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Teaching Seniors

An illustration of the different teaching approaches and swing techniques needed to successfully instruct senior players.

To the thesis committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my thesis to obtain "Master Professional" status. I would accept this honour with tremendous pride and I would always endeavour to exemplify myself accordingly. Thank you.

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TEACHING SENIORS

By

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The question is, "Do seniors learn differently from younger players?" If the answer is yes, then two additional questions will surface:

- Why must we teach differently?
- How must we teach differently?

Seniors do learn differently because of the aging process. Their past experiences, shorter memories, less positive outlooks regarding their current and potential abilities, and the physical changes in their bodies necessitate different teaching methods than are applied to younger players. I substantiate my answer via twenty-five years of teaching education and experience, plus specific research. I am a senior golfer and have lived many of the learning experiences that are offered through golf instruction today. So, I have "walked the walk", so to speak. Prior to addressing the subsequent questions of "why" and "how", I will give some background on how my own personal training and research lends credibility to my conclusions.

Teaching Education & Experience

I entered the C.P.G.A as a class "J" Head Professional and learned my working skills via the P.G.A. education programs and my fellow professionals. I truly enjoyed all aspects of our business, but teaching intrigued me more than all my other duties and responsibilities. I felt this was the area where I could best contribute to golfers at large and to my profession. I researched the golf swing in earnest and sought expertise from some of golf's foremost instructors of that time. Jimmy Ballard, Joe Nichols, Mike LaVeauve and Eddie Bush all helped me (hands-on) learn and better understand the dynamics of the golf swing. I have been fortunate over the past 20 years to attend many zone business schools and

listen to great instructors such as George Knudson, Ben Doyle, Dr. Gary Wiren, and many others who were highly qualified. I have absorbed all of this knowledge over a period of years and became conditioned to teaching the ideals, because that was how golf was and is still taught. It was interesting to listen to the great teacher, Jim McLean, on his recent Golf Channel instruction series explain how teachers study the attributes of all the great players and determine what the ideal positions and motions are so they can be used as models from which to learn. Mr. McLean also went on to say that although we work with ideals, we have to modify them according to each individual student. I completely agree with Jim McLean. A model is needed to establish reference points and starting points, regardless of what teaching methods are used. I have had a great deal of success over the past 20 years teaching players of all skill levels from the ideal model. I believe I have helped ninety-eight per cent of my students improve their swings and games to significantly higher levels. The remaining students improved to a much lesser degree and I found it very difficult to take them to higher levels of performance. Nothing seemed to work to any appreciable degree. I am no different than any golf teacher in that I am constantly researching the golf swing. My library and video collections are enviable, and I am quite confident they will continue to grow.

Research

Although I have significant reference material on methods and swing techniques, it was a book entitled *Boom, Bust & Echo*¹ that changed my whole approach on how I taught the senior or middle-aged player. As I was reading this great book about the generation born immediately after World War II, and how their habits and health are affected by aging, I realized that the great majority of the students, who had limited success in learning from me, were older (45 years of age and up). I was teaching them using the same techniques and ideals as students much younger than they were, more agile than they were, stronger than they were, and with more stamina than they had. I was teaching them what their

body shapes and conditions would not permit at their age. I had to focus more on adapting the model to each individual, rather than adapting each individual to the model. I was always aware that not everyone could conform to the model and I would try to make the necessary adjustments. However, looking back, I just paid this “lip service”. I believed they couldn’t improve because they were older, and “oh, well, do the best you can”. However, the ‘boomers’ are here, or close to it, and there are a lot of them (about thirty-three percent of our population), and according to the book, they are not accepting of just “lip service”. I definitely had to change my focus and awareness to better serve my older students.

There are additional observations to be learned from the excellent instruction book, *The Laws of the Golf Swing*²:

- “Tall and thin, short and powerful, stiff as a board, loose as a noodle – in conventional teaching they all learn the same concepts and swing mechanics, and they are all asked to perform the same physical movements”
- “David Love and Craig Stadler get the job done differently. The bottom line is that each uses a swing that perfectly matches his unique characteristics of body build, strength, and flexibility.”
- “Even Jack Nicklaus – ravaged by injury and decreasing flexibility – has become just another senior player because he is unable to change his swing to harmonize with the aging process.”
- “Our research makes it clear that two out of the three golfers are victims of a mismatch between their swing type and their body type.”

The Aging Process

Just consider the physical changes that everyone experiences throughout their lifetime as reported by scientists at Tufts University³:

- Strength: The average American loses 6.6 pounds of muscle each decade after adulthood – the rate of loss increases after the age of 45

years. Between the ages of 30 and 70 years, the average person loses approximately 20% of the muscle units in all the large and small muscle groups.

- **Body Fat:** Between the ages of 20 and 65 years, the average person doubles his or her ratio of fat to muscle. Over the age of 70, it becomes more difficult to maintain body weight. This is especially true of people over the age of 80 years.
- **Endurance:** By age 65 years, the body's ability to use oxygen efficiently declines 30 to 40%, resulting in decreased aerobic capacity.
- **Flexibility:** Without regular stretching, ligaments tighten and cartilage wears, resulting in a reduction of motion; old injuries and growth of bony spurs in a variety of locations may limit range of motion of joints.
- **Vision:** With age, the development of presbyopia, or aging vision, results in poorer distance vision and decreased accommodation with the need for bifocals or trifocals. This may affect head position in the golf swing.
- **Psychology:** Deepak Chopra in *Aging Body, Timeless Mind*⁴ relates research which indicates that we have been conditioned to accept growing old, and accept the limitations that come with the process. These thoughts are exemplified by such statements as: "Can't hit it as far", "Won't get any better", and "Can't teach an old dog new tricks." Seniors dream of hitting the ball 300 yards again, while the juniors expect to someday hit it that far.

It is evident from this research that the abilities and skill levels of senior golfers are governed to a much larger degree by their physical capabilities and mental outlooks than all other age groups. Therefore, we must teach them the game accordingly – to fit their limitations because of the aging process. We must teach them to adapt to themselves as they age, and teach them to compensate for limitations in strength, flexibility and endurance.

Adaptation of Teaching to the Aging Process

What approach do we take that is different? Overall, we, as professional instructors, must become more cognizant of physical limitations, body shapes, mental outlooks and golf equipment that a senior student has. This is not to say that we do not consider such variables when teaching younger players since we must. We are saying because of the aging process, these variables become more vital for older golfers to have success in learning.

The perfect swing model: Although there are always exceptions, I believe in the great majority of cases (80%), that the swing model must be customized to the senior student. This becomes quite evident when you look at some of the swings on the senior tour. These unorthodox swings, self-taught or not, are hybrids of the perfect swing model and are the result of compensation for either injuries, the aging process, or physical limitations

A. Adaptations for Physical Limitations

There are players with physical limitations in every age group, but more so among seniors. Awareness of these limitations requires a more creative learning approach. Because of the aging process, students with these limitations seem to become commonplace. Dealing with a huge variety of limitations forces more deviations from the model swing. The different approach to teaching seniors with physical limitations is to become more creative to find methods that they can adapt and understand. The following examples are directly related to my experience and realizations through teaching well over 7000 seniors over the past 20 years.

- 1. I would teach younger players to resist their hip turns against full shoulder turns on the back swing to produce coil and leverage. I**

would not teach the average senior this discipline because it is much too hard on the lower back. Ninety percent of seniors that I have taught over the age of 55 years could not resist their hip turns like younger players without eventually injuring their lower backs (usually muscle pulls). In fact, I encourage them to turn their hips (barring no injuries) at least one-third as far as their shoulder turns. This will create less stress on their bodies, but still give them some coil and a longer swing which they need for distance.

2. I would teach the younger players to make a full shoulder turn with their arms swinging out from their bodies to produce width to their back swings. This usually results in a very straight target arm at the top of the back swing. Because it is much more difficult for the senior player to achieve width in their back swings (because of injuries or joint stiffness or mobility), I encourage them to turn their shoulders as far as comfortable and bend their target arms to produce length. For the majority of seniors, length is easier to attain, in most cases, than width, to produce club-head speed.
3. I would encourage many younger students to favour wider stances over narrow stances as this encourages a little more lateral movement producing a better load behind the ball on their back swings. Via quickness and good range of motion, these younger students can shift their weight from this position to find the ball. The great teacher, Jim Ballard, teaches this swing motion, as is evident from watching two of his past students, Jim Colbert and Curtis Strange. The opposite is true of the senior player (at least in seventy percent of them). I would teach my senior students to narrow their stances so they have a better chance of executing their weight shifts properly. Very few of them have the range of motion and quickness needed for a wider stance.
4. I teach seniors to swing the club to a two-thirds or three-quarters length on the back swing to about the same on the follow-through

to encourage more solid striking of the ball. With less motion, there is a better chance of good contact and adequate distance. The younger player would usually only use this swing motion for a specialty shot.

5. In many cases, I instruct my seniors to lift their target heel during their back swing to increase their range of motion. This is not true of the younger player as ideally they are taught to keep their target heel in place.

Those are but a few examples of how I would teach seniors differently, customizing for their physical limitations which may inhibit flexibility and strength. To reiterate, younger players may also have physical limitations, but not in the numbers or varieties that one finds among seniors. An instructor has to be more aware of and more creative in approaches to teaching seniors. Different avenues or routes to the same destination must be found when adapting the model swing to the student, rather than the other way around.

B. Body Shapes: There are three anatomical body types or shapes:

- Ectomorph: long-limbed, thin (little body fat). Davis Love, Fred Couples. Primary power sources: arc and height.
- Endomorph: short-limbed, rounded/barrel-shaped (usually excess body fat). Craig Stadler, Jim Albus, John Cook. Primary power source: upper body strength.
- Mesomorph: balanced build (muscular). Greg Norman, Steve Elkington, Mike Weir. Primary power source: leverage.

Each of these body types has specific swing motions that allow maximum performance. These specific swing motions and the test performed to determine

what body type a student favours are extremely well-documented in the reference book, *The Laws of the Golf Swing*². This book, I believe, is a "must read" for any C.P.G.A professional who has any desire to teach the game at a high level. The "Laws" book is authored by a trio of outstanding teaching professionals from the American P.G.A. who collectively have over 70 years of teaching experience. Their names are synonymous with teaching excellence. Their book was compiled through seven years of research and was a 1996 cover story in *Golf Magazine*. This turned out to be one of the most sought-after issues ever published by the magazine. I will explain briefly the main swing characteristics of each body type as per the book, and then explain why this information and system is so valuable to teaching seniors.

"LAWS" is an acronym for leverage, arc, and width swing. Ectomorph has the arc swing, endomorph has a width swing, and mesomorph has a leverage swing. The arc players will keep their spines quite steady and swing their arms high above their bodies causing a huge swing arc. They will keep their heads quite still throughout the back swing and, in some cases, come close to a reverse weight shift (e.g. Colin Montgomerie). Their back swings are more upright than other body types.

The width players will experience some upper spine tilt and head movement off the ball as they swing their hands away from their bodies resulting in a short but wide swing arc. These players typically have shorter back swings and shorter finishes and appear to "punch" the ball (e.g. Sandy Lyle).

The leverage players will swing a little flatter and deeper behind their bodies with a medium swing arc. Their spines and heads will move slightly off the ball during their back swings (e.g. Mike Weir). The book describes this motion as the "modern swing".

All of these back swings look different, but again, are unique to the different body shapes. To go further, there are grip, stance, posture, ball position, and down swing motions that match each individual body type. Where players really become confused is when they try to swing like someone who is not their body type, or through the aging process when their body type changes but their swing does not. This research has revealed that two out of three golfers have swings that don't match their body types. The book also takes into consideration that most players won't exactly fit into a body type and they may have some characteristics of all three. This again can be determined by the body type test. Although they are hybrids, there will be dominant characteristics that will favour one of the three body and swing types. Sometimes a blend in some swing motions of each type may be necessary to customize a swing for a given person. This book shows how to do just that.

This information becomes extremely important in the task of teaching the senior players over the younger players. The body shapes and range of motion of seniors will have changed dramatically over the years. Dr. Chopra's research⁴ indicates that between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five, Americans are the least physically active. Generally, this is when people are most busy due to increased responsibilities both at home and at work. There is less free time for physical activity. Many seniors don't take the game up until they have retired. During this time period, bodies are more likely to take on changes in shape, flexibility, and strength. We, as instructors, have to adapt to this and sometimes throw out the "perfect swing model" that we are likely to use on the younger students. At this time, instructors need to put on our "creative hats."

I will give a true example of a student that I have taught over the past 25 years and why I had to make swing changes to harmonize with the aging process and change in his body type. I have known this student for approximately fifty years and have witnessed his swing for this period of time. This is a factual account -- more real than examples out of some book or video.

This student is now 59 years of age and plays to a handicap of 5 to 7. He began playing the game at age eleven. His body shape from this age to about age forty favoured that of the mesomorph, and therefore, he had a leverage swing. He swung his arms and turned his body more around his spine in a deeper position, which allowed him to use the leverage of his turning motion to develop his primary power source. With a combination of building his upper body width via various weight lifting disciplines, followed by a poor diet and inactivity, his body shape started to favour the endomorph. The aging process was an additional factor producing stiffer joints and limited range of motion. He simply couldn't swing around his spine without coming out of the shot (straightening his spine angle) in his back swing. We solved this problem by closing his stance so that he could swing around his spine to some extent without coming out of the shot on his back swing. We knew his body shape would not allow him to swing his arms as deeply as before so we swung them more out from his body to create more width in his swing. Because of this, his head and upper spine moved a little more of the ball, so we had to move the ball slightly back in his stance to compensate. He had always been a good striker of the ball and understood the swing fundamentals, so positive results were immediate. It took a lot of years for his body type to change and finally, coupled with other aging processes, he could not swing as he did when he was younger.

I could list many more examples of how the aging process and changing body shapes demanded swing changes to the older students that I have taught, but it would sound too repetitive. It really makes sense, if we take the time and effort, to look for the aging process and methods to compensate for it.

C. Psychological Approach

The mental outlook on playing and learning the game will be different according to what age group players belong – young, middle-aged, or older. The great adage is: “Tell me and I will listen, show me and I will see, involve me and I will learn”. I have seen so many instructors demonstrate how to hit the golf ball that it appears rather comical. When you are very young you are amazed, when you are middle-aged, it is not impressive, but when you are older, it is both intimidating and infuriating. An older player may think: “Look at his guy – who does he think I am? John Daley? I can’t even see how far he hit it.” Dr. Chopra⁴ says “people accept time as a linear measurement....we pass through time accepting to age just like our parents did. We are born... we age... and we merely accept the process that gets us there”. What we do on our way to “getting there” has a tremendous input on how our minds accept the journey.

I cannot count the numbers of times that seniors have said, “I might be too old to learn”. Your brain rarely ceases to function as you age, outside of disease. “Can’t teach an old dog new tricks”. But you are not a dog! “I’m not as strong as I used to be.” Even seniors can increase strength by lifting small weights. “I would like to hit it like Ed. Just so I can keep up with him. I don’t need to be a tour player. I just want to hit it decently. I can’t get it off the ground. The ground must be too high or is it my clubs? What about my clubs anyway, are they right for me? I got them in a garage sale. Spalding or something, I think they’re probably good enough for an old guy like me.”

Just about everything they say includes something about age or physical limitations. Through my many years of teaching seniors, I have found that they doubt their abilities to learn and they accept mediocrity to a much higher degree than younger players. Via the aging process they have been conditioned to think along these lines. Through many teaching experiences I have found the following teaching approaches to be more

conducive to teaching seniors than other age groups, largely because of their mental approach to learning and playing the game:

- Positive attitude
- The KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle personified. Too much detail is really a detriment to most seniors. They truly believe they neither have the time nor the capacity to remember too much detail.
- Develop swings that encourage solid contact with less body motion. They are pleasantly surprised to discover how well they can hit the ball with so little effort.
- When teaching groups, be very diligent on the skill levels of each student. Endeavour to separate the experienced players from the beginners or less advanced players. This obviously helps to eliminate confusion and intimidation.
- Demonstrate the techniques that apply to their swings – not the personal style of the instructor.
- Spend more time on direction of hit and short game skills than distance.
- Emphasize the importance of exercise and stretching. Research on aging has proven that with moderate exercise, muscle and bone mass will continue to grow well into our advanced years.
- Never be condescending. Approach a senior student with a “you can do it” attitude. “Age is only a number. Look at all the remarkable things you have already accomplished in your lifetime!”
- Course management... change strategies to new skill levels... more lay-ups... more positional golf.

D. Golf Equipment

An important part of teaching students to get the best results possible is to make sure they are playing with clubs that are properly fitted and suited to

their skill levels. This obviously applies to all age groups, but especially so to the senior player. The senior player, in the great majority of cases, will have a larger variety of clubs that make up their sets. They are likely to have more fairway woods and fewer long irons than the younger players. A six wood, seven wood, nine wood, and eleven wood will replace the longer irons because they are much easier to hit because of the additional loft features. In a lot of cases senior players are reluctant to make these changes because they feel it dates them and they are losing their skill levels. They feel it is a "crutch" so to speak. On numerous occasions I have had to convince them that they are actually increasing their skill levels and abilities to play as well as they used to by simply changing their set-mix. The next step is to be sure to develop their swings accordingly with more sweeping motion disciplines to match their additional wood shots. This would affect stance, ball position and swing plane to a large degree. These are changes that are needed because of equipment changes that are more radical than that of the younger players.

Summation

This thesis is written to illustrate that different teaching approaches and swing techniques are needed to successfully instruct the senior players. The by-products of the aging process speak volumes in support of this statement.

References

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