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MAINTAINING PLAYING ABILITY

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## Maintaining Playing Ability

### Introduction

In my thesis I will attempt to show you ways in which you can maintain or improve upon an already sound golf game. The areas that I will key my discussions on are, a) practice habits and routine, b) course management, c) goal setting and self management, and d) mental attitude.

In my thesis, I have assumed that you are an accomplished player, with a reasonably sound swing, and at this point you are not worrying about the mechanics of the swing, but that you are more concerned with maintaining and gradually improving the game that you already possess.

I will not be discussing swing mechanics, for a golfer can have a so called "perfect swing" and be a poor player of the game, or it is also possible to have a poor swing and play the game of golf very well. Although having a sound golf swing is helpful, swinging the golf club and playing the game are not totally related.

I will keep my thesis strictly to ways that will help you perform to the best of your ability, day in and day out.

## 1. Practice Habits

Indiana basketball coach Bobby Knight once said "Too much is made of the will to win. It's the will to prepare to win that's crucial." Although he was referring to basketball, it would apply to golf as well. Being committed to that end means practising and playing with a particular aim in mind and not abandoning that aim until it's accomplished, no matter how long it takes, and no matter how hard you have to work. There is no substitute for hard work.

When practicing try and remember to maintain a practice routine, and have a set plan of action. Always practice to a target, and always concentrate on fundamentals (grip, setup, alignment, ball position, tempo, timing).

Use your preshot routine(1) on every practice shot as well as every shot you hit out on the course. All successful players rely on a precise routine that repeats itself automatically under pressure. Practice this routine until it becomes second nature. An individual routine will vary from one golfer to another but once you have developed your own routine use it on every shot from the driver to the short putts, practice shots included.

The importance of this type of practice can be summed up best in a quote by Jerome D. Travers. " A golfer can practice the development of the right mental condition just as he can practice the development of a swing. Too many people make their practice purely physical.

(1) preshot routine- this is a precise routine used when approaching the ball. It starts from the moment you take a club out of the golf bag, and is an exact sequence of movements, that is repeated on every golf shot. It involves visualizing the shot, placement of the feet, and the number of waggles.

There are two kinds of practice sessions, warm up sessions before each round of golf, in which you are mainly concerned with stretching muscles, loosening up the swing and generally preparing for the days round, and practice sessions where you are working on swing mechanics and or ways to improve your game. This kind of practice takes place after a round of golf or on a day when you are only going to practice and you are not about to play a serious round of golf. No matter which kind of practice session, try and divide your time between hitting full shots and working on the short game (chipping and putting). Fifty percent of the game is around the greens, so fifty percent of your time should be devoted to this part of the game.

#### WARM UP SESSIONS

When warming up try and pick a spot where you are alone and you can avoid distractions. Concentrate solely on preparing for your round. And save experimenting for after the round when things are fresh in your mind, and the pressures of the day are behind you.

When warming up always start with some half shots, giving your muscles time to stretch and warm up. Swinging a golf club is no different than any other physical activity. You should always start with some stretching exercises and gradually bring your heart rate up and slowly warm your muscles. This will help you avoid muscle pulls and sore backs. It will also calm your mind and help clear it of the things you were thinking about just before you arrived at the golf course.

After enough short shots to warm and stretch the muscles, start hitting full shots with one of your short irons, then move

on to your mid-irons, and gradually work up to some full swings with the driver. At each stage of your practice session try and work with each club until you are confident with the way you are hitting that particular club and then move on to the next stage. After working your way through to the driver move over to the practice green to practice your chipping and putting. In each case start with some short, flat easy shots and then gradually increase the distance and difficulty.

When practicing putting start with 3 foot putts and gradually work back in 3 foot increments, making sure that you are confident with a range before moving back to another length.

When chipping start with a 7 or 5 iron and practice your chip and run shots first, again working from close in to further away. Then try the pitch shots with your wedge and sand wedge, and finally some bunker shots. This way you are always building success patterns and you can approach the days round full of confidence.

These warm up sessions should be at least 30 minutes in length and you should try and use the same routine day in and day out. While warming up try and approach every shot using the same pre-shot routine and in the same manner that you will approach every shot during the days round.

#### SWING THOUGHTS

As you warm up try and establish a swing thought that allows you to repeat a good swing. Swing thoughts change constantly, so on the practice tee before your round, when you are learning what your swing is going to be like that day, determine what swing thought will put you on cruise control for the day. If you can not find one immediately, do not panic. Use the swing thought that

worked last time. When you have a swing thought that works, write it down for future reference, along with the specific problem that it helped cure. You'll be surprised how many times the same flaws will reappear. By writing down this information, you will be able to key on knowing what your bad habits are and how to correct them.

#### FIRST TEE

Once you get to the golf course, remember that the first tee shot of the day is neither more or less important than any other shot that you will play, although starting off well does give your spirits a lot of adrenaline. The first shot of the day is more of a mental challenge than a physical challenge but it proves the importance of warming up before you play. By warming up, you go to the tee prepared both physically and mentally and after establishing your day's shot pattern on the practice tee, you can approach the first shot with confidence, knowing in which direction you are likely to hit the shot.

#### PRACTICE SESSIONS

After the round or during a regular practice session is the time to experiment with the swing or work on swing changes or just to try and put the swing in a more consistent groove or repeating motion. During these sessions never stray too far from the basics, those being grip, setup or proper stance, alignment, ball position, proper weight shift, and swing tempo or rhythm. At the start of the session always check your grip first, and then proper alignment. You should try and always lay down some clubs on the ground aiming at a specific target, and use the clubs as a visual aid. This way you are continually working on alignment and ball position. Many times when your game starts to

go a little sour, it is not your swing that has changed, it is because you have gotten out of position, either by incorrect alignment or incorrect ball position. So always, always make it part of your practice routine, to work on alignment and proper setup.

A good routine when experimenting with your swing is to hit all the shots - 3 high, 3 low, 3 fades, 3 draws, 3 straight, and then some high fades, high draws, low fades, low draws, etc. This type of practice keeps you very interested and you not only learn how to hit all the shots you will be required to use on the golf course, but you will be continually learning more about your golf swing and what changes are necessary to change the trajectory or flight pattern of the different shots.

## 2. Course management.

Once you have learned to strike the ball acceptably, strategy influences your scoring tremendously. There are four dimensions when dealing with strategy, you have to understand your personal capabilities, you have to understand the trouble spots on the course, you have to play every shot with the next shot in mind, and you have to be aware of the conditions for the day.

### Course conditions

Before you get to the first tee you should always ask yourself a few questions to help you decide, how the days conditions will affect todays round of golf. Ask yourself questions such as what time of year is it, what kind of day (windy, calm), what time of day (morning dew) what has the weather been recently ( alot of rain, dry), how have the greens and fairways been affected, (wet, firm), have the fairways been cut

(fliers), are the sand traps raked, what are the local rules. All these conditions will affect the way you will play the course and will help you approach the tee ready to play.

#### Personal capabilities

Know your strengths and weakness, play to your strengths and play from your weakness (e.g. if you are a bad bunker player, take a path to the hole which would avoid the bunkers). Know the potential penalties that the course presents and when the option is available play away from those areas. (e.g. If there is a water hazard on the right side, tee the ball on the right side of the tee blocks, so that you are hitting away from the trouble, and then play a left to right shot so the ball starts away from the trouble and then curves back towards it). This will give you the greatest room for error, and everybody does make errors. This way you are keeping the odds in your favour, and you are taking some of the gamble out of your game.

If you are playing a round of golf and you are having a hard time hitting a particular shot, try if possible to avoid situations where that shot would be necessary. But as soon as your round is over go to the practice tee and work on that particular shot.

It is always a good idea to play a high percentage shot (A shot you will probably execute the majority of the time). Always ask yourself, if what you are about to gain outweighs the risk.

Plan a hole mentally from the green back to the tee. If the flagstick is on the left, you probably want to be hitting your approach from the right, for this will give you the most green to work with. Ask yourself how far a good tee shot will leave you from the green. If it is a par 5 and you cannot reach the green in



two, keep in mind that eighty yards from the green is better than being forty yards. This will give you the opportunity to take a full swing enabling you to hit with more spin and control.

Once you have made your decision and it is time to hit your shot, make sure all indecision has been removed. A good shot is more likely after a confident, positive beginning.

Always try and make a game plan before you get to the first tee. Know how you want to play each hole. Once out on the golf course, stick to the game plan. Don't let your score, your opponent, or other factors dictate how you play the golf course.

#### Target Golf

Try to develop the placement concept, or target golf, keeping in mind that there is a place for you to hit the ball on every shot in order to make the next shot a good one. To do this you need sound strategy, and a clear plan of action, absorbing all information around you as part of your decision making process, knowing your limitations and your strengths and evaluating what you can do. Then pick your target, select a club which will get you there without forcing the shot, and then concentrate on the target, blocking everything else out of your mind. Focusing on your objective in this manner will build success patterns and will help build your confidence.

When picking a target be aware of the risks, and of the rewards for hitting your target. Check out the trouble on either side and know your bail out area. Make sure you are comfortable trying to hit to that target, you do not want to be unconsciously aiming in another direction. You must have a clear picture in your mind where you want the ball to go, why you want it to go there,

and how big a margin of error you have. You should be hitting it to a spot so that you have the easiest next shot that is possible. Like the game chess, you should always be planning ahead.

Conditions such as pin placement, or possibly wind should be dictating the reason for picking a particular target. The key to scoring is not how good your good shots are but how bad your bad shots are, so think ahead, and plan your accordingly.

While playing a round of golf, not only should you be aware of the course conditions, but during play you should be checking out pin placements on other greens. Any time you are walking by or you can see another green that you have not already played, check and file in your mind for future reference the pin placement. This way when you come to that particular hole later in your round, you will have a better idea how to play the hole. This is extremely important if it happens to be a blind green.

Many tournaments are lost by trying to force things to happen. You must be patient from the start. you can not be to high strung or to aggressive. Remember in tournament golf you do not win by hitting the most spectacular shots but by making the fewest mistakes. You win by making people beat you, not by trying to birdie every hole.

You are always competing against par, not the other golfers. Treat every round the same, use the same tempo, same preshot and alignment routine and try to concentrate the same every round. And whenever possible play with golfers that are better than you are.

Once you get momentum going, just tee it up and freewheel it. Never think about mechanics when things are going well. Just look at the yardage, check the wind, pick a club, and hit it at the target. On those days you are playing by instinct, you are

trusting your swing and your mechanics. When you are hitting the ball well, your confidence runs high. If you are hitting it close to the pin, you start to think you can do no wrong, and you can't hit it any other place. You have faith in your game and it shows. But when you make a few errors, you can run into the danger of starting to doubt yourself and your own game. That spells trouble. You can't second guess yourself and you can't let uncertainty creep into your golf game or you will be inviting real trouble. A letdown in concentration, can lead to a string of bogeys. One error undermines your self confidence, and this can lead to a series of errors. All of a sudden you can't or don't plan each shot properly before you hit it. You start making errors in your decision making.

To prevent this from happening play each and every shot as if this is the most important shot of the day. The biggest mistake you can make is remembering the previous shot. The only way to play is one shot at a time.

A golfer must use his imagination and see in his minds eye the path he wants the ball to travel, what happens to a golf ball when you hit it, how far it will travel, the path it will take, how far it will roll, the trajectory, visualizing the whole flight pattern.

Things to remember, when dealing with course management are

- 1) Never try and do the impossible, stick to your game plan at all times, do not let circumstances make you change your mind.
- 2) You can do nothing about the shot you have already played.
- 3) You cannot play the next shot until you have completed the one you are now attempting.
- 4) The most important shot in your round is the one you are about to play.
- 5) Nothing can change what has already

happened. 6) Play the course, not your opponent. 7) Play the percentages, don't try and be a hero, don't take unnecessary risks. 8) Play within yourself, approach each round with a fresh mind. 9) Be in touch with all the circumstances surrounding a shot, the lie, distance, wind strength, and direction, slope of the ground, all the considerations that go into club selection 10) There are 14 holes on a golf course where you hit driver, every time you hit your drive in the fairway the odds of hitting a good second shot improves, if you drive in the rough your success ratio goes down.

Finally, remember no matter what the conditions, or whether it is a tournament or just a friendly game, the game of golf never changes. It is not the other players who are your opponents, your real opponent is the golf course itself. Your challenge is to tackle the course and score the best you can, all the other golfers have the same challenge.

### 3. Goal Setting and Self Management.

To set proper goals you have to understand your own game and and you have to be honest about your evaluation. To help, it is a good idea to keep a statistics card similar to the statistics that are kept on the PGA tour every week. Keep track of 1)fairways hit, and if possible overall length of drives, 2)how many greens in regulation, and how many approaches were left short, long, right or left. 3)Keep track of how many putts you are taking along with how many long putts did you make and how many short ones did you miss. 4)Keep track of your sand saves and 5) what percentage of up and downs from the edge of the green. 6) Finally keep track of your mental lapses.

If you keep all this information it becomes easy to give your game an honest evaluation.. Then if you have a good understanding of the importance of each specific area of your game, you will know what part of your game needs the most work, and where you should spend your practice time.

Evaluating the statistics that are kept on tour, you will find out driving accuracy is more important than driving distance and that greens in regulation and putting, are the most important areas. Year in and year out it is the putting and greens in regulation leaders who are making the most money on tour.

After evaluating your own strengths and weaknesses, you can then decide what part of your game needs the most work. Then write your goals on a "commitment card", and read it before each round or practice session. Once you have determined your goal, or what area of the game you need the most improvement, work out a program that will help you achieve that goal, and then set up a practice schedule, and work on that goal or specific area, until you have achieved it....

The other goal that you should be striving for is better consistency. To achieve consistency, you need to be reasonably proficient in every area of the game. By this I don't mean that you have to be the very best in each area, I mean that you should be just a little better than average in each area of the game. For instance, if you are a poor chipper and always make a bogey when you miss a green, then you have a real problem because no matter how well you are playing it is unlikely that you will hit every green in regulation. By eliminating the weakness, chipping would not adversely affect the rest of your game, and the

things that you were doing well. Try and stay consistently good in all key areas, and you will be on your way to consistent scores.

If you have only enough time for a short practice session, practice your weakness, not your strength. Try not to neglect any part of your game, during practice sessions, for any length of time. Spread your time around to cover all areas of the game.

Another key to consistency is maintaining the same tempo or rhythm in your swing day in and day out. Many golfers when they get into a pressure situation will hurry the swing, trying to get it over with as fast as possible. The more important the shot, the more you should concentrate on the proper swing tempo.

When setting your goals, or trying to manage your game, remember that there is no such thing as a perfect golf swing. You do not want to be spending all your time trying to achieve the unattainable. Even on the PGA tour no two swings are exactly the same. When you make contact with the golf ball, the ball reacts to the laws of physics, not to how pretty the swing was. To play to your potential, you need a sound swing, but equally important are qualities such as toughness, patience, experience, competitiveness, and intelligence.

#### 4. Mental Attitude.

We have all heard the saying "The game of golf is 90% mental" I believe that after you have the proper swing mechanics, the game is 90% mental. After you have built a sound swing, to play good golf you need steady nerves, a healthy attitude, the ability to see the shot in your mind before you hit it, concentration, patience and confidence. You need confidence in your golf swing and in your ability to hit the required shot. The

more confidence you build, the greater the chance of success no matter what you are trying to do.

### Healthy Attitude

To keep a healthy attitude you first of all need self esteem, a strong healthy self esteem involves liking yourself. Self esteem is your personal belief in your own worth or value as a person. A healthy self esteem also includes a great amount of respect for yourself and the talents you possess. Self esteem is the foundation upon which you build, it means liking yourself at all times, not just when you are golfing well or when you are winning. If you like yourself first, and enjoy golfing no matter what the outcome, it is easier to learn quicker, and develop success faster. Real winners do well because they like themselves, not in order to like themselves. Self esteem will give you greater freedom to learn from your mistakes and from adversity. And no matter how much talent you have everybody goes through a slump at one time or another. The real test is how you recover from those slumps, and turn them around, learning from your mistakes and turning them into positives or opportunities. Self esteem helps you learn from your mistakes, by accepting them, and turning them into challenges that you will overcome, and no matter how bad the round you'll be able to pick out something good, rather than dwell on the negative.

### Patience

You have to be patient with yourself and your game when you are playing. You cannot realistically expect every shot to turn out exactly like you had planned. You will find that in many rounds your birdies will fall into a 5 to 7 hole segment. It

doesn't matter whether it's 3 out of the first 5 holes, or 3 out of the last 5. If the putts are not falling early, or you are missing greens early in the round, stay patient, and scramble for your pars if necessary.

Try and stay relaxed, enjoy yourself, and let things happen naturally. If you try and force things to happen, frustration sets in and you become your own worst enemy. You must remain patient, take one shot at a time, and just let good things happen. Most of the time, that patience will be the difference between playing great and playing average.

With patience, you will make less errors in your golf thinking, and you will normally make better judgements in decision making situations. A real Nicklaus strength was his talent for avoiding errors, never beating himself. It is one of the characteristics that made him so great, and it is an area that you should work on, to help make you a better player.

#### Steady nerves

For steady nerves, you need a disciplined mind, confidence, motivation and competitive desire. Temperment and personality also go a long way in determining how calm or attentive you will be out on the course. If you are well organized and mentally orderly away from the course, you are likely to show the same characteristics while playing. You will be more even tempered and less likely to let things bother or upset you. If you have a volatile temper away from the course, you will be more likely to get frustrated, upset, and have concentration lapses. You will have to work harder to keep your emotions in check.

To play well and keep the nerves steady you need to have enough rest before playing. You might feel fine when you get to



the course, you might feel right physically, but you will end up mentally tired. What will happen is your concentration will not come naturally. You will then try and force things, and end up becoming impatient and angry. If you have enough rest, your mind will be fresh, you will feel keen to play, and your concentration will come naturally. You will be motivated right from the first tee.

Every player has a breaking point, a point when pressure gets to be so much that your mental attitude or nerves starts to work against you, instead of for you, and no matter what you do, your concentration starts to go. This is usually from putting too much importance or significance, on the next shot. If you are in a position to win, its very difficult to convince yourself that its just another shot, but that is exactly what you have to try and do. Try and control your anxiety, by taking a couple of deep breaths, tell yourself that you have hit the same shot successfully, many times before, and then concern yourself with doing your best by focusing your complete attention on the job at hand.

#### Concentration

Concentration can best be described, as the ability to achieve, and substain, a mental groove in which you become totally focused on the job at hand.

You lose your concentration when you lose your focus or attentiveness. Lack of concentration can come from fatigue, illness, or preoccupation with a personal crisis. Lack of concentration usually leads to anger or fear. To generate a substained level of concentration you need a certain degree of challenge, motivation, or the burning desire to be the best. The

stronger your motivation, the more fully committed you become, and the better you will be able to sustain your concentration.

Building concentration is something you develop the same way you develop other parts of your game. It starts with a good night's rest, eating at the proper times, a daily exercise program, and establishing a routine such as always arriving at the course early enough to relax, and to start your warm up session at exactly the same amount of time before your tee off( e.g. always 45 minutes before your tee time ). Avoid distractions, and allow yourself to ease into a focused mental groove.

During practice sessions, you also need practice concentration. If your mind is going to wander while on the practice tee, it will wander while out on the course. Work as hard mentally, as you do physically, while practicing. Force yourself to concentration, when you get tired. If you can keep your concentration during a long practice session , you will be better prepared, when you hit the golf course.

#### Confidence

Confidence starts with a positive mental approach. It is basically nothing more than a feeling, a belief that you can do a particular thing. Confidence will help eliminate barriers that prevent you from performing to your maximum capability.

Confidence is a variable, some days you have it, and some days you don't. It is not a thing that you can talk yourself in to, you can not go to the tee and say I'm going to be confident today. Sometimes the way you start a round of golf will have a lot to do with it, you make a long putt on the first hole and your off to the races, you make a couple of birdies early, and you start feeling you can do no wrong.

Sometimes you just get into winning or losing patterns. A lot of it is just luck or getting the breaks. If you win a lot of close matches, your attitude when you get into close matches is "no problem, I've been here before and I'll be here again". But if you start to lose a lot of close ones, you have to avoid the "oh, oh, here it comes again, attitude".

To build confidence, you need to stockpile positive experiences, you need to have been in the situation before, and then you can feed the mind strictly positive inputs.

The best example of confidence is illustrated in a comment made by Jack Nicklaus " I knew I was going to win, he knew I was going to win, and I knew, that he knew, I was going to win".

#### Shot Visualizaton

To play consistently well, you need to be able to see the required shot in your mind, before you start your swing. This enables you to relate your swing feel to the target, by visualizing the flight of the ball to that target. Then all you need to do, is let your swing react to the target picture in your mind.

This whole process, is best described by Jack Nicklaus in his book Golf My Way. " I never hit a shot, even in practice, without having a very sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First I see the ball where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes and I see the ball going there: its path, trajectory and shape, even its behavior on landing. Then there's a sort of fadeout, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the precious images into reality. Only at the end of this short, private, Hollywood

spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball."

Always have a clear picture in your mind, of what you are trying to do with each shot, don't think of mechanics, think of the perfect shot for the situation, and then just let it happen.

The importance of proper mental attitude can be summed up best in a poem that Gardner Dickinson Sr. wrote and gave to his son Gardner Jr. just prior to Gardner Jr. joining the tour in the early 1950's.

Ode To A talented Son

Ther'll be those days when the course plays tough  
And well hit shots will find the rough,  
Or down the middle drives will die  
In fluffy grass with a floating lie.

But you can't afford to capitulate  
To temper brought on by sorry fate;  
Nor let the Devils' hand so rule  
That you completely lose your cool.

Giving up won't change your fate\_\_\_\_  
"All things come to those who wait."  
God gave you talent and a brain  
To meet adversity with disdain.

Guts to conquer the ball's ill deeds\_\_\_\_  
"He who patient is, succeeds."  
So said the prophet ages past  
And those true words forever last.

Things don't remain in status quo\_\_\_\_  
They change, of course as you well know.  
Whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad  
And luck can be as good as bad.

You've won before\_\_\_\_ you will again  
For burning hopes are not in vain.  
Just keep your head when things go wrong  
And in the end you'll sing a song.

Of thanks to Him who gave you skills  
To overcome all kinds of ill.  
Stick in there and keep your cool\_\_\_\_  
Remember, that's a darn good rule!

### Summary

To maintain your playing ability, you not only do you have to play the game, you have to work at it as well. Each day before you play, use warm up sessions to loosen up and prepare for the days game, after the round, or on practice days, use practice sessions to work on your mechanics. Never work on mechanics before a round of golf. No matter which type of practice session, keep as similar a routine as possible to the one you will use while playing. And work as hard on your mental preparation, as your physical preparation.

Once out on the course, prepare yourself for each shot, computing the course conditions, trouble spots, and how the hole was designed to be played. Always have a specific target in mind, and know the reasons for picking that particular target. Once your mind is made up, aim, setup, and fire.

Know your strengths and weakness, by keeping a statistics card. Write your goals on a committment card, work out a program to achieve those goals, along with a timetable, and then practice until your goals are achieved.

After proper swing fundamentals, the game is 90% mental. You have to think around the course using not only course strategy, but also mental discipline. You have to stay focused on what you are attempting to do, visualizing the shot while preparing for it, in an exact preshot routine. Remain patient and calm, and always trust not only your swing, but also your ability to perform under all conditions.

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P.S. The majority of the information in my thesis has been accumulated over the years from different golf instructors, magazines, seminars and books. It is difficult to put an exact source on most of the material.