ve even moved the club.

The third fundamental is tempo and rhythm. Golfers of all abilities talk about swinging instead of hitting. We all know that’s what we should do, but how? By finding the best tempo for you, and the rhythm it creates, and sticking to it.

The fourth fundamental is impact. No matter how good your swing looks or feels, it means nothing if it doesn't line up the club-face at impact.

Golf has numerous technical points beyond these fundamentals which cannot be overlooked. Even though your fundamentals are sound, if you have a slice swing, you'll keep slicing. That needs to be corrected, but getting these fundamentals right comes first, and that's not hard to do. Mastering them doesn't require athletic talent or years of practice. It only requires making them part of every practice session for them to soon become habits.

A CALM MIND

We were born with a mind and a body. It's natural for the mind and body to work as one. In medicine, doctors formerly thought that illness meant only the body needed treatment. They now understand that our mental state affects both our illness and our successful recovery. Elite athletes consult sports psychologists to prepare their mind for the rigors of competition in the same way they consult coaches to perfect their physical skills. They know the condition of their mind during competition affects their body's performance.

Percy Boomer mentioned the relation between mind and body in 1946 in his book *On Learning Golf*. Referring to the work of F. Matthias Alexander, Boomer said that no act is purely mental or purely physical, but the result of a "psychophysical union." Boomer noted that when we play golf we must replace thinking, which is subject to the dictates of our emotional condition, with a state of psychophysical union that allows us to apply what we've learned regardless of environmental stresses.

About the same time Boomer published his book, the concept of the connection between mind and body was being developed in Japan by a man named Koichi Tohei. In 1953, Tohei came to Hawaii

to teach the art of Aikido for the first time in the West. He also brought a discipline he called Mind and Body Coordination.

Tohei teaches that when the mind is calm, the mind and body become unified and the flow of a person's *ki*, or living energy, begins to interchange freely with the *ki* of the universe and becomes one with it. At this point, mental and physical tension fall away, and a person can perform to the best of his or her ability.

Tohei established *ki* as the link between mind and body, and created a method whereby any person can learn to unify mind and body at any time. The foundation of this method is a process called *ki testing* which proves whether or not a person is unifying mind and body. His method is fully described in his book, *Ki in Daily Life*.

The application of mind and body coordination, the psycho-physical union, to golf is twofold—in planning the shot we are about to hit, and in hitting it. The application is the same for every shot from putt, to chip, to iron, to drive.

You plan a shot by calming your mind and letting the solution come to you. That way you'll hit shots within your capability, and they'll be shots that work. That makes the game very easy.

Top-level tournament golfers describe this process in their books when they talk about key shots they hit to win important tournaments. They say they looked at the situation until both the right shot and how to hit it became infused in both their mind and their body, so that the shot was successful even before it was struck.

I have my own such stories. Here's one of them.

A few summers ago I hit my tee shot short of the green on a par-3 hole. This green sits on a shelf that slopes sharply downward in front. The ball was five feet below the level of the green and about 30 feet from the pin. I looked the situation over and through no deliberate decision-making process, absorbed it, and thought, "Sand wedge, two feet."

My mind and body shared the knowledge of what to do and performed as one. My body knew (and I'm using the word "knew" quite literally) how to hit the shot so it would end up next to the

pin. As I hit the shot, a feeling of calmness and confidence was strong from address through follow-through. I hit my sand wedge, the ball stopped two feet away, and I tapped in for a par.

You prepare for a shot, then, by visualizing the shot you want to hit. But what is visualization? It is not seeing a movie of what you want the ball to do. Visualization is allowing what you see between yourself and your target to create an impression in your mind that spreads through your body, an impression that carries the exact feeling of how to hit a shot that will get the ball where you want it to go. You can visualize every shot, from drive to three-foot putt. The process takes only a few seconds once you get used to it.

The reason this process is important is that every shot you hit is unique. The shot you hit from this spot last week is not the same shot you're about to hit right now. It's different in many respects. The lie can be different. There can be more or less wind. The pin can be in a different place on the green. You're striking the ball differently than you did last time out. I'm sure you could add to this list.

When you plan a shot by drawing on your experience in a logical way, you'll be off the mark. By keeping a calm mind, you'll become aware of the situation you're facing right now, and plan the shot that is called for right now.

The second thing a calm mind will do is help you hit the shot. Do you remember the times on the course when instead of chattering to you about your swing and the hazards you faced, your mind quieted down and you just swung the club? And the result was a shot so good you couldn't believe it was you who had hit it? In moments like that, the knowledge in the mind becomes lodged in the body as well. Your body becomes a physical expression of your mind—not taking orders from the mind, but the mind made manifest.

Now that might have been a fortuitous moment, and you might think, "Wow! I like it when that happens." But you can learn to repeat it at will. You can make it happen whenever you want.

You've calmed your mind to plan your shot and that calmness continues as you're standing over the ball ready to take the club

away. This is the critical moment. The change from a motionless state to movement can easily cause your mind to switch to concentrating on your physical movement. If it does, all is lost. Your feeling of calmness must not be interrupted by starting your swing and it must continue undisturbed throughout your swing. You only have about one second within which your calmness must continue without interruption, and the shot is over.

This is what concentration means. You calm your mind and have that calmness continue undisturbed as you act. If you can master that you have mastered the mental aspect of golf.

You might agree that having a calm mind is a good idea, and that it's easier to be at peace looking over a 5-iron second shot on a par 5 to somewhere "up there in the fairway" than over a sloping four-foot putt. The mental approach to both shots, though, is identical.

You control what your mind does, not the golf course. The mental challenge is to be calm and at peace with the shot you're about to hit, regardless of the circumstances.

We're human, though, and we occasionally lose our focus. What then? First, recognize and accept that you've reached the limit of your ability to concentrate, or that playing conditions have created more stress than you can handle.

Second, calming down just by telling yourself to is hard to do, and sometimes makes things worse. Leave your mind alone, and it will get calm by itself. Start getting the ball around the course with shots you know you can hit well. Placing your attention on something you do well, and enjoy, can help calm your mind.

Third, don't give up. Tell yourself that it's OK to take extra strokes on the next few holes if that's how long it takes to calm your mind again. There will be plenty of holes after that to score well. I've had days where I had a mental lapse, but salvaged the round later because I patiently worked on getting my mental focus back.

Throughout this book, I'll refer to mind and body unification as having a calm mind or being at peace. Both phrases describe a state where doubt and worry don't enter your mind; in fact, at that

moment they don't even exist. You can see the situation clearly, weigh all the variables, and select a shot that is one that you can hit and is one that will work. Execution of the shot will almost feel like an afterthought. That's the easy way to play golf.

Practice your mental game on the course and off. At the range, practice calming your mind before every shot. Learning how to calm your mind takes as much practice as learning physical techniques. Don't neglect it.

Away from golf, practice by calming your mind before you do anything. Being at peace on the golf course cannot happen unless you're at peace with your life. Whatever other people say or do, or whatever happens to you, stay calm and receive it in a positive way. There is good that can come out of any situation. Make it your habit to look for it.

Ask yourself occasionally if you can truly calm your mind at will. How easily can that calmness be disturbed? How long can you maintain it? The answers to these questions describe your ability to achieve and maintain mental calmness.

Don't worry if your concentration doesn't last long or is easily upset. Everyone starts from somewhere. Keep at it and soon your concentration will be stronger than you ever imagined it could be.

For exercises that will help you learn to have a calm mind under any circumstance, see *Ki in Daily Life*, referred to above.

SETUP

The setup varies with the club and the shot, so the particulars of the setup will be dealt with in the relevant chapters. The one common element in every setup, regardless of the shot, is to calm your mind first. The state of your mind is as important as the position of your body. This is the most positive golfing habit you can develop to play better.

TEMPO AND RHYTHM

Several years ago, I watched a rebroadcast of a PGA Championship Champions Clinic on TV. At these clinics, past tournament champions teach shotmaking and playing strategies to an assembled audience. Every pro who talked about the full swing in this show said that what he was working on at the time was tempo. After that show was over the Champions Clinic for the following year came on, and again, they all said the same thing.

It wasn't about their grip, or about their position at the top, or their swing plane. They all have that down pat or they wouldn't be Tour pros. They all saw tempo as the key to producing the swing that would keep them at the top of their game.

Tempo and rhythm are words borrowed from music. Tempo means "the pace at which a piece of music is to be performed." Rhythm means "the alternating tension and relaxation in the duration of tones."

Tempo measures the absolute speed of a piece of music. Rhythm describes the relative duration of its parts. You can play "Stars and Stripes Forever" at different speeds (tempo), but the relative duration of the notes (rhythm) will be the same.

Every good golfer swings the club with the same rhythm. The movement from address to the top of the backswing takes two counts, and from there back to impact takes one count.

Tempo, however, is a personal matter. Among current players, Nick Price swings at a much faster tempo than Ernie Els does. They both, however, swing with the same rhythm. While one swing takes less time than the other (tempo), the duration of the component parts relative to each other (rhythm) for each player is the same.

Here's an example of what good tempo and rhythm can do for you. It might sound familiar. One day I was having a hard time off the tee because I kept trying to hit the ball too hard. On the 8th tee, I finally decided to make an easy swing and pay strict attention to having a controlled and manageable tempo. Bam! 240, straight down the middle. One of the guys in my group said, "You sure put

some oomph into that one!” I thought to myself, “No, I took the oomph out of it.”

Tempo Exercise. The following exercise teaches you how to find the tempo that best suits your swing. Use a driver because the lightest and longest club in the bag lets you make an easy, free-flowing swing critical to making the exercise pay off.

Make a full swing, without a ball, all the way through to a high finish, at an easy, “walking” speed. Don’t think of hitting a ball, just swinging the club. What you’re monitoring is the speed that your hips turn back and through. Disregard the speed of your hands for now. Tempo is based on the speed at which you turn your hips, not the speed at which you move the club.

Keep swinging, and increase the speed of your turn with every few swings until you feel yourself on the verge of losing control of your swing. When you get to that point, stop. That’s too fast. Gradually slow back down until you feel yourself swinging once again at an athletic, yet effortless pace. That’s your natural tempo.

A metronome will help you with this process. Start your swing when you hear a tick. The next tick comes when you’ve swung the club back down to impact. When the metronome is set at 52 beats per minute, the swing tempo feels right for me.

To repeat, your tempo is measured by the speed of your hips turning. The tempo (speed) of your turn must be the same in both directions. By thinking of tempo as the speed the club is moving, you will start rushing your swing and turn into the ball faster than you turned away from it. The results will not be good.

After you’ve tried the Tempo Exercise at home and achieved a satisfactory result, go to the range and hit some balls. When you swing at the right tempo, the ball will fly straighter and farther, more consistently, than at any other swing speed. You might still have swing flaws that make a few shots go astray, but overall you will be hitting the ball very well. That’s the confirmation you’re looking for, and when you get it, you know you’ve found the right tempo.

What about rhythm? How do you develop that? Well, you already have. Rhythm, expressed in the speed of your hands, is the by-product of tempo.

When you swing back and through at the right tempo, and you let your hands just follow, they get accelerated naturally by the crack-the-whip force that turning around a calm center creates.

Once again, a metronome will make things clearer. Set it at the speed that fits your tempo. Subdivide that two-tick interval into three parts, counting to yourself as you swing. Count “one” when you hear the first tick and begin your swing. Time the remaining counts to get to “three” at the finish of your backswing and “four” at impact. That’s the rhythm of the golf swing.

When I get paired with someone I’ve never played with before, I’ll count out their swing based on the timing of their backswing. Much more often than not, they’ll hit the ball before I get to “four.” That’s rushing the swing, which leads to poor ballstriking. They’re thinking “hit” (bad) instead of “swing” (good).

The proper rhythm, and the tempo that carries it along, can be developed in thirty minutes of practice. They will touch every part of your game in a positive way. No other technical points have that reach. Get these two fundamentals under control before anything else if you want to improve the way you hit the ball. I cannot emphasize this fact too strongly.

Practice the Tempo Exercise daily to remind yourself of the swing speed that’s right for you. If you don’t, you’ll forget. Just a few swings will do. Count out your rhythm as you swing, too. Remember to concentrate on the speed of your body turn, not in the speed of the club.

In addition to instilling your personal tempo into your swing, learn to putt with that same tempo. That could be the only change you need to make to get the smooth and controlled putting stroke you’ve been looking for.

IMPACT

Impact is the point of golf. The entire swing comes down to that 1/1000th of a second when the club and ball are in contact with each other. The clubface must be square, traveling toward the target, and making contact with the ball on the center. That's a tall order when the club is moving at 90 miles per hour or so, but that's what a good shot requires.

Having the clubface in the correct position as it flies through impact is not something that just happens. You can practice it just as easily as you can your setup. The Impact Exercise and Clubface Exercise will teach you how. By having a conscious knowledge of what the freeze-frame impact position should be, you will find your swing adjusting itself to get you into that position.

Impact Exercise. The movement in your swing that governs the flight of the ball occurs in the space when your hands get to about waist height on the downswing, and continues through the ball until your hands are about that high on the other side. This is the impact zone. Whatever you do before this or after this is of no consequence as long as what happens in the impact zone is right.

Get a drawing or photograph of a top-rank golfer at impact and put yourself in that position. Stand so that you mimic what the picture you chose looks like. Pose in that position for a while to absorb the feeling of where everything is—your feet, legs, hips, hands, arms, shoulders (Figure 1). Let's call this your impact posture.

Now turn that posture into a dynamic impact movement. Swing back slowly from your impact posture about one foot. Swing through impact and past it about one foot. Feel yourself hit that impact posture as you get to where a ball would be sitting. Do this a few times, back and forth without stopping, slowly, feeling yourself arrive at the impact posture in the middle of this little swing.

Now start making longer swings back and forth until your hands are about hip high on the backswing and about that high on



Figure 1, 2, and 3. The Impact Exercise. Pose for a few seconds at the moment of impact and let the orientation of your body sink in. Then slowly swing back and forth, starting with small swings, and gradually building up to the length of swing you see here. Do two things: pass through that impact pose every time your swing gets to the ball, and swing the club through impact on a line going directly at a target you would be lined up to.

1



2



3

the other side of the ball (Figures 2–3). This is the impact swing, and the area you're swinging through is called the impact zone.

As you swing, watch the blurred image of the club as it swings in front of you. The goal is for this image to make a straight line pointing at your target. This exercise teaches you how to eliminate the inside-out or outside-in swing path that starts the ball off line. Make sure you feel yourself in your impact posture at the moment your swing reaches the spot where a ball would be.

The true test of any exercise is how it affects ball flight. Go to the range and hit a ball using just the impact swing. When you're doing the exercise right, the ball will go straight and get reasonably high off the ground.

After a while, move on to full swings. Do the impact swing twice in immediate succession—without stopping your movement between swings. The first time, the swing might not be straight through, but swinging a second time lets you adjust your swing so it does go straight.

After these two swings, address a ball and make your full swing right away, while the feeling of the second Impact Exercise swing is fresh in your mind. You have only a few seconds before the feeling fades, so don't wait. You're as ready as you need to be. Golf is one of the few sports where you don't have to execute until you're ready. But when you are ready, with the right feeling, go right away.

On the course, you could do this same thing on the tee or in the fairway. When you step up to the ball, ready to hit your shot, do the Impact Exercise swing twice, instead of taking a full practice swing. There's no harm in giving yourself this strong reminder before you hit your shot.

Practice the Impact Exercise daily, following the Tempo Exercise. Try it with different clubs, since each club puts your body in a different posture, giving impact a slightly different feel.

Clubface Exercise. Even if the club path is straight going through the ball, the ball could start out straight but curve afterwards. The clubface is opening or closing at some point during the swing. This exercise might help you find out where.

From your address position, swing the club back to where your hands are waist high and stop. Turn your torso back to the front and bring your arms to the front, without re-orienting your hands and look at the clubface. If it's not square, your problem is in the takeaway.

If the clubface is still square, start over and swing back to where your hands are shoulder high and stop. Once again, bring your torso and arms to the front without re-orienting your hands. Is the clubface square? If not, you've found the place where the change occurs.

Keep enlarging your swing a piece at a time, to the top of your backswing and down to impact, until you find out where the club is getting out of square. When you find that place, it isn't too hard to figure out what you're doing that needs to change.

Everyone, even the top touring professionals, has a pet swing flaw that prevents the club from coming back to impact square and in line. Find out what yours is and what you need to do to correct it.

If this exercise doesn't help, see a pro, who will spot right away that little thing you couldn't find.

If your swing sends the ball off poorly or unpredictably, the best way to solve the problem is to get right to the heart of the matter. There's something wrong at impact. Learn to swing correctly in the impact zone to get the club path straight, and work backwards from there to keep the clubface square.

I would guess that your practice mostly concerns hitting shots or working on swing changes. Try taking a break from that for a while and concentrate on the three fundamentals we developed in this chapter, and your setup, as explained later. Give them a fair trial and you'll have taken the first steps toward achieving the consistency that you've been striving for.

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