1-2-3 SWING!

A step-by-step guide to mastering the fundamentals of the golf swing

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CHAPTER 1

“Anytime any golfer hits a ball perfectly straight with a big club it is, in my view, a fluke, an accident. Maybe ‘miracle’ would be a better word.”
— Jack Nicklaus

The Right Way to Hit a Golf Shot

I will never forget my first miracle on a golf course. I was a teenager beginning to play the game seriously for the first time in my life. A few years earlier, when I was 10 years old, I had taken lessons from the pro at my parents’ club. I didn’t exactly set the world on fire. At that age, I was more interested in playing Little League Baseball, Grasshopper League Basketball, and Midget League Football.

But the lessons I took that summer with Reggie, the friendly, patient New Zealander who was the instructor at the club, gave me a good grasp of the fundamentals. Good enough to have fun hitting the ball around, which was all I wanted from the game at the time.

It wasn’t until I was 14 that I became interested in playing more often, almost every day during summer vacation. And it was at that time that I became interested in becoming a better player. That was when my first miracle happened.

My father and I had driven to a course about 10 miles out of town. It wasn’t a famous course, or even a regulation course. But it was a beautiful place to play golf—a short 9-hole course in the mountains that had you teeing off into what felt like a canyon on one hole.

Dad and I enjoyed the course as much for the scenery and the hike as we did for the golf. To tell the truth, the course wasn’t that challenging. I could sometimes shoot par, which I wasn’t able to do at the 18-hole club course. That may have been the main reason why I found the shorter 9-hole course so much fun.

I can’t remember how long the first hole was. It was a par 3, probably between 140 and 160 yards, with no major hazards as far as the person driving off the tee was concerned. The only hazard on this first hole was for a another kind of driver; the road leading up to the clubhouse cut across the fairway, so automobile drivers were advised to take a look at the first tee before crossing the fairway.

I can’t remember what club I used to hit my tee shot. About a dozen people were standing outside the little combination clubhouse-office, watching us tee off. Dad drove first and left his ball within easy chipping distance of the elevated green. I toed my ball
so badly that it turned out as well as a complete mishit can turn out. If I had gotten any more club on the ball, I would have shanked it into the woods.

I have no idea how far my failed tee shot sputtered. It couldn’t have rolled more than 15 or 20 yards off the tee. I barely nicked it, which was much better than losing it in the woods. I have only the dimmest recollection of such details now. What I remember with astonishing clarity is what happened next.

After missing the ball, I felt a sudden sense of relief, which surprised me enormously. I wondered why I wasn’t feeling like a complete fool. A dozen golfers had just watched me melt down on the first tee. It was probably fortunate that I didn’t get more clubface on the ball. I might have hurt someone if I had.

I came to understand something about the game of golf that I have never forgotten. I understood why I lost control of my swing: I let the tension build up before the shot, and I didn’t do anything about it.

I hovered over the ball with my mind on the people watching me, instead of keeping my mind on the fundamentals of the swing. I wanted to look good in front of the other golfers—and in front of my father, who had paid for the private lessons a few summers before. Of course, I always wanted to beat my dad.

The golfer’s greatest enemy

That tee shot taught me one of the most important lessons that golfers can learn: Self-imposed pressure is the golfer’s greatest enemy. As soon as I grasped that simple truth, I was relieved, totally relaxed. And I knew that my sense of relief came from knowing that my next shot could only be better than the first.

Suddenly I was alone on the course. I forgot about the onlookers. I forgot about my father. I forgot about trying to look good. I entered what researchers call “flow.” I didn’t know it at the time, but I was in the flow. It was one of those moments when time comes to a complete standstill. One of those moments when it’s no longer you against your playing partner, no longer you against the course. I became intensely aware, somehow, that it was me against myself.

All golfers want to learn to drive the ball as far as they can. I was no different, but I had learned by my own experience, and by watching other golfers, that average players lose control of their shot when they try to hit the ball as hard as the pros do.

It was always fun to smash a ball. One of my favorite childhood rituals was to discard old balls I didn’t want any more by driving them into a cow field behind our house. But as I pondered my second shot, I was certain of one thing: Distance wasn’t the problem. The first hole wasn’t the problem. At that moment, I realized what all golfers must
realize if they are to improve: I realized that my primary target wasn’t the green, the pin, or even the cup. My primary target was the ball.

I prepared for my second shot the way I should have prepared for the first shot. I took my 3 wood. I told myself that I didn’t need to crush the ball. I just needed to get the right rhythm in my swing and hit the sweet spot. I rested my 3 wood on the base of my neck and, holding each end with one hand, I did a few upper body twists to work the tension out of my shoulders, back, and neck.

Jack Nicklaus was known for his 280-yard drives. The key to his distance was his leg strength, of course. But he also warmed up for almost a minute before every shot he took in tournament play. I had watched Nicklaus enough on TV to have seen him do this a number of times. If it worked for Jack, there was no reason why it couldn’t work for me.

It felt great. I could really feel the built-up tension leaving my shoulders. Most importantly, this pre-swing drill narrowed my focus to the task in front of me. At that moment I was no longer conscious of anything except the rhythm of my body.

I took a deep breath (20 years before I learned about deep-breathing exercises). I took my perfect grip. I went into my perfect stance. I waggled my perfect waggle, and I stepped away from the ball. I double-checked my alignment. When I was sure that my clubface was squarely on the ball-to-target line, I took my address position again.

At that time, I had never heard of missiles guided by cameras that honed in on their targets, but I discovered my ability to guide a golf ball with the same precision. Before that day, I did not think it was possible to drive a golf ball so perfectly straight. I had always been afraid to hit a wood on the fairway without the aid of a tee. This time, I could not have been more confident.

What happened next was a thing of beauty. The sound of a golf ball on the sweet center of a wooden clubface is like no other sound in this universe. The ball landed on the green a few yards from the pin. I had hit the ball so perfectly square that it sailed through the air with just the right amount of backspin. As soon as it hit the green, it seemed to grab the surface, rolled toward the pin, and stopped an inch from the cup.

I tapped in for par, but it was more satisfying than any hole-in-one could have been. A hole-in-one always entails a certain amount of unpredictability, no matter how skilled the player is. My miraculous second shot to save par was not about luck—it was about having a plan, and carrying it out to perfection.

I can’t remember anything about the rest of the round. I can’t remember if I sent my tee shot into the water hazard on the second hole or if I shot a round of par golf for the 9-hole course. All I remember is that I said to myself, as I walked up to the green on that first hole: That is the right way to hit a golf shot.
The secret of the perfect golf swing

I had discovered the secret of the game of golf. I knew that if I could play one shot like that, I could play another one. And if I could play most of my shots like that, there would be no limit to the player I could become. It was the type of revelation that comes at those moments when we are able to see through the clouded glass, when the veil is removed, when we grasp the secret of it all.

The secret was this: No Masters champion, no British Open champion, no other golfer in the world could have made a better shot than the one I made to save par on the first hole that day.

Having discovered this secret, I now faced the question that confronts all golfers throughout their lives, whether they are complete beginners or Tour players: Will I be able to repeat the perfect shot that I just made?

I wasn’t a beginner. I knew what to do when I stepped up to the tee for my first shot. But for some reason that baffles even the greatest golfers, I momentarily forgot what I knew. Then, by going back to the fundamentals, by going through a sound pre-swing routine, I remembered it again.

That is what the game of golf is all about. First, you have to learn how to make the shot. Then at some point you’re going to forget what you know. It always seems to happen at the worst possible moment.

Jean Van De Velde could not have picked a worse time and place to forget what he knew than the 18th hole at Carnoustie. It happens to all of us, usually in front of a much smaller audience, but it happens. We forget what we know.

If we have learned well, we can always remember it again—there’s always the next shot. As I watched Jean’s game fall apart on the 72nd hole of the 1999 British Open, I kept thinking about how I picked myself up after missing the tee shot on the first hole of the par 3 in the mountains.

Van de Velde had scored two pars and a birdie on the 18th in the first three rounds. As I watched on TV, I kept saying to the man on the screen: Remember what you know, Jean. Forget the British Open. Forget Carnoustie. This isn’t about glory. This isn’t about what people are going to think if you lay up and play it safe.

Thinking about that stuff will only cause you to unravel. It isn’t even you against the other guy. Take a deep breath, Jean. Let your body, your clubface, and your mind work as a unit. Together, they are a high-tech guidance and tracking system that will take the ball where you want it to go. Forget everything else.
Van de Velde’s drive went farther to the right than he would have wanted, but he had a good lie. Now, Jean, just lay up nice and easy, and chip onto the green in three. It’s just you against yourself, Jean. Don’t try to make history today. Just manage this one last hole. You don’t have to bring the people to their feet by birdying the 72nd hole of the Open when you have a 3-stroke lead.

It was too late. Van De Velde’s ball was floating in a Scottish moat, and he was on his way to losing a 3-shot lead on the last hole of the British Open.

He had gone for the green on his second shot with a long iron. The shot bounced off the grandstand and ended up in the rough. I cringed as his next shot landed in the water. I couldn’t believe he was doing this. The guy has courage, I said to myself, but this is not the time for courage. This is the time for caution.

Van de Velde’s triple bogey on the 18th put him into a tie for first place. He lost the playoff. I was heartbroken for Van De Velde. I wondered how he was going to deal with it. You wouldn’t want to go through the rest of your life thinking about the big one that got away. You wouldn’t wish that on your worst enemy.

A record that has stood for 80 years

“It is not solely the capacity to make great shots that makes champions, but the essential quality of making very few bad shots.” The quote is from a marvelous little book titled How to Play Your Best Golf All the Time, by Tommy Armour.

Audiences today are more familiar with Armour’s grandson, Tommy Armour III, who has won two PGA Tour titles. I was playing with a set of Tommy Armour clubs when I made my miracle 3-wood shot. It was my first set of clubs, which my father handed down to me.

Tommy Armour was a Scottish-born golfer who became a U.S. citizen in the 1920s. He won three majors: the U.S. Open, the PGA, and the British Open. One week after winning the 1927 U.S. Open, Armour shot 23 on a par 5 at the Shawnee Open. It still stands as the highest one-hole score in PGA history. After retiring from the Tour in 1935, Armour taught at the Boca Raton Club in Florida. He was loved by his students, who came from all over the country to learn from him.

How can you not love a Triple Crown winner who shot 23 on one hole? Few of us will ever experience victory on the Pro Tour, but all of us know what it is like to score double digits on a golf hole. Still, how could a champion golfer lose control of his game like that? Did they play the Shawnee Open in the middle of a hurricane that year, or what?
Tommy Armour’s 23 defies understanding. How is it possible to play so well one week, yet so bad the next? Tommy was caught in a mustard gas attack while serving as an officer in the First World War. He was blinded in both eyes by the gas attack, and only later recovered sight in his right eye. He must have gone temporarily blind in his one good eye at the Shawnee Open. I can think of no other explanation.

Such is the nature of the game. No matter how perfectly you swing a club on one hole, it can all go haywire on the next. When a round of golf can get ugly so quickly, even for a champion like Tommy Armour, what hope is there for the rest of us? More than you think.

_Golf Digest_ has estimated the odds of a blind golfer getting a hole-in-one at 12,750 to 1. On August 19, 2007, 53-year-old Sheila Drummond beat the odds. Playing with her husband, her coach, and two friends, Sheila teed off with a driver—in the rain—and aced the 144-yard 4th hole at Mahoning Valley Country Club in Lehighton, Pennsylvania. Sheila’s drive cleared a water hazard and sand traps, landed on the green, hit the pin, and plunked into the hole.

A 48-handicap golfer, Sheila has been blind since the age of 27. She has been playing golf since the age of 38. How does she explain her hole-in-one? “I just try to do the best I can,” Sheila says.

How can a golfer who has a swing that’s good enough to hit a target 144 yards away have a 48 handicap? “I get nervous,” says Sheila.

Don’t we all. That is why great golfers and teachers emphasize the fundamentals of the golf swing. Playing good golf consistently is a matter of mastering the fundamentals of a sound, repeating golf swing. When you master a few fundamentals, you can accomplish things on a golf course that you never dreamed of before.

I don’t know what went haywire in Tommy Armour’s game at the 1927 Shawnee Open, but I think Tommy Armour illustrates one of the simple truths of this beautiful game: _Anyone who wants to be a good golfer has within him—or her—the ability to swing a golf club correctly and play the game well._ Even if you just shot 23 on a par 5 at the local club.

How do you play your best golf? By swinging the club correctly more often than you swing it incorrectly—by making fewer bad shots. Jean Van de Velde didn’t need to play his best golf on the last hole of the 1999 British Open. He didn’t need to make a great shot. He just needed to make one less bad shot.

As much as I like Tommy Armour’s book on golf, you can’t play your best golf all the time, not even if you’re Tiger Woods. Tiger is on his way to becoming the greatest player in golf history, in spite of the fact that he doesn’t play his best golf all the time.
He plays his best golf most of the time by making very few bad shots. That is the secret of playing the game well.

When Tiger makes fewer bad shots than the competition, he wins. That is the key to his domination of the game. As Tommy Armour taught his students, good golf is not so much about making great shots as about making fewer bad shots.

The fundamental difference between Tommy Armour and the rest of us is this: The Tommy Armours of this world have learned how to play their best golf most of the time, while the rest of us keep looking for the secret that will provide what is missing in our game.

A woman once asked Armour how much he charged. Armour told the woman what he charged for one lesson. In the hope of negotiating a package price, the woman asked Armour how much he would charge for six lessons. Armour explained that the cost of six lessons would be equal to the cost of one lesson multiplied by six. Not ready to give in so easily, the woman then asked Armour how much he would charge for 18 lessons. “I don’t know that much golf!” Armour answered.

If you hear about a golf instructor like that in your area, sign up for a lesson. That kind of teacher knows all the golf you will ever need to learn. Good teachers know what it’s like to fall flat on their face, pick themselves up, and prepare for the next shot. They know that the key to success lies in mastering the fundamentals of the swing, and, like Tommy Armour, they know how to get back to the fundamentals when something goes haywire.

Whether you’re a complete beginner or an established player, you’re trying to accomplish the same goal: You want to play the game as well as you can. Whether your goal is to beat your playing partners or just have fun, your ability to enjoy the game depends on learning how to hit the ball correctly—on mastering the fundamentals of the golf swing.

**The key to making fewer bad shots**

This guidebook has two goals: The first goal is to help you become a better ball striker. The second goal is to make the learning process fun. If you’re just getting started, I hope you’ll discover how rewarding this great game can be. If you’re an established player who has been on the same level of play for too long, I hope you’ll discover how to put the fun back in your game by becoming a better ball striker.

Golf is a simple game. The best swing is an easy, natural swing. That was true when shepherds in the Scottish Highlands invented the ancient game of golf by using their staffs to hit pebbles into holes, and it is still true today.
The shot I made to save par when I was 14 years old was a shot I had made before. But I had never made such a great shot immediately after making such a bad shot. Before that day, one bad shot was always enough to ruin the hole for me.

My par should have been a birdie. By the next summer, I was making fewer bad shots. As a result, I started to make more pars, and even birdies. The triple bogeys didn’t disappear—I’m beginning to suspect they never will. But I was playing better golf and having more fun.

That’s the only secret you’ll ever need to know about the game: You become a better golfer—and you have more fun—when you learn to make fewer bad shots.

The purpose of this guidebook is to help you become a skilled golfer who enjoys the game. It all starts with the right grip, the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2

“A player with a bad grip doesn’t want a good swing.”
— Ben Hogan

The Right Grip

Numerous books and magazine articles have been written on the mechanics of the golf swing. Visit any public library and you’ll find dozens of books that offer step-by-step instruction on how to improve your golf swing. The fattest books are as thick as encyclopedias and contain hundreds of photographs and diagrams that illustrate every conceivable aspect of the golf swing.

I have taken a look at almost all the available literature on the golf swing, and I don’t think I have ever seen a book that I didn’t get something out of. But I know I didn’t get nearly as much out of most of these books as the author intended. From the reader’s perspective, many instructional books try to do too much.

Most authors want to be sure that they cover everything that can conceivably come up during a round of golf. When a guidebook is comprehensive in its scope, readers can refer back to it at any time in their golf lives. Whenever a problem becomes evident in some aspect of your game, you can usually track it down in a good golf book.

That’s a good reason to write a book on golf, and most of the books I’ve seen tend to be very comprehensive. The problem is that many books on golf are too comprehensive. Many readers feel doomed to failure from the first page. There is so much to learn, so much to worry about, so much that can go wrong. Many frustrated beginners are likely to give up before they get started. How can I ever learn to do all this?

This guide has a much narrower focus than most instructional books. If you want to begin to play golf, this brief book will give you all you need to know to get started. And if you’ve been playing for a few years without seeing as much improvement as you’d like to see in your game, you can use this guide as a checklist to identify and correct flaws in your swing.

Everything that happens before you begin your swing is part of your pre-shot routine. As I learned when I was 14 years old, a sound pre-shot routine is every bit as important as a perfect golf swing. Indeed, you can’t have one without the other.

Every golf swing is a chain reaction
A bad grip is one of the most common problems in golf. Even if your stance and swing are perfect, your ball is not going to go where you want it to go if your grip is wrong.

There are three basic grips: the baseball grip, the interlocking grip, and the overlapping grip. Whichever grip you decide to use, the function of your hands is the same in each. Your left hand controls your swing. Your right hand provides the speed—and thus the power—in your swing. In the case of a left-handed player, the right hand and arm guide the club, while the left hand and arm supply the power.

At this juncture, I need to make a special apology to left-handed players who are reading this guide. I’m a natural left-handed hitter in baseball, but I’m a right-handed golfer, so I am well aware of the need to tell both sides of the story.

I simply don’t have enough space to go into a detailed description of left-handed golf in this brief guide. I am left with the less than ideal solution of asking you to form a mirror image of the positions you’ll need to master, since my descriptions are made from the point of view of a right-handed golfer.

In each of the three grips, right-handed golfers will take the end of the club in their left hand first, then slip the fingers of their right hand over the grip. Left-handed golfers will take the club in their right hand first, then slip the fingers of their left hand over the grip.

The baseball grip is a two-handed grip. In this grip, all ten fingers are placed on the club. This is the easiest grip for children and for older players with weak hands. To get the feel of a two-handed grip, simply hold the club as you would hold a baseball bat.

The interlocking grip is ideal for players with small hands and fingers. In this grip, the little finger of the right hand gently interlocks with the index finger of the left hand. Jack Nicklaus used an interlocking grip.

Most professional golfers use the overlapping grip. Instead of interlocking, in this grip the little finger of the right hand rests on top of the index finger of your left hand.

No matter what grip you decide to use, follow these five steps every time you take a club in your hands:

1. Place the clubhead on the ground. Support the top of your club by letting it rest on the index finger of your right hand. Use your thumb to keep the club steady. Let your left hand hang down, beside the grip.

2. Keep your left hand open. Move it against the grip so that the shaft lies against the fleshy part of the palm. The shaft should run down your left hand diagonally, so that it rests on the middle joint of your index finger.
3. Close the fingers of your left hand, which is now the only hand making contact with the club. The thumb of your left hand should lie flat on the grip. As you look down on your hand, the thumb should be a little to the right of center.

4. Let your right hand hang naturally next to the grip. Now bring your right hand against the grip and place the shaft in the fingers of your right hand. Imagine that the palm of your right hand is square to the target. In other words, your right palm should now be in the same position as your clubface will be when it makes impact with the ball.

The easiest way to do this is to imagine that the palm of your right hand is the clubface. To get the picture, imagine that you’re hitting a golf ball with the palm of your right hand. If your palm is angled in toward your body, the ball will go to the left, or hook. If your palm is angled out away from your body, the ball will go to the right, or slice.

This simple visualization exercise can help you begin to feel how the different parts of your body work together in the golf swing. Hitting the ball square with the clubface is the best thing that can happen when you swing a golf club. When you grip the club, you’re not just putting your fingers around the shaft. You’re preparing your fingers and hands to transfer direction to the shaft, which in turn transfers direction to the clubface, which in turn transfers direction to the ball.

Everything in a golf swing is part of a chain reaction. A flaw in any point of the chain detracts from the end result. But when every part of the chain is right, the result is more than the sum of the parts, as is the case in every chain reaction.

Think of what happens in atomic fusion. When two atoms fuse, they release an enormous explosive force. The hands and fingers of a golfer are like two atoms that fuse—when they are joined correctly around the grip, they have the potential to set in action an enormous amount of power.

5. Finally, as you look down on your right hand, the thumb and index finger should look like a trigger. Now complete your grip by doing whatever is most comfortable for you: a baseball grip, an interlocking grip, or an overlapping grip.

A full-length mirror is one of the most useful pieces of equipment in golf. Check your grip in front of a mirror. In all three grips, about an inch or so of the end of the shaft should be visible. In a baseball grip, there should be no space at all between your hands. The little finger of your right hand should be right next to the index finger of your left hand.

In the interlocking grip, the tip of the index finger of your left hand should rest approximately on the knuckle of the little finger of your right hand, and vice versa. In
the overlapping grip, the little finger of your right hand should rest directly on top of the index finger of your left hand.

**The function of the grip**

When you’re a beginning player trying to make sense of a series of photos or drawings, getting to the correct golf grip can be more than a little confusing. But it doesn’t have to be. Step back from the mirror for a moment and think about the function of the grip.

The only function of the grip is to begin the series of hand and arm movements that draw the club back from the ball, and then return the club to the ball in such a way that the clubface is square to an imaginary line that runs from the target straight back to the ball. *Any flaw in your grip will cause the ball to go to the left or to the right of the target.*

Even experienced players can get in trouble by failing to identify a problem that has crept into their grip over the years. The problem with most bad golf grips is that they feel comfortable. No matter how many years you’ve been playing, one of the best ways to tweak your game is to check the position of your hands and fingers on the club.

Many golfers with bad grips blame their bad shots on a problem in their stance or swing, simply because their grip feels right. If they try to compensate by changing their stance or swing, they will only add an additional error to the grip error that has gone undetected.

This is how flaws pile up until it’s impossible for a player to get out of the rut by himself. At this point, a player must seek the advice of a good teacher who can detect the cause of the problem by watching the golfer hit a few balls.

Every book on golf includes a section on the grip. And I’ve never found any advice on the golf grip that wouldn’t improve the mechanics of a large number of golfers. Nevertheless, in all the literature on the subject of golf, no one has yet been able to turn the golf grip into a topic with broad appeal. It simply isn’t the kind of thing that stirs up a lot of passion, so it is often neglected.

I’m not saying anything new when I point out that most golfers severely limit their games by not working hard enough on their grip. After all, it isn’t an exciting topic. But the simple fact is that most golfers suffer through years of bad golf due to their ignorance of the correct grip. When you realize how easy it is to correct a grip problem, you wonder why most books don’t try harder to create a little excitement around the topic.
Let me give you some food for thought. Ben Hogan’s grip was so bad that he and his wife went through periods when they were barely surviving. Hogan came from a poor family and was a teenager at the start of the Great Depression. He knew what it was to have to struggle for a living.

Hogan was the most powerful hitter of his era, but he hooked the ball so severely that he almost decided to quit the professional tour. At one point, things were so bad that Hogan entered one tour event with 15 cents in his pocket. That was all he had to his name.

When Hogan was 34 years old, he changed his grip. Weakening his grip eliminated the hook. As a result, Hogan won nine of the last sixteen majors he entered. He had every right to say that “a player with a bad grip doesn’t want a good swing.”

I think the story of Ben Hogan’s transformation into one of the greatest players in the history of the game injects a lot of excitement into the topic of getting the correct grip. Look what it did for Hogan’s game.

During one event on the PGA Tour when Hogan was still struggling with his hook, he left the course for a few minutes and disappeared into an adjacent orchard. When he came back, he was loaded down with enough oranges to sustain him and his wife for the next two weeks.

If a time traveler had dropped onto the course that day and told the other players that they were watching a future legend of the game struggle through his growing pains, I am sure that no one would have believed it.

What I am trying to say is this: Don’t be lazy about your grip. There’s nothing unexciting about winning nine major championships in four years. And it was all because of a new grip—after years of playing the game as a Tour professional. So, are you starting to get excited about getting the right grip? I thought so.

If you’re a beginning golfer, the best way to develop the right grip is to use a practice grip. And if you’ve been playing for a few years, but you know your mechanics have a lot of room for improvement, using a practice grip to correct a grip problem can prove to be the fastest way to take your game to the next level.

A practice grip is molded to guide your fingers and hands into the correct position on the club. It will help you get used to how a correct grip should feel. You can put a practice grip on one of your old clubs. Practice with this club until the correct grip feels comfortable. Soon you’ll be able to pick up every club with the correct grip. (It’s against the rules to use a practice grip in tournament play, of course.)

**Common grip problems**
If you don’t take the time to get the right grip, you can’t hope to develop a sound golf swing. All incorrect grips fall into two basic categories: weak and strong grips. Here’s how to find out if your grip is wrong:

- Grip your club without using a practice grip. Let the clubface rest on the ground. Look down at your right hand. If the V formed by your thumb and index finger point to your left arm, your hands are gripping the club too far to the left. In this case, your grip is weak.

- If your hands are too far to the right, your grip is strong.

If your grip is too strong, the clubface will point in toward your body at impact. A closed clubface causes a hook, which sends the ball to the left of the target (or right of target in the case of left-handed golfers).

On the other hand, if your grip is weak, the clubface will point away from your body at impact. This will cause the ball to slice to the right of the target (or to the left in the case of left-handed golfers).

When the ball hooks, the player “pulls” the shot; when the ball slices, the player “pushes” the shot. In both cases, the root of the problem is the player’s grip. When your grip is incorrect, it’s very hard to have the clubface square to the ball when you make contact.

If your shots are going anywhere but straight, don’t be too eager to blame the problem on your swing. Your grip isn’t the only thing that influences your impact position, but it is the first thing that influences it. If you’ve resigned yourself to playing golf with a debilitating hook or slice most of the time, it’s time to check your grip.

Good golfers don’t wait until a problem shows up in their game to check their fundamentals. One of the best ways to improve your game is to check your grip on a regular basis. Regular checkups allow you to nip the problem in the bud, before it grows into something that requires a major overhaul of your entire swing.

You’ll use the same grip for every club in your bag, from the driver to the wedge. Most players use an overlapping grip on the putter, although putting is where you see the greatest variety of unconventional grips. It’s simply a matter of trying out different grips until you find the one that works best for you.

Keeping the grips of your clubs clean will correct any problems in your swing caused by slippery grips. Dirt gets trapped in the ridges of the grip with normal use, and this makes the club harder to hold. When your hand slips during the swing, it’s practically impossible to keep the clubface square to the ball at the moment of impact. To clean your grips, brush them with soapy water and then dry the grips with a towel.
The importance of a firm grip

If you ever have the opportunity to go to a PGA Tour event, you’ll learn more by walking around the practice grounds before the players tee off than by watching them play. You’ll notice that the best golfers in the world spend a lot of time practicing the pre-swing fundamentals.

Most flaws in the golf swing stem from an incorrect grip or stance. Jack Nicklaus’ pre-swing checklist always started with a firm grip. A loose grip can always be seen at the top of the backswing. It wastes power and leads to a poor shot.

Paul Azinger, a PGA Tour professional, has a natural swing that causes the ball to slice badly. He compensates by trying to put the same amount of hook in his grip. As a result, his balls fade about five yards, instead of the 20-yard slices he would hit if he used a more correct grip. His grip isn’t mechanically correct, but it’s always firm.

Azinger has played that way all his life. In spite of a mechanically incorrect grip and swing, he has won 12 events on the PGA Tour, including the 1993 PGA Championship.

What works for Paul Azinger probably won’t work for you. Do your best to learn a technically sound grip and swing. But I think there’s a lesson to be learned from studying “the Zinger Swing,” even if you’re a complete beginner. If your grip works, don’t let anyone change it. If your grip is technically sound and you’re hitting the ball well, that’s all that matters.
CHAPTER 3

“You get out of golf what you put into it. There are no shortcuts.”
— Earl Woods

The Right Stance

There are only two objectives in the game of golf—direction and distance. In a very real sense, the target is not the fairway, the green, or even the cup. The target is the ball. The whole game of golf is about nothing more complicated than developing a routine for swinging a club in such a way that the clubface is square to the ball at impact.

Anybody can do it now and then. The pros do it consistently, but not even PGA Tour players do it every time. But you should be encouraged to know that the greatest ball hitter of his era, Ben Hogan, believed that any person with a normal degree of coordination could learn a technically sound, repeating golf swing. And that is the goal.

Perfect parallel alignment

You can’t hit what you don’t aim at. That’s true in any sport, of course, but golf poses a special challenge to the player taking aim. In the game of golf, if you aim at what your eyes see, you’re already off target before you even begin your swing. A golfer must learn to see the course from the ball’s point of view.

The right stance, or set-up, places the golfer in perfect parallel alignment to the ball. The easiest way to visualize the correct set-up is to picture yourself standing next to a railway track. Here’s how to do it:

1. First, imagine the railway runs straight to the pin, or to any point on the fairway that you have chosen as your target.

2. Next, imagine that the ball sits on the rail that is farthest from you. This imaginary rail runs from the ball to your target. This imaginary line is your “ball-to-target” line.

3. The rail closest to you runs to a point just left of the target. Your toes should almost touch this line.

Every time you set up for a shot, be sure to line your clubface and your feet along these two imaginary rails. You’ll be in the correct set-up every time.

How to set up a practice station
If your set-up is incorrect, you won’t be able to hit consistently good shots. You can use clubs to set up a practice area that will help you learn the right stance. Here’s how to set up a practice station:

1. Take any three irons. Place two irons on the ground as if they were the rails.

2. Place the ball just inside the outer club, leaving enough space so that the shaft won’t interfere with your swing.

3. Place your feet about the same distance from the inner club.

4. Place the third club perpendicular to the first two clubs, as if it were one of the ties of the railway. The grip of the third club should lie on top of the club closest to you. The end of the grip should point directly to the ball. The shaft should run between your legs, closer to your left foot than to your right.

Even when you only have a few minutes, two or three times a week, setting up a practice station in the back yard is the fastest way to learn the correct stance.

When I was a child I had enough yard space at home to set up a practice station and hit wiffle balls at targets that were inside our property boundaries. My mother even let me do a little landscaping one summer—I “designed” and built a couple of par-3 wiffle-ball holes in the back yard.

You can practice the fundamentals of your swing with an impact bag (available at pro shops and Web stores), no matter how little space you have. Set up a practice station whenever you have 20 minutes; focus on getting the perfect parallel alignment.

If you find yourself falling in love with the game—as I did when I was a child—but your wife or husband isn’t willing to let you turn the back yard into a practice course, you have a secret weapon: The inherent potential of every human being to fall in love with the game of golf.

Get your husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, children or parents, interested in learning the game with you. That will solve any potential disputes, and it will provide many hours—in some cases, a lifetime—of quality time together.

Both my parents had been avid golfers when they were younger, so I had a green light to practice in the back yard—as long as I replaced the divots!

**The correct ball position**

The right stance involves three equally important elements: *alignment, ball position,* and *posture.*
Parallel position is the first part of a good stance. The second part is correct ball position. These two things make up what’s known as the *address*—your position at the moment when you begin the swing. The ball must be positioned so that your club moves along an ideal arc as it moves through impact.

The correct ball position depends on which club you’re hitting. The driver has the longest shaft of all your clubs. Irons have progressively shorter shafts. The driver also has the least degree of *loft* of all the clubs—the face of a driver is relatively straight. To drive a ball well, the club must sweep the ball off the tee. A sweeping shot is best achieved by positioning the ball forward in your stance.

Remember the third club we set up on the practice station (as if it were one of the ties on the railway bed). When you drive the ball, the shaft of this third club should run between your legs just inside your left heel. In this position, the club will impact the ball at the very bottom of its arc. This is what allows a driver to “sweep” the ball away.

On the other hand, short irons and wedges have a high degree of loft—their faces are slanted. These clubs should still be on the downward arc when they make contact with the ball. The ball needs to be positioned further back in your stance so that the short irons and wedges are traveling downward at impact. The best ball position for these clubs is on a line that runs through a point halfway between your feet.

**Perfect posture**

The right posture is the third part of a good stance. It is impossible to swing the club in the correct plane if your posture is out of sync. Hitting a golf ball straight is hard enough as it is without complicating things by letting your posture sag.

Your posture should be athletic and poised for action. Working in front of a full-length mirror is the easiest way to build the right posture into your stance. Here’s how to get the right posture every time:

1. Set up your practice station. Place your feet in the correct position. Your club should rest at your left side; your left hand should already be in the correct position on the grip of the club. Stand as straight as you can.

2. Bend forward. Flex your knees slightly. Stick your buttocks out just a little, the way the pros do on television. At this point, you should start to feel the power in your stance. You should feel energized. Have a friend shove you from behind. You won’t lose your balance if your posture is correct.

3. Grip the club with your right hand. Try not to change any of the angles as you place the clubhead on the ground slightly behind the ball.
That’s all there is to it. You’ll feel strange the first time you try this, but keep working at it—the right posture is a huge influence in the quality of your swing.

An effective pre-shot routine

Many golfers never take the time to master the fundamentals. In every sport, these are the basic skills that seem insignificant and boring—the last thing that beginners want to learn, and the first thing that all good coaches want to teach.

In our eagerness to hit the ball and get going, it’s easy to overlook the importance of building your game on a solid foundation. Reading an instructional book and trying to get your hands, feet, and arms into the same positions can be frustrating. But you won’t start to truly enjoy the game until you master the fundamentals.

Mastering the basics is what gives you the ability to make better shots. And as your score comes down—more than you ever dreamed possible—you’ll begin to enjoy the game more than you have ever enjoyed another game or hobby in your life. It all starts with a solid mastery of a few simple steps you take to place your body into position to swing the club correctly.

You can divide everything that happens in golf into two basic sets of skills: the pre-shot routine and the shot itself. These are the only two areas you need to master in order to develop a good swing, no matter what your current level of play is.

Every good golfer has a pre-shot routine—the succession of movements that ensure that the player is in the correct address and posture at the beginning of the swing. You can learn a lot about the fundamentals of the game by watching professional golfers go through their pre-shot routine. Some players are especially meticulous about the moves they go through before they begin a swing.

The pre-shot routine is like the preparation of a basketball player who steps up to the foul line to take a foul shot. If you have seen any amount of basketball, or played it at any time in your life, you’ve probably noticed that bad free-throw shooters are always the ones who seem inconsistent or unsure in their pre-shot routine; the worst shooters usually have no routine at all. But the best shooters do the same thing every time they step up to the line.

The pre-shot routine in golf serves the same purpose—to prepare the player to make a technically perfect shot. Here’s how to develop a pre-shot routine that will add confidence to your game and shave shots from your score:

1. Stand behind the ball and visualize the shot you want to make. Your goal in this first step is to focus on the shot and get a clear view of the ball-to-target line.
2. Choose an intermediate target that's just a few yards in front of your target. There may be a leaf or an old divot mark lying on the ball-to-target line. You'll find that it's much easier to aim the clubface at a target that's just a few yards away than to aim at something 100 or 200 yards away.

3. Address the ball and move your body into the right posture.

4. When you’re set, waggle the clubhead a few times.

The waggle helps to reduce tension in your shoulders, arms, and hands. When your body is relaxed, your movement through the swing is more fluid. Now you’re ready to begin the backswing.
CHAPTER 4

“It is utterly impossible for any golfer to play good golf without a swing that will repeat.”
— Ben Hogan

The Perfect Swing

If you’ve taken the time to get the right grip, the correct set-up, and the correct posture, you’re ready to swing a club with more power and accuracy than you have ever swung a club before. If you feel more athletic and confident as you address the ball, that’s a sign that you’re well on the way to mastering the pre-swing elements. You’re about to discover what a big difference that will make in your golf swing.

Before we start swinging away, we need to take a moment to consider which club to use as you learn—or relearn—the elements of a good golf swing.

Whichever club you decide to swing first, be sure to use a golf glove on your control hand. (Your control hand is the hand that grips the club first—the left hand for right-handed players, and the right hand for left-handed players). If you don’t use a glove, you’ll get calluses on the palm of your control hand. Always use a glove, even if you’re only planning a 15 to 20-minute practice session.

The ideal club for learning the perfect swing

There are two different schools of thought concerning the ideal club to use for learning the correct swing. Some instructors think it matters very much; others think it doesn’t matter much at all.

The driver is the most difficult club for golfers to master. It has the least loft and the longest shaft of all the clubs in your bag. The straight clubface of a driver puts maximum sidespin on the ball; the longer shaft means that your mechanics must be flawless in order to return the clubface square to the ball. If the clubface is open or closed at impact, the ball will slice or hook away from the ball-to-target line.

That’s not a noticeable problem on driving ranges, which are wide enough to forgive fairly severe mishits. But a hook or slice of 20 yards or more on a fairway can send the ball into the rough on most holes. Since your mechanics must be nearly flawless to drive the ball fairly straight, many instructors prefer to use one of the short irons or wedges to teach beginners how to swing the club correctly.
The short irons and wedges have higher lofts and shorter shafts, which means that it's much easier for new players to control shots made with these clubs. The greater the loft of the club, the more backspin will be applied to the flight of the ball.

Backspin counteracts the tendency of the ball to travel right or left of target, which means that shots made with the short irons and wedges tend to travel straighter than shots made with a driver, even when the clubface is not completely square to the ball at impact.

Some instructors insist that your choice of club for learning purposes doesn't make a lot of difference. Ben Hogan taught beginners to learn the fundamentals of the golf swing using a driver. He wrote a popular series of instructional articles for *Sports Illustrated* in the early Fifties that were later published in book form. Hogan argued that a sound, repeating golf swing is the same with every club, so if you learn to control your shots off the tee with a driver, you’ll have good control of all the other clubs.

I can’t tell you what method is best for your learning process. Every individual player is different. Only a coach who has the opportunity to watch you hit a few balls is in a position to judge which club is the best one for you to start swinging with. So please keep in mind that what follows is the best general advice I can give you.

I can appreciate the logic of both arguments. In defense of Hogan, whose method is the one that is used less today, it can be argued that learning the swing with a pitching wedge, for instance, can cause problems that may be hard to correct when a player begins to swing a driver.

The beginner has a much larger margin for error with the wedge, so it’s easy for undetected flaws to creep into a swing, even when the learner thinks that he or she is making progress. This is a constant danger for players who don't have the opportunity to work with a coach. They won’t really know how mechanically sound their swing is until they start using the longer clubs.

If you have an opportunity to take lessons with a club pro, or at least to have a low-handicap golfer check your mechanics from time to time, then by all means start swinging with a wedge. Learning to control the wedge before you take another club out of your bag is the fastest way to build your confidence.

The fact that you’re making fairly straight shots from the first day is a tremendous morale booster. If you start swinging with a driver, searching in the rough for all the balls you hook or slice is a frustrating experience that can make it hard for any beginner to want to go on learning.

As you gain confidence and control with the wedge, move through the bag one club at a time, from the short irons to the medium irons, then on down to the long irons and
woods. The driver can be the last club you learn to swing. You can use this method and be confident that it will serve you well, as long as you have the opportunity to check your mechanics from time to time with a good teacher.

Earl Woods recommended that beginners should learn to control the putter, wedge, and short irons before picking up the long irons and woods. So which club did Tiger swing first? You guessed it—a driver. He simply picked up his father’s club one day and started swinging.

Seve Ballesteros, one of the most successful players over the last 30 years, learned to play the game with a 3 iron that his older brother gave him. Seve learned the fundamentals of the golf swing by hitting every shot in a round with his 3 iron. Seve credits his early learning experience as the source of his unequaled versatility; he is generally regarded as the greatest shot-maker of his era. As Ben Crenshaw once said, “Seve plays shots I don’t even see in my dreams.”

When I was a teenager, I loved playing a round of golf at a local 9-hole par 3 course with my 3 iron and a putter. Whichever club you use in the beginning, the mechanics of the swing are the same. And remember: You don’t have to hit a tee shot with a driver, even if you’re playing a 500-yard hole. Even the pros tee off with a 3 wood or long iron on a medium or long hole when fairway hazards demand utmost accuracy off the tee.

Complete beginners will enjoy the game more and run into less frustration by teeing off with a 3 wood—or, like Seve Ballesteros, with a 3 iron—during their first six to twelve months. When you’re learning the game from scratch, you certainly don’t need to carry a complete set of clubs with you on a round of golf. A 3 wood, 3 iron, 5 iron, 7 iron, 9 iron, sand wedge, and putter—less than half the clubs in a complete set—are all you need to play a satisfying round of golf once you’ve mastered the fundamentals of the swing.

You can learn a great deal about shot-making by playing a round of golf with nothing but a 3 iron. Go ahead and take your putter along with you, too—Seve putted with his 3 iron! If you want to have an adventure—or if you feel destined for greatness—leave the putter at home and get a taste of what it feels like to be Seve Ballesteros. Seriously, if you’re adventurous enough to do it, you’ll gain a whole new understanding of the meaning of versatility.

**The backswing**

A golf swing is a chain reaction: Whatever happens in the beginning of the swing will magnify the effect of what happens with the ball after impact. A problem at any point in the swing will cause a poor shot.
The swing begins with the golfer in the address position. The backswing is the first part of the swing. Let’s take a look at how the pros do it:

1. In the address position, you should only be thinking about the next action: to swing the club smoothly away from the ball.

2. Keep the club low to the ground as you sweep it away from the ball. Keep your left arm straight.

3. As your left arm moves away from the ball, the clubhead will begin to arc upward.

4. As your arms swing back, your body rotates. The wrists also “hinge” in sync with the motion of the clubhead. Your arms must work together with your body as a unit.

5. At the top of the backswing, the shaft of the club should be parallel to the imaginary rail running from the ball to the target.

6. Make sure the club isn’t pointing left or right of target when you reach the top of the backswing. (Both of these club positions are a clear indication that you haven’t brought the club back correctly. In either case, the clubface will be returned to the ball incorrectly, causing a hook or a slice.)

Ask a friend or your coach to let you know if your club is parallel to the ball-to-target line when you reach the top of your backswing. It’s easier for another person to see where your club really is.

Your eyes must be on the ball all the way through the backswing, and they must stay on the ball until impact on the downswing. The most common advice that golfers hear is to keep their head steady. It’s important to understand that steady doesn’t mean motionless.

It would be impossible to hit a smooth shot if your head stayed completely rigid during the swing. The correct rotation of your upper body obligates your head to move just enough to let the rest of your body move fluidly through the swing.

Friends who tell you not to move your head probably mean well, but they haven’t studied the mechanics of the swing in depth. Just think about keeping your eyes on the ball, and any slight movement of your head will be perfectly in sync with the correct rotation of your body.

**The downswing**

The downswing is the second part of the swing. Many beginners lose control of their swing when they start the transition from the top of the backswing to the start of the
downswing. The key is to keep it smooth, and to *step into the swing with your left knee.*

1. Start your downswing by gently moving your left knee toward the target. At the top of your backswing, most of your weight is on your right foot.

2. At the same time that you move your left knee toward the target, start to shift your weight to your left foot. This weight shift is what golfers refer to when they talk about “leg separation.”

3. At the top of the backswing, your upper body and hips are in a cocked position, like a revolver that has been cocked in preparation for a shot. Leg separation triggers the correct downswing by encouraging your hips and upper body to unwind naturally. As your hips and upper body unwind, your hands and arms move down into the correct position to attack the ball.

4. If everything has gone right so far, your arms and hands are moving on a track that will return the clubface square to the ball.

5. Swing through impact. Be sure to follow through, finishing the swing in a perfectly balanced position. The right heel lifts up off the ground and your club wheels around.

At the end of the swing, the shaft of your club should be parallel to your left biceps, just behind the back of your head. At the end of the swing, your head faces the target. With your navel pointed straight at the target, your eyes can easily follow the flight of the ball.

**Rhythm**

Rhythm describes how fast or how slow the player swings the club. This is one of the elements of the game that’s entirely up to the individual player. It doesn’t matter how fast or how slow you swing the club, as long as the tempo of your swing stays the same from start to finish.

The best tempo is one that allows you to stay in control of your movements throughout the swing. Beginners usually have trouble maintaining a consistent tempo. When you watch professional golfers tee off—even if you’re watching on TV—you’ll notice that the pros maintain a steady tempo from the start of the swing to the finish, and they do it every time.

**How to stay on the right track**

Remember these four tips to keep your swing on the right track:
1. There is only one basic swing in the game of golf.

2. Beginners and high-handicap golfers only need to worry about two elements of the swing: the correct rotation of your upper body and the correct motion of your arms. Your swing will be perfect when your upper body and arms work together as a unit.

3. Most of the average golfer’s practice time is wasted. Without an experienced eye to detect errors and make suggestions, weekend golfers only establish their faults.

4. The best way to practice is to keep it fun, focused, and competitive. Practice that isn’t consciously designed to improve some aspect of your game is just wasted time.

**Perfect swing checklist**

The key to building a sound golf swing is to work bit by bit on all the elements of the swing, put them together, and see what happens. No matter how much natural talent you possess—and no matter how long you’ve been swinging a golf club—the way to become a better player is to keep coming back to the basics to make sure flaws haven’t crept into your swing.

Pay special attention to these three essentials of a good swing:

- Footwork—shifting your weight.
- Turning your body—this provides the power.
- Hand action—this transfers the power to the ball.

Whether you’re a complete beginner or an established player, you’ll go on fine-tuning your swing as you gain a better understanding of the fundamentals. Tiger Woods has gone through two swing changes since he joined the PGA Tour.

If you’re a beginning player, the best advice is not to worry about it too much right now. Just start swinging and try to do the best you can. You have to swing the club a lot before you can begin to get a feel for a mechanically sound golf swing.

In the meantime, keep this checklist handy as a reminder of what you need to be thinking about as you train your muscles and your mind to swing a club correctly:

- Grip the club correctly.
- Take the correct stance.
- *Keep your eyes on the ball.*
- As you begin the backswing, make sure your left knee points behind the ball.
- At the top of the backswing, your left hand grips the club tightly. Your right hand grip is firm, but not tight.
- As you pause at the top of the backswing, your club is parallel to the ground.
- As you begin the downswing, your right knee moves in toward the ball.
- *Keep your eyes on the ball.*
- Keep your hands cocked to make sure they stay ahead of the clubface on the downswing. Just before impact, let the full force of your right hand explode into the shot.
- *Keep your eyes on the ball.*
- Swing through impact. Finish with your navel pointing toward the target.
CHAPTER 5

“Naturally you have to learn the various parts of a golf swing. But once you get it, don’t think about your swing anymore.”
— Sam Snead

Overcoming Problems

The simple act of reading an instructional book on golf is going to improve your game. Thinking about the mechanics of the swing is bound to make you more alert to what goes on—and to what goes wrong—when you hit poor shots. By thinking about it, you’re already starting to focus on the problem. And that’s half the battle.

In his splendid book, How I Play Golf, Tiger Woods explains that many of his most productive practice sessions last no longer than 20 minutes. Come with me as I go off on a very relevant tangent. We’ll come back to Tiger in just a moment.

Focus is the key

Researchers have discovered that natural ability has very little to do with the success of accomplished performers and champion athletes. In one study, researchers examined the attitudes of both professional singers and amateurs who take voice lessons. The findings revealed an essential difference in the way that the two groups approached the lessons.

Amateur singers reported that they took voice lessons in order to have fun and relax. On the other hand, professional singers reported that they took lessons in order to get better—professionals approach a voice lesson as work.

The point is this: Practice in itself won’t make you a better singer or a better golfer. If you approach the game of golf as a way to have fun and relax, you can spend the rest of your life playing the game on the same level. There’s nothing wrong with that, if your goal is simply recreational.

But if you want to become a better golfer, you must understand this: Improvement on the golf course, as in any other area of life, has relatively little to do with the quantity of practice. Becoming a better singer, a better manager, or a better golfer is all about the quality of your practice.

Practice that isn’t dedicated to the goal of improving a specific skill may be fun and relaxing, but it isn’t going to make you a better golfer. We all know golfers who enjoy playing the game for fun, exercise, companionship, networking, or any of a number of other reasons. A large part of the allure of golf is that it is such a fun game to play.
To become a better golfer, however, you must make sure that your practice is what researchers call *dedicated practice*. Dedicated practice is focused practice. In other words, when your practice is focused, you never go to a practice tee just to hit some balls. Every time you go to a practice tee or a driving range, you consciously focus on improving a specific skill.

**The second pine tree from the right**

Now back to Tiger. His father, Earl Woods, taught Tiger the importance of dedicated practice from the time Tiger was old enough to know what practice was. Earl Woods taught Tiger that it’s a waste of time and energy to hit balls just as far as you can.

Mr. Woods taught his son that you never hit a ball without picking a target. “The second pine tree from the right,” Tiger was likely to say. Tiger always had a target when he practiced with his father.

Professional singers describe their voice lessons as strenuous, difficult, tiring, and challenging. Whatever they may say about a lesson once it’s over, the hard work that goes on during a lesson is never “fun” for the singer.

Or think about a rock climber. The tortured expression on a climber’s face as she pulls her body up to the next ledge can hardly be described as an expression of joy. The same goes for a beginning climber’s practice sessions on a wall. No matter what climbers say about their experience of the climb when it’s over, it isn’t “fun” in any sense of the word when they are engaged in the activity itself.

I’m not a rock climber, but I have finished two regulation marathons. Crossing the finish line of a marathon is an exhilarating experience. No matter how bad you look on the outside when you run the last 100 yards of a 26.2 mile race, you are beginning to feel glorious on the inside.

But you didn’t feel that way 30 minutes before you reached the finish line. Half an hour earlier, you were questioning your sanity, telling yourself that you would never make your body go through such torture again. And during the months of marathon training, you endured all the hard training days when your running was anything but fun. Yet as soon as you cross the finish line, you vow to prepare yourself to run a better race the next time.

I think climbers must feel the same way. What about golfers? Can a golfer practice as hard as it takes to get better and still have fun? I’m not talking about the sense of achievement or inner peace that comes from reaching the summit of a mountain or from crossing the finish line 26 miles after you started. I mean, can a golfer have fun during a hard practice session in a way that a runner or climber cannot?
I can only speak for myself, but my personal answer is “yes.” I think this gives us an insight into the appeal of golf. Since a golfer only needs to put out his maximum physical effort during the swing itself, golf affords a greater opportunity to enjoy the actual playing of the game.

Everything changes in extreme weather, of course. But on a clear, mild day, the game of golf gives players an opportunity to have fun in a way that other games cannot.

**Chopping down on the ball**

Long drives are a result of two things: the speed and position of the clubhead at impact. PGA Tour players achieve a clubhead speed of 120 mph and up. Tiger Woods has been clocked at a speed of nearly 130 mph.

Many beginners hit poor shots off the tee because their ball is on a tee peg that’s too low for the arc of their swing. This causes a player to chop down on the ball, which severely reduces the distance the ball can travel.

The correct height for the ball on the tee peg is easy to check. Place the clubhead of your driver on the ground as if you were preparing to strike the ball. The top of the clubface should be right at the equator of the ball.

If you’re teeing the ball at the correct height and still tend to chop down on the ball too steeply, there’s a simple solution. Simply tee the ball higher to correct the flaw in your swing.

Chopping down on the ball is caused by a swing that’s too vertical. The correct swing is a more rounded and shallower arc that keeps the clubhead lower to the ground as it sweeps away from the ball. Elevating your ball on a higher tee peg will help you develop the correct arc.

When your arc is right, you’ll hit the ball solidly. This correction will add distance to your swing.

**Check the flex in your knees**

If your legs are too rigid in your address position, your whole swing will suffer. One of the tell-tale signs of a high-handicap golfer—even before he hits the first ball—is a lack of flex in the knees. When your legs are straight, it’s impossible to rotate your body correctly as you turn away from the ball in the backswing.

Here’s an easy way to make sure your knees are correctly flexed:
• To get a better feel for the correct body angles, step into your address position. Check your position in a full-length mirror.

• Hold the shaft of your driver or 3 wood down your spine. Gently hold the grip in the fingers of your right hand, in such a way that the clubhead rests next to the seat of your pants. Keep the fingers of your left hand on the shaft, at the level of your lower back.

• Stick out your buttocks in such a way that the shaft of your club runs parallel to your spine.

Repeat this exercise whenever you need to remind yourself of how much to flex your knees in the address.

Flexing your knees too much causes a poor shot as well, although too little flex is a much more common problem. The right flex helps you get to the correct position at the top of the backswing, which prepares the way for a smooth transition into the downswing.

**How to become a better golfer**

Earl Woods said that he always tried to make his son’s practice sessions focused, competitive, and fun. A child can’t be expected to develop a desire to pursue a sport or hobby if it isn’t fun. The same is true for adults. Needless to say, no one is going to invest the time and energy required to become a good golfer if it isn’t fun.

If I can teach you how to have fun learning the fundamentals of the golf swing, I will have accomplished my goal. If you’ve been stuck on a level that’s far below what you’re capable of accomplishing, I can show you how to begin to achieve your full potential as a golfer. But that’s really all I can do in this guide.

You have to do the rest. I have a strong feeling that you already know that, or you wouldn’t be reading this. You want to become a better golfer. The question is, How?

You become a better golfer by doing three things:

• First, by learning how to focus on improving the individual skills involved in the game.

• Second, by working with a coach from time to time, someone who can watch you swing a club and point out what you need to change.
• Third—and this is the most important ingredient—you become a better golfer by learning what it takes to become your own coach.

All of these things take time. Patience is one of the most overlooked qualities in athletes. Yes, athletes have to be “hungry.” But athletes who don’t have the patience that’s required to stick through the frustrations of the learning process usually quit before they accomplish anything that’s worth accomplishing.

Don’t let a bad practice session or a bad round of golf kill your spirit. Be patient. It will all come together faster than you think, as long as you don’t give up.

You’ve already started. For most people, that’s the hardest part. Now just keep working on your swing, and you’ll overcome problems when they arise.
CHAPTER 6

“Discouraging as it may sound, I must tell you that as long as your legs are in lousy shape you’re never going to come anywhere close to reaching your full golfing potential.”
— Jack Nicklaus

Strength, Flexibility, and Conditioning

Tiger Woods has the most accurate and powerful swing in golf. His drives travel 300 yards. He is the youngest golfer to win the Masters. And although he has gone through two swing changes in his professional career, his golf swing today is basically the same as it was when he was three years old.

The most visible difference between Tiger and the rest of the field at a PGA Tour event is Tiger’s superior level of conditioning. Tiger Woods is walking proof of the fact that distance comes from the perfect blend of strength, flexibility, and conditioning.

Tiger is the best conditioned athlete on the professional golf tour today. Whenever he has a chance, he likes to work out with good friend Roger Federer, the top tennis player in the world.

That piece of information alone should put to rest the notion that golfers don’t have to be in such good physical condition as top performers in other sports.

For every Tiger Woods on the Pro Tour there’s a golfer who chain-smokes. But that doesn’t change the importance of strength and conditioning for your golf game. Tiger won his 13th major at Southern Hills, outside Tulsa, Oklahoma, in August, 2007, as the competition wilted in 102-degree heat over the 72 holes of the PGA Championship.

Don’t let anybody tell you that conditioning didn’t have a lot to do with who carried the Wannamaker trophy home that day. Some of the golfers didn’t even play a practice round before teeing off on the first day of competition, explaining that it was just too hot.

If you haven’t played sports or worked out on a regular basis for some time, taking up golf is a fun way to get fit. Golf is a wonderful way to start living a more active and healthy lifestyle.

Nothing in this chapter is more important than what you’re going to read next: Don’t use a golf cart unless it’s the only way you can get around the course. Walk. If somebody else wants to ride around in a cart, that’s fine. Let them carry your bag in the cart. But don’t get in with them.
Golfers walk four to five hours during a normal round. Jack Nicklaus lost 20 pounds in 1969, which increased his stamina and helped him move faster through the ball. Taking off the weight made Nicklaus feel better about himself, both physically and mentally.

Within two months of making a commitment to a more active lifestyle, you’ll start to feel and look like a new person. Then your friends may realize that it’s time for them to get out of the cart, too. By that time, you’ll be in such good condition that carrying your bag will be a breeze.

**Upper body conditioning**

The movement of the upper body in a golf swing is completely unlike upper body movements in other sports. In both tennis and baseball, the swing is a fundamental part of the game, but the correct arc of the club in a golf swing is different from the way that a tennis player swings a racket, and even more different from the way that a baseball player swings a bat.

The only thing that a baseball swing has in common with a golf swing is the obvious fact that the same grip can be used in both sports. Aside from this similarity, a golf swing requires a type of body rotation and arm movements that are unfamiliar to both tennis and baseball players.

That’s why the correct golf swing feels unnatural at first to people who have played either of these other two sports before taking up golf. If you have any experience in baseball, softball, or any of the various racket sports, your natural instinct will lead you to start swinging a golf club in a way that feels natural.

If you are fortunate enough to have a good coach at your side during the learning process, you’ll constantly be reminded of what you need to change in your golf swing. It may not feel natural at first, but just ignore your feeling. Realize that you really do have to learn a few new movements in order to swing a golf club correctly, no matter how successful you’ve been in other sports where a swinging motion is part of the game.

Don’t rush things. Just remember that it takes constant practice to form new habits. Researchers have discovered that a new habit can be formed in as little as about 21 days, if the new habit is reinforced continually.

Even if you don’t have the opportunity to get to a range or practice tee where you can actually hit a ball, it’s important to reinforce your new body movements and angles as often as possible during the early learning period.
And if you suspect that the mechanics of your golf swing are faulty, even though you’ve been playing for years, let me be the first to congratulate you. Many players never reach this crucial realization, and consequently their handicaps never come down over the years.

If you find yourself in this category, there’s good news for you, too. Old habits can be broken and replaced by new habits in the same time frame—about 21 days—if you make a conscious effort to reinforce the new habit on a daily basis.

Here’s a fast, effective, and fun exercise for teaching your body the correct rotation for a winning swing. This exercise is great for increasing your flexibility. Be sure to take it easy, especially if you haven’t worked out for a few years:

• Take a club (any iron will do) and hold it at each end behind your head, letting the shaft rest on your neck. Keep your hands up at shoulder level, and be sure to keep the shaft of the club parallel to the ground.

• Try to stand in the perfect posture for beginning the backswing. I can’t overemphasize the importance of correct posture. The right posture encourages your upper body to move through this exercise as it should in a correct golf swing.

• Rotate your body to the right (or to the left, if you’re a left-handed player). The point is to turn in the direction that you turn through the backswing. The shaft of your club will point to the ground in front of you if your posture is correct and your knees are properly flexed. If the shaft is still parallel to the ground, your upper body and knees have failed to maintain the correct angles.

• This movement of the upper body away from the ball in the backswing is known as the coil. This is the golfer’s wind-up; this movement begins to store power that will be transferred to the ball at impact. If you feel that your upper body is trying to rotate in opposition to your legs and feet, you’re doing everything right. That’s the way a correct coil should feel. Be sure your knees stay flexed, but don’t flex too much, or you will lose power and control of the swing.

• Finally, emulate the downswing and follow-through by rotating your body to the left (or to the right in the case of left-handed golfers). Don’t let your shoulders fall as you twist through the downswing. Try to keep your shoulders moving along a steady plane.

No matter how athletic you are, always start slow. Don’t increase your tempo until your back muscles are warmed up. Even pros can injure themselves by pulling too hard when their muscles are cold.

This is a wonderful exercise for learning to feel the correct rotation of your upper body through the backswing and downswing. The beauty of this exercise is that you can do it
at home for a few minutes at least once a day. It's also a great way to stay loose and manage stress at the office.

A great amount of literature has been written about the benefits of stretching and flexing exercises, so I won't go into the details here. Try this exercise, at least once or twice a day for 21 days, and you'll be amazed at the difference it makes in your golf swing, no matter how long you've been swinging a club.

This is also a great way to stay flexible and focused on the correct mechanics during a practice session or a round of golf. Repeating this exercise after every dozen shots will keep your upper body rotation fine-tuned.

**Drills that work wonders for your swing**

The goal of swinging drills is to teach you to *swing through the ball*. The importance of learning to swing through the ball is one thing that golf shares with tennis and baseball. In all three sports, you don't swing to the point of impact; you swing through the point of impact. Swinging through is your last chance to add distance and direction to the ball.

Over the years, golf instructors have used just about every heavy, flexible object imaginable as a prop for teaching students the elements of a better swing—everything from sand bags to old tires. You can buy an impact bag at many pro stores for a swing drill, or simply create your own homemade impact bag.

Here's how to get the most out of an impact bag:

1. Place your impact bag on the ground and set up in the correct address and posture.

2. Swing into the bag for all you're worth. Since the impact bag provides much greater resistance than a ball, this drill is ideal for strengthening your wrists.

3. At the same time, your lead leg will naturally start to firm up in preparation for the increased resistance at impact, which is *exactly* what should happen when you attack a golf ball. This, in turn, encourages you to transfer weight to your lead leg, which is an important part of the transition from the backswing to the downswing.

Your prop should be much larger than the ball. Part of the effectiveness of this exercise lies in the fact that you can't miss the ball, which encourages you to allow your body to move more freely through the swing.

A lot of good things happen when you practice your swing with an impact bag. This is another great exercise to do at home, when you simply don't have time to get to a
range or course. If you’re worried about divots in the back yard, you can do this drill on a small mat to protect the turf.

Myths die hard, and one of the myths that amateur golfers cling to concerns the importance of hand power. The truth is that hand power is overrated.

Specific exercises to strengthen the grip are not as effective as exercises designed to strengthen the muscles of the arm and wrist. Swinging into an impact bag is one of the best exercises for strengthening these muscles.

**Swing two clubs at once**

Another exercise that’s very effective for building your strength and improving the mechanics of your swing is to swing two clubs at once, in the same way that baseball players do when they are next in line to bat.

Here’s how to use a two-club drill to increase your strength:

1. Take two clubs of approximately the same length. Mid irons make good clubs for this exercise. Try a 5 and a 6 iron, or a 5 and a 7 iron if you don’t have every club.
2. Hold the clubs in a baseball grip. Be sure your address position and posture are correct.
3. Swing the clubs slowly back and forth. Easy does it. If you’ve watched baseball players do this, you will have noticed that the right way to do this drill is slow and smooth. Even highly conditioned professional athletes can strain a muscle, or worse, by overdoing it.
4. Focus on your body rotation. Turn away from the ball; sweep the clubs slowly back and up to the top of the backswing; step into the transition with your lead knee; and follow through as you would with a normal golf shot.
5. When you reach the end of your swing, hold your position for a few seconds, trying to stay perfectly balanced. The heel of your right foot should be lifted up, with only the toes touching the ground.

If you ever have the opportunity to attend a professional tournament in person, you’ll notice that the pros use this drill to loosen up before hitting their first tee shot.

**One-armed swing drills**

No matter how new to the game of golf you are, by now you’ve started to understand—and to feel through first-hand experience—that the perfect swing is all about
coordinating the movements of one part of your body with the movements of another part.

The correct swing coordinates the movement of the lower body with the movement of the upper body, and the movements on the right side of your body with movements on the left side.

Getting a perfect swing is all about blending these separate and different movements into a seamless, smooth, unified routine that repeats itself every time you swing. Easier said than done, I know. But people learn to do it all over the world, all the time. And so can you, if you are willing to put time and energy into mastering the fundamentals.

Try this drill to fine-tune your coordination:

1. Grip any club with your right hand all the way down on the shaft, next to the clubhead.
2. Keep your left arm straight as you sweep the grip end of the club all the way back.
3. Concentrate on bending your right arm as you do in a correct two-handed backswing.
4. Whip the club through the ball zone (although you never use a ball in this exercise). You’ll hear the club woosh through the air—that means you’re getting plenty of speed into it.
5. Feel your right arm straighten in the downswing.

One of the things that this exercise does is to teach you the correct release as you swing through impact. When you feel comfortable doing this drill, you can start making half shots with just one hand. (To make a half shot, tee the ball and hold the club near the bottom of the grip, in the same place where your speed hand takes the club in your usual two-handed grip.)

Try this one-armed drill to build up strength and coordination in your left side:

1. Grip a medium iron (a 6 or a 7 iron is ideal for this drill).
2. Start off with the correct address and posture, as in all drills, and hold the club in your left hand.
3. Keep your right hand in the pocket of your trousers so it doesn’t interfere with your swing.
4. Make three-quarter swings, by raising your left hand to about the level of your head.

5. Be sure to do this drill in a smooth, slow, consistent tempo.

Concentrate on accelerating through the impact zone. As you get a feel for the weight of the clubhead at the end of the backswing, you’ll soon develop a swing that naturally encourages correct rotation of your forearm and correct wrist action.

Concentrate on smooth motion and consistent rhythm. If you try to swing the club too fast in this drill, you’ll destroy your tempo and run the risk of injuring yourself. If a three-quarter swing is too hard, you can do this drill with half swings.

As in the previous drill, you can do this drill without a ball to develop a feeling for the correct motion. Once your strength and coordination improve, start hitting a ball or put tee pegs in the ground (without a ball) and practice flipping the pegs out of the ground.

Always warm up for at least 10 to 15 minutes before a round of golf. After warming up, Jack Nicklaus started a round slowly to release tension. On the first tee, all he wanted to do was hit the ball square by swinging slowly. Start with a swinging exercise like the first drill in this chapter. It’s especially important to warm up the back muscles before teeing off.

**Flexibility—the golfer’s secret weapon**

Ben Hogan was 5-foot-seven and weighed 140 pounds; not a large man by any standard. But Hogan drove the ball longer than bigger and stronger players because of his flexibility.

Sam Snead holds the record for most PGA wins—81. Known by the nickname of “Slammin’ Sammy,” Snead believed that his power came from his flexibility, which allowed him to make a fuller body turn.

Tiger Woods says that what most impressed him about Snead was his amazing flexibility. When Snead was well over 70, he could still kick his leg up and touch the ceiling with his foot. Tiger says that when they played a round together, he was astonished to see Snead pick the ball out of the cup without bending his knees at all. I’d like you to remember two things: First, flexibility determines how long you’ll be able to swing a golf club well. Second, flexibility determines how well you swing a golf club, at any age.

Make time to do each of the drills outlined in this chapter at least once a day. You can do a complete routine that includes each drill in less than 30 minutes. Keep it up for six weeks without cheating. After six weeks you’ll be amazed at the difference in your stamina and your flexibility.
The biggest change will be in your golf swing. By improving your strength, your flexibility, and your conditioning, these drills will improve the distance and accuracy of every ball you hit.
CHAPTER 7

“Every day you miss practicing, it will take you one day longer to get good.”
— Ben Hogan

The Right Equipment

I think the universal attraction of the game of golf has to do with the fact that it appeals to the child in all of us. Like the ancient, unnamed Scottish shepherd who started it all by trying to hit his pebbles straighter and truer than the other shepherds could hit their pebbles, we want to play the game as well as we can.

And the pleasure we get out of the game increases in direct proportion to our ability to play it well.

We live in an era of “flavors.” No matter what you want to buy, the choices get more numerous all the time. Golf equipment is no exception when it comes to an abundance of good options.

First, let’s take a look at the clubs. Woods are numbered from 1 to 5, irons from 2 to 9. Throw in a pitching wedge, a sand wedge, and a putter for a full set of clubs.

Low-numbered clubs have less loft—less slant in the clubface. They achieve greater distance than higher-numbered clubs. But since they have a straight clubface, they don’t lift the ball as much. A straight clubface puts sidespin on the ball, so it’s easier to hook or slice a shot made with a 1 wood or a 2 iron than, say, the same shot made with a 3 wood or a 5 iron.

Low-numbered clubs also have longer shafts, which means the player must stand farther from the ball and achieve a higher swing plane in order to return the clubface correctly to the ball.

Beginners can learn the game quite nicely by using a reduced set of clubs: a 2 or a 3 wood for driving the ball off the tee; 9, 7, 5, and 3 irons for fairway play; a sand wedge; and a putter.

Choosing the right clubs

Traditional clubs concentrate most of their weight behind the center of the clubface. The center of the clubface of a traditional iron is called the “sweet spot.” A player that hits the ball squarely in the sweet spot will achieve maximum distance and accuracy.
The problem with traditional, center-weighted clubs is that they give players a very small margin for error: A shot made with a traditional club that doesn’t hit the sweet spot will be well off the ball-to-target line.

Mishitting the ball with a traditional driver can leave the golfer with the need to play an ugly lie in the rough in order to save a hole. Nevertheless, the majority of professional golfers and low-handicap players prefer to use traditional clubs for the control and accuracy that they provide for the player who works hard enough to gain mastery over them.

Another type of club, known as a game-improvement club, has the weight evenly distributed around the edge of the clubface. The great advantage of perimeter-weighted clubs is that they increase the size of the hitting area. If the player hits a ball off the edge of the club, the shot won’t be nearly as ugly as a shot that’s badly toed by a golfer using a traditional center-weighted club.

Perimeter-weighted clubs are ideal for beginners. Some of the world’s most successful professional golfers use perimeter-weighted clubs. Beginners can feel free to use these clubs without worrying about any sort of stigma—or illegality—attached to their use.

Game-improvement clubs are the best choice for the complete beginner, as well as for the high-handicap player who wants to become more consistent.

The greatest variety of all the clubs is found in the putter. The subject of putting is practically a book in itself.

The important thing to remember is that choosing the right putter is a highly personal matter. Trying out as many different putters as you can is the only way to find the one that’s right for your game. Visit a pro shop and try different types of putters.

If you discover a putter a few months or years down the line that seems to take your game to a higher level, don’t feel that you made a hasty decision when you bought your first putter.

Growth, learning, improvement, and transformation are a part of the game; over the course of a lifetime, they are what make the game worthwhile. Look at it this way: Whatever you spend on equipment, fees, and memberships, you’re more than likely to save on medical bills over the years by becoming stronger, fitter, and more flexible.

**Wood, metal, or graphite?**

Woods are made of metal and graphite today, as well as real wood. The first “woods” were made of wood, of course, and wood is still the material of choice for the professionals who play the game of golf at the highest level. Veteran players say that
wood lets them shape shots with greater precision than drivers made with metal or graphite.

Traditional woods and traditional irons will magnify any flaws in the golfer’s swing. But they give good players much more control of the direction and spin of a ball than metal or graphite clubs.

In many cases, metal “woods” no longer look like traditional woods, although they have become the first choice of most beginners and amateur players. Metal woods are made with hollow shells, which allows the weight to be more evenly distributed over the entire clubface.

However, the majority of professional players prefer to use drivers made of real wood. They feel that at the highest level of play, the disadvantages of perimeter-weighted clubs outweigh the advantages. Most professionals believe that it’s more difficult to control the precise flight of a shot with a perimeter-weighted club.

Many golfers claim that the best performance available today comes from graphite clubs. They are the most expensive clubs on the market, so complete beginners probably shouldn’t invest in graphite until they’re sure that they plan to play the game for years to come.

Wood is unique in the feel of the club and the sound of the sweet spot on the ball at impact. Many players prefer wood for this reason alone. If you’re serious about becoming a skilled player, you’ll probably want to have at least one wood in your bag.

Shafts are made of steel or graphite. The most important thing to consider in a shaft is the grade of flex: soft, regular, or stiff. Professional players use a stiff shaft—the stronger and more skilled the golfer, the stiffer the shaft needs to be. Beginners should usually stay away from the stiffer shafts; beginners will feel more comfortable playing with a soft or regular shaft.

The advantage of graphite is that it’s stronger and lighter than steel; a graphite shaft allows more mass and weight to be concentrated in the clubhead, where it does the most good.

How to know when you need a club fitting

There is no way to custom-fit clubs to an individual player without working directly with a pro. If you plan to buy a set of new clubs, ask a local pro to do a club fitting.

A club fitting will last from 30 to 45 minutes. By watching you hit balls and by assessing your body type, a pro will be able to recommend the type of clubs that are best suited to your swing and physique.
Standard shafts are made for a male golfer who stands 5-foot-10. If you’re not in that height range, you should definitely get fitted by a pro.

Before you buy the most expensive graphite driver on the market, visit a pro shop. Ask the pro if you can play a few holes with a driver to make sure it’s right for your game. If a graphite club adds confidence and ability to your swing, you’ll be happy in the long run that you spent the extra money.

If you are committed to becoming a good player, graphite is a good choice. The money you spend will provide benefits that go beyond any improvement in your score—the commitment you make to become a better player will pay huge dividends over the years in terms of your mental, physical, and emotional health.

When you visit a pro shop, be sure to try different types of clubs. You may decide that a less expensive metal club is all you need. If you feel confident after hitting a few balls, there’s no reason to spend more money in the early stages of your learning process.

**Choosing the right balls**

Balls are very much like putters: Different kinds of balls suit players of different skill levels, so it’s important to try out as many different types of balls as you can. Professionals use a 3-piece ball with a rubber center.

Some professional balls have a soft cover that allows players to achieve maximum control of spin. These are the most expensive balls, and it’s easy to damage them with a mishit.

The best ball for amateur players to use is a high-compression two-piece ball, which lets a strong player get maximum distance from a shot. *Titleist* and *Maxfli* are two of the most popular brands available. These balls have a rubber center and a durable cover.

A dozen new *Titleist* golf balls cost approximately $25. This type of ball is a good choice for the beginner. It drives farther than other balls, although it’s harder to control.

That means it’s harder to shape shots with this type of ball. But that isn’t an important consideration, for the simple fact that beginners need to put in a lot of playing and practice time before they can start to think about the fine points of shot-shaping and course management.

**How much does it all cost?**
A complete set of top-of-the-line clubs can cost up to $2,000. The best drivers cost from $300 to $600. A good putter can cost up to $300. A set of the best irons can cost up to $1,200.

The best balls cost as much as $50 to $60 a dozen. Sounds expensive, but when you think about the fact that many high-performance laptops have a price tag of $2,000 and up, it’s not a bad investment at all for equipment that you will enjoy for the rest of your life.

The good news for budget-conscious golfers is that it’s possible to start playing for only a fraction of the cost of top-of-the-line equipment. You can find great deals on golf equipment today, on the Internet as well as at pro shops.

A beginner can find a good driver for around $35 to $40. A set of irons can be purchased for as little as $100 to $200. Many good putters can be found for $20 and under.

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of online sites that sell new balls for as little as $10 to $12 per dozen.

And don’t despise the bargains available on used clubs. Getting a feel for the different types of clubs involves a trial-and-error learning process that takes time. Beginners can never go wrong by starting off with a set of used clubs.

Don’t be afraid to buy a set of used clubs at a garage sale. Whatever you start out with, you may discover after a year or two that your game would benefit by switching to a different type of club.

Check out flea markets and classified ads as well as Internet sites. If you look around, you can find a complete set of used clubs for $100 or less.

The simple fact is this: You won’t feel a huge difference between the garage-sale bargain clubs and new top-of-the-line equipment until you gain experience and a certain degree of mastery over the golf swing.

If you plan to play regularly enough to justify the investment in a new set of clubs, make sure you visit a pro shop before you spend a lot of money. Tell the pro about your goals, your level of experience, and how often you think you’ll be playing and practicing.

You can find competitive prices on all major brands by surfing the Web, but only a pro can evaluate your swing by watching you hit some balls. A pro’s suggestions on the best type of clubs for you will add tremendous value to any purchase you decide to make, and it may save you from making a costly mistake.
You can also save money by buying used golf balls. Practice balls have nicks, club marks, scratches, and discolorations. Name-brand used balls, such as Titleist and Callaway, cost no more than half the price of new balls.

Here’s a sampling of some of the best bargains I found by doing a quick Internet search:

- A dozen used golf balls for $5
- 1 dozen Callaway used balls for $5.95
- 100 Dunlop used balls for $30
- A complete set of new men’s or women’s clubs for $300
- 3 wood, 7 iron, wedge, putter, and carry bag for $100
- 3 wood, 6 iron, 8 iron, wedge, putter, and carry bag for $120

Municipal courses are great places for beginners to practice their game; it costs much less to play a round at a public course than to pay for a round at a club. A 9-hole course is a great option for budget and time-conscious golfers.
CHAPTER 8

“If you’re not having fun playing this great game, do something to change your perspective. Having fun leads to great golf and vice versa. And don’t forget to take time to smell the roses along the way.”
— Tiger Woods

Keeping Everything in Perspective

We all know golfers who fall into the rut of hitting bucket after bucket of practice balls on the driving range without ever seeing any improvement in their game. You may have gone through a similar period in your own game at some time. It’s a lot easier to fall into a rut than it is to get out of one.

There is a story told about a group of friends who took their Jeeps into the Canadian backwoods on a hunting trip before the onset of winter. The muddy roads had deep ruts worn into them. At one crossing, a road sign simply said: “Choose your rut carefully. You will be in it for the next thirty kilometers.”

Don’t expect to master the fundamentals of the golf swing in a month. Make a commitment to work on your grip, your stance, and your swing for the next six months. An average golfer who masters the fundamentals of the game can come very close to breaking 80 within six months of starting to work on the skills covered in this guide.

Mastering the mental aspects

You’ll continue learning how to play golf for as long as you play the game. That is as true for Tiger Woods as for a golfer whose goal is to break 80. And one of the most important parts of the learning process is learning how to coach yourself.

Coaching yourself means checking the fundamentals of your swing on a regular basis to correct flaws before they develop into ruts. It also means learning to master the mental aspects of the game. Volumes have been written on the topic of sports psychology. Some of the most important lessons I have learned in life were learned on a fairway, a marathon course, or a tennis court.

I learned to play the best tennis of my life by practicing with a good friend who, at the age of 15, was one of the top junior players in Latin America. He lost to a young Goran Ivanisevic at the Junior U.S. Open that year. After the tournament, my friend was very candid about his experience.

He told me that there was no difference between his ability to make shots and Ivanisevic’s shot-making ability. What, in my friend’s opinion, was the difference?
Ivanisevic had better control of the mental aspects of the game, which is why my friend came home and Ivanisevic went on to become the No. 1 ranked player in the world.

Becoming a good golfer is as much about mastering the mind as it is about mastering the fundamentals of the golf swing. When things get ugly on a round of golf, staying in control of your game requires the right attitude as well as a mechanically sound swing.

The scope of this guide doesn’t allow me to go into the depth that the topic deserves; there are many good books available on the subject of sports psychology. Some of the best have been written by senior golf writers, avid amateurs, and Tour champions.

Every good instructional book on the game of golf contains a chapter or section on winning golf psychology. Mastering the game that goes on in your head is vital to your mastery of the golf swing and enjoyment of the game.

It's such an important factor that I want to use this last chapter as an opportunity to take a fresh look at this crucial topic.

**The mind of a tiger**

Tiger Woods has won 13 majors in 11 years on the PGA Tour. At the rate Tiger is winning major championships—more than one every year—in five years or less he will tie Jack Nicklaus’ record of 18 majors.

Tiger won his first 13 majors in 44 attempts. Nicklaus won 11 majors in his first 44 attempts, which puts Tiger roughly two years ahead of Nicklaus. In his first 44 majors, Tiger was a combined 120 shots under par. Nicklaus was 32 shots *over par* in his first 44 majors.

These statistics are clear proof of the extent of Tiger’s domination of the game. Yet Tiger’s victories are far from automatic. After blowing a lead in the final round of the 2001 Bay Hill Invitational, Tiger found himself trailing Phil Mickelson with three holes to play. Back-to-back birdies on the 16th and 17th holes set up a showdown between the two rivals on the 18th.

Tiger’s tee shot hit a spectator. The spectator, who was not hurt, kept the ball from going out-of-bounds. Facing a 192-yard shot to a green protected on the front side by water, Tiger hit a perfect second shot that left the ball 15 feet from the hole. He made the put for birdie and won the tournament by one stroke.

“Never did I let a negative thought enter my head,” explains Tiger. “Control yourself and you control your destiny.”
We can hardly talk about golf today without talking about Tiger Woods. And that's a good thing. Positive role models have become very scarce in professional sports. In Major League Baseball, Barry Bonds has broken Henry Aaron's home-run record, but it doesn't really count because of the dark cloud of alleged steroid use that hangs over Bonds wherever he goes.

In the NBA, players fight with opponents on the court—and sometimes with fans off the court. Tim Donaghy, an ex-NBA referee, has pleaded guilty to felony charges in a betting scandal. As I write this paragraph, Donaghy faces 25 years in prison. In the NFL, star players like Michael Vick are making more news by breaking the law than by breaking tackles. Vick’s NFL career may be over because of his role in a dog-fighting conspiracy.

Through it all, there seems to be a general sense, in spite of the high TV ratings and popularity of these major sports, that the stars of today are different from the stars of yesterday. Amid the ubiquitous tattoos and body piercings that have become part of the look of professional athletes, there is a widespread feeling that athletes today are not made of the same stuff as athletes of an earlier era.

Professional sports have become a greedy business where the bottom line is king. Money has displaced character and integrity as the fuel that drives modern sports. No one makes more money than Tiger Woods. But Tiger has something that many star athletes in professional sports today don't even seem to consider a virtue anymore: Tiger has character.

There's something else about Tiger that's worth pointing out; he put the fun back in golf for millions of people. He has shown us that having fun leads to better golf, and that better golf is more fun. Tiger has made everyone else on the Tour a better golfer, too.

**The only thing you can control is your next action**

In 1996, Tiger came from five strokes back to win his third straight U.S. Amateur Title. Although Tiger has won 13 majors in just 10 years on the PGA Tour, he has never come from behind on the last day to win a major championship. That only proves how hard it is to win.

The most impressive thing about Tiger's game is that it keeps improving. After winning the 2007 PGA Championship, he said there was no comparison between his game now and his game in 2000, when he won three majors.

Tiger explained that in 2000 he was hitting the ball long and high, but he hadn't learned very much about how to make shots. He says that he is starting to get a better feel for how to manage the course and how to win tournaments.
How has Tiger managed to become so good? What does it mean to improve? What does it take to keep getting better when you’re the best? Researchers have discovered that talent alone is not a very important determinant of success.

The key to becoming great at something is dedicated practice. Not just any type of practice, but practice that is consciously designed to strengthen a specific ability.

Tiger’s father always made practice fun, focused on a target, and competitive. Earl Woods would not let a practice session become boring. More importantly, he would not let a practice session become unfocused.

Earl Woods wouldn’t let Tiger hit balls just as far as he could; he taught Tiger that hitting balls without aiming at a target was a wasted practice session. Tiger learned at an early age to pick out a target—the third pine tree on the left. And competing with his dad on the practice range kept it fun.

Tiger has said that the quality of his practice sessions today has nothing to do with how long he practices. Some of his best practice sessions last no more than 20 minutes. Tiger knows that a productive practice session is highly focused.

Ben Hogan said that he would always make notes after a practice session to record what he was working on and how much, if any, progress he had made. That’s the secret of dedicated practice.

Tiger has improved because he knows the importance of dedicated practice sessions. Practice doesn’t make perfect—perfect practice makes perfect. Tiger also knows how to keep the game fun. Watching Tiger play golf is fun in a way that watching Barry Bonds hit home runs isn’t.

**The measure of a man**

Why play golf in the first place? For relaxation? For health and fitness? For companionship or networking? These are all good reasons to spend time and money on a hobby. But the best reason of all is for the sheer joy of playing the game.

Why do we try to play golf better? I think it’s because the better we play, the more we enjoy the game. Tiger said that his 2007 PGA Championship was his most satisfying yet. Why? Because now his own family was there to enjoy it with him.

That’s a scary thought for all the other players on the Tour. If Tiger is enjoying golf more than ever, he isn’t just going to break Nicklaus’ record of 18 major championships—he’s going to obliterate it. Thirty majors are within Tiger’s reach if he keeps striving to improve.
There is a grandfather clock at Inverness Club near Toledo, Ohio, which was given to the Club by Walter Hagen. An inscription on the clock says:

God measures men by what they are,
Not by what they in wealth possess.
This vibrant message chimes afar,
The voice of Inverness.

One of the reasons that Tiger is a better golfer today is that he is learning about priorities. About the things that are most important. He is starting to hear the message.

Paul Azinger is another player who has his priorities right. From 1987 to 1993, Zinger won 11 championships on the PGA Tour, including the 1993 PGA Championship at Inverness.

Azinger was the 1987 PGA Player of the Year, even though “The Zinger Swing” was criticized and mocked by commentators, writers, and other golfers. He won the 1993 PGA by defeating Greg Norman on the second hole of a sudden-death playoff. Azinger played through the pain in his right shoulder to win at Inverness. He didn’t know he had cancer.
He felt the pain in his shoulder more intensely when he lifted the Wannamaker Trophy. Soon afterwards he was diagnosed with lymphoma in his right shoulder blade. He missed most of the 94 Tour, but he came back in time to defend his PGA Title.

Azinger defended his title at the 1994 PGA Championship at Southern Hills, where Tiger Woods won his thirteenth major. He shot a 75 the first day and a 74 the second. He missed the cut by three strokes, but he was back.

**It's only a game**

Azinger received the Ben Hogan Award in 1995, given for accomplishment in golf despite serious illness or injury. Ben Hogan and his wife were nearly killed in a head-on collision with a Greyhound bus in 1949. His doctors feared that Hogan would never walk again.

Hogan recovered and went on to win nine majors, including the only British Open he entered. Over his career, he won 63 PGA tournaments.

Hogan became the greatest hitter in the game, but he had to go through many unsuccessful seasons on the PGA Tour before he found his swing. He was once asked how many shots he was happy with in an average round. “Never more than two—usually less,” Hogan said.
1953 was Hogan’s best year on the PGA Tour, when he won the Masters, the U.S. Open, and the British Open. He didn’t have a chance to win the PGA that year, because the American tournament started before the British Open was over. It would be 47 years before another golfer would match Hogan’s three major championships in one year. Tiger Woods did it in 2000.

By now, you can probably guess who my favorite players are: Tommy Armour, Paul Azinger, Ben Hogan, Tiger Woods, and—here comes the surprise—Jean Van de Velde. The guy who blew the British Open doesn’t seem to belong on a list that includes golfers who all won majors, but he is there for a reason.

The reason: Van de Velde’s comments after losing the 1999 British Open revealed him as a true champion. He refused to sulk about his collapse on the last hole at Carnoustie. He didn’t let it get him down. Sure, he said, he was devastated. “But it’s a game,” Van de Velde said, “There are worse things in life. We all read the newspapers and terrible things happen to people.”

Sometimes terrible things happen to golfers. When Ben Hogan was nine years old, his father committed suicide. Hogan may have witnessed his father’s death; he never talked about it. Ben Hogan was not a talkative man. Other golfers say that he rarely spoke at all during a round of golf, other than to ask who had the closest lay.

When Hogan won the British Open at Carnoustie in 1953, it was so cold that he carried pocket warmers around the course. He called them “little Victorian things,” and said they were useful for keeping golf balls warm. (Warm balls travel farther than cold balls.)

Hogan never talked publicly about the pain he must have felt in the cold at Carnoustie. The collision that nearly killed him four years earlier left him with bad circulation for the rest of his life, as well as a double fracture of the pelvis.

I don’t know what other people do in a car crash. I think that most crashes happen before we have time to think about what we’re going to do. But Ben Hogan was no ordinary man. He was a champion. And champions have a plan for every situation.

A champion golfer has a plan for every hole of the course. He knows how he is going to play a hole before he tees off. He plans every shot before he sets up to address the ball.

Remember this every time you hit a shot: Picture the shot in your mind before you step up to the ball. Picture yourself making a perfect shot. Don’t think about all the bad things that can happen.
Judging by the way Hogan reacted at the moment of the collision, he must have had a plan. He must have mentally rehearsed what he would do, just as he had a plan for the 18th hole at Carnoustie.

At impact, Hogan threw his torso to the right and covered his wife. The force of the collision turned the steering wheel into a missile, propelling it into the driver’s seat. If Hogan’s upper body had still been in the driver’s seat, he would have been killed.

Ben Hogan was exercising utmost caution at the time of his near-fatal collision. The fog was so dense that Hogan was driving at a speed of 10 mph when his car collided with a Greyhound bus on a bridge. Sometimes bad things happen even when you exercise extreme caution; sometimes playing it safe is the most dangerous thing you can do.

Is that what Van de Velde was thinking when he went for the green instead of laying up on the 72nd hole of the British Open, before his triple bogey forced him into a playoff that he lost?

Van de Velde later said that there are no easy tee shots on the 18th at Carnoustie, not even when you have a three-stroke lead. Ben Hogan knew there are no guarantees that you will live another day, not even when you’re driving at a speed of 10 mph.

People who love the game of golf love it for the same reasons. But we all have our own individual reasons for loving the game, too. I think you can understand now why I love the game of golf.

I do not know whether it attracts people who already have character and integrity, or whether it helps to build these qualities in the men and women that are attracted to the game. I suppose it’s a little of both.

As Van de Velde said after losing the British Open, “It’s only a game.” And since it’s only a game, I hope you’ll try to do the best you can and learn to enjoy the outcome of a round of golf, whether your score is good or bad.

I don’t care if I never see another Super Bowl. I stopped watching Major League Baseball and the NBA a long time ago. For me, there will always be a sense of something special in the air during Masters Week.

There will always be a reason to watch the British Open, although we never know what the reason is until we get to the 72nd hole. That is why it is such a special game.

It’s only a game, but I’m glad it’s the game Earl Woods taught his son to play. If you’re a parent, there is no better game to teach your children than the game of golf. Your child might not become the next Tiger Woods, but it would be just as wonderful if he were to become the next Jean Van de Velde.
As you teach your child the game of golf, or as you learn to play it for the first time, remember the grandfather clock that Walter Hagen gave Inverness as a token of his love for the game. Teach your children that God measures people by what they are, not by the wealth they possess.

When you do, you will give them the greatest gift that parents can give their children—an enthusiasm for life and a belief that they can overcome all the odds against them.

The greatest lesson I have learned from golf is that the game produces many champions who never win a championship on the golf course. And sometimes they come back from the greatest trial a person can face to win one more tournament on the PGA Tour, as Paul Azinger did when he came back from cancer to win the 2000 Sony Open.

You should not try to emulate “the Zinger swing.” The swing that works for Paul Azinger probably won’t work for you. But you will not go wrong if you adopt the Zinger philosophy.

Azinger explained his outlook on life when he was starting his comeback from cancer: “From now on,” he said in 1995, “I want to live every day as a gift from God.”

Azinger hasn’t won again since 2000, but he’s still playing a good game of golf. And at the age of 47, he’s still winning money on the PGA Tour. “I’m playing to win,” Azinger once said, “But then, in many ways, I have already won.”

As you practice the techniques outlined in this guide, remember that golf is a game. Play it as well as you can, and have fun. Above all, I hope you will keep your priorities in the right order. It’s never an easy thing to do. I struggle every day in the battle to keep my priorities straight, just as I struggle to perfect my golf swing.

I have never played well enough to get to a place like Carnoustie. But sometimes, when I hit my best shot, the ball flies as straight and true as when Tiger hits his best shot. Miracle moments like that make it all worthwhile.

And when those miracle moments happen, I seem to be living on a level I’m barely conscious of when I’m not in such close harmony with the rhythm of my own body.

When those miracle moments happen on a golf course—when I’m not thinking about anything at all other than the shot—I somehow seem to be more aware of the simple fact that life is the greatest miracle of all.
As Tiger Woods noted in his wonderful book, *How I Play Golf*, “Playing great golf is much more than developing solid fundamentals and sound technique. It’s about keeping everything in perspective.”

Practice your swing, eat healthy foods, stay physically fit, and live every day as a gift from God.

I can’t guarantee that adopting Tiger Woods’ and Paul Azinger’s philosophy will help you win your next club championship.

But I can promise you this: When you follow their advice, you’ve already won.