

## **REVIEWS**

**This manuscript is Part One in the trilogy that reveals practical mental tools that are often overlooked in traditional instruction.**

**Volume Two: The Gorilla Is Loose: Your Innate Swing Unleashed!**

**Volume Three: Playing Out Of Your Mind: Moving Beyond Swing Mechanics**

“As an avid, but deeply struggling golfer, I was always looking for anything that could improve my game. This book was not only concise, but I genuinely felt understood. After reading it, I feel more confident than ever that my swing will not only improve, but I will finally enjoy the game again. By breaking down the mental stress associated with a bad shot, Dave creates an environment where golfers can naturally excel.”

R. Wood (14 Handicap) Newmarket, ON.

"As we try and strive for golf improvement, Dave's simple, effective and humorous ideas teach that conventional wisdom (ie. based strictly on mechanics) is often ineffective and that there are other ways to playing better golf than spending hours on the driving range hoping to discover "the secret." Read this book. You will not only thoroughly enjoy it. It will do wonders for your game!"

Jonathan Levitt (12 handicap) President, Levitt Insurance Brokers, Toronto, ON.

“What makes Dave Johnston’s golf instruction great, is his remarkable ability to focus on the handful of things that make all the difference, and to communicate them in an easily understood manner. Just like Dave, this book is focused, easily understood, humorous and (most of all) very, very helpful in improving your game – no matter what level you play. This will be the year I finally break that elusive 90 barrier, thanks to the principles outlined in “Just Hit The Damn Ball!”

G. Hardman (16 handicap) London, ON

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## **DEDICATION**

To my father who could never quite figure out,  
if golf was a microcosm of life or life itself.



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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Thank you for purchasing this book.

The concepts are a distillation of notes compiled from 31 years of teaching golf for a living. My fundamental goal is to provide the “average” golfer with practical tools to develop their natural ability. If I had these tools 20 ago, you would have seen my name on the leaderboard beside Arnie and Jack.

Or maybe not.

At the very least, I would have understood that the key to developing your natural ability is abandoning the search for technical perfection.

Modern equipment technology has given us the potential to play our best golf consistently with less effort. Yet the proliferation of on-line assistance for the forlorn golfer, reveals that the search for the missing piece of the puzzle is stronger than ever.

I look forward to helping you on the journey to playing better than you ever believed possible!

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

There is no way I can thank everyone who has provided the impetus to write this manuscript. Every one of the students I have had the privilege of working with have contributed in one form or another. You have shown me more than I have ever taught you. Thank you.

My wife Mary deserves a medal for enduring thirty years of marriage with a golf instructor. Words cannot express my gratitude for allowing me to pursue a career path that has been anything if not boring! She provides an anchor to reality, without which the game would be a consuming obsession.

My brother, Gord, who has I'm sure on numerous occasions, wondered what kind of a geek he has for a sibling. I could very well daydream my life away without his periodic metaphorical kick in the butt to jolt me back to reality.

Harvey Patterson, musician, writer, perpetual student and lifelong friend who has endured my emotional roller coaster on the golf course. Our conversations during the

past twenty years, have provided the incentive to write this manuscript. Thank you for being a willing sounding board. Your feedback has been invaluable.

Dave Richardson, CPGA Retired Head professional, thanks for your guidance. Your insight provided the background information that was the springboard for this work

Jonathan Levitt, thank you for your encouragement when I felt like abandoning the project.

Randy Wood, perpetual student, for challenging me to keep my instruction straightforward and practical.

Shelley Hitz, for providing the tools that allowed me to publish the manuscript that has been floating around in the back of my mind for the past twenty years.

Dr. Paul Kennedy D.D.C. for taking the time to explain the self-regulating mind/body machine to me in layman's terms.

Dr. Karl. Morris, for his insight on the connection between emotion and memory.

Dr. Harlan Kilstein, for his revelation on the effects of everyday language on performance.

Anthony Robbins, for simplifying the principles of Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

Bloomington Downs Golf Club and the Miller Paving Group for allowing me the freedom to implement my theories in real life.

*"...to model ourselves on a champion is about as profitless, as to copy out Hamlet in the hopes of becoming Shakespeare."*

*The Art of Golf, Sir. W.G. Simpson, Bart.*

## **FOREWORD**

When Dave approached me to write a forward to this book, I asked him why he didn't get someone who was a little better known—like Tiger or Phil. He said he wanted a real life golfer, one that the average golfer could relate to.

Dave and I have been friends for many years and I have followed his blossoming career as a teacher. He talks in his book of his struggles in the past to overcome negative thinking. I can attest to this, for when we used to play, each swing for Dave was a life or death undertaking.

When he hit a bad shot, he would stand in the fairway (or rough), a look of complete bewilderment on his face as if to say, why is this happening to me?

As you read in the following pages, he learned to turn his thinking around and enjoy the game for what it is. By a strange coincidence, at the same time his swing and his game improved.

Through it all, he has been the most supportive teacher one could have, always looking for something positive to say, no matter what disaster occurs.

I have joked that someday when we're playing, I would take a mighty swing and completely miss the ball. Dave would consider a moment, smile encouragingly and then say, "nice sweater".

You wouldn't get that from Tiger or Phil.

I know you'll enjoy his book and if you take the lessons to heart, you will never have to hear a compliment about your sweater.

Harvey Patterson (musician, writer, golf fanatic)

## **INTRODUCTION: THE GLASS CEILING**

*“Your swing is your swing.”*

*Jackie Burke Jr.*

The 20th century golfer is the penultimate research scientist. Like a modern day alchemist, the rabid golfer experiments tirelessly to uncover the combination of elements that will unlock the vault guarding the secret to a consistent game.

The Golf Gods tantalize us with the illusion that the missing piece of the puzzle is *out there* somewhere. Golfers have an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Amazon.com lists over 1,240 instruction books. YouTube boasts 13,000 videos on *How To Cure A Slice*. These numbers are multiplying daily at an exponential rate.

It would appear that every instructor has a different version of the golf bible.

Any golfer with a computer has free access to unlimited resources on every aspect of the game, from swing mechanics to physical conditioning to mental secrets of the world's best players. Esoteric knowledge is no longer the exclusive domain of scratch players and elite instructors.

Drivers with self-adjusting screws allow a golfer to compensate for a chronic slice or hook, without taking out a second mortgage to enlist the services of a highly-touted teaching professional.

Smart phones with built-in, high-definition cameras are capable of slow motion playback. Within minutes a golfer can see the critical flaws in his swing. With all this knowledge (literally) at one's fingertips, you would think the average golfer would score in the 80's consistently.

According to the National Golf Foundation, the 2012 median handicap for the average male golfer in North America is 16. Only 10 percent of golfers score below 90 consistently. This figure hasn't changed appreciably in 40 years! My search for an answer to this paradox was the tipping point for writing this manuscript.

SAME OLD, SAME OLD...

Upon reviewing my lesson notes compiled over the past thirty-one years, I've noticed a disturbing pattern. My regular clients take a series of lessons every spring, practice regularly and improve. During the summer, the golf clubs are often relegated to the basement as kid's activities, family holidays and home renovations assume top priority.

Often, I wouldn't see the student again until the following spring. In the majority of cases, the first two lessons of the new season were devoted to correcting the swing faults that were supposed to have been exorcised the previous year!

This ritual repeated year after year with alarmingly regularity. (The image of a mouse on a treadmill pops into my head as I write these words.) When the student had time to practice, the new technique produced significant improvement. After an extended layoff, however, the old habits re-emerged.

Most once-a-week golfers do not have the time or resources to invest in regular lessons. Resigned to this fact, you may abandon any hope of improvement. You just play for fun right? Score doesn't really matter, does it?

My approach is based on fundamental concepts of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) as popularized by Anthony Robbins. (Don't worry, it's not as scary as it sounds). You have untapped natural ability. The key to your best golf is learning how to unlock your mental vault and access your innate swing on demand. One of the biggest roadblocks to improvement is our automatic tendency to dwell on apparent flaws in technique.

Based on my experience, most golfers find it easier to think negatively; we have been conditioned to look for mistakes. An awareness of critical flaws is necessary for improvement, however, our obsession with fault-finding leads to the embedded belief that our natural instincts betray us and must be constantly suppressed.

How often do you hear a golfer ask, "What's right with my swing?"

The technology that permits us to dissect the golf swing into a hundred pieces perpetuates our tendency to look for errors; technical nuances that cannot be seen by the naked eye.

Disassembling the motion is easy. Learning how to put the pieces back together again is the "kicker". The secret to constant improvement is refining, not destroying, your innate ability.

Traditional golf instruction is akin to "throwing out the baby with the bath water". For the once-a-week golfer, attempting to correct every swing flaw in pursuit of an esoteric ideal is lunacy.

So what's the alternative?

Every golfer has hit shots that just felt right. Re-creating this feeling is the key to unlocking your best golf. Feeling is, by implication, the absence of conscious thought.

A common misconception among high handicap players, is that one must have the proper form in order to recapture the gossamer feeling of a perfect shot. The skilled

golfer knows that the exact opposite is true. Learn how to “find the feeling” and the swing will take care of itself.

Every seasoned player has heard that golf is ninety percent mental. Taken to its literal conclusion, one might assume that technique is irrelevant and you can learn to will the ball to the hole. At this point in our evolution, telekinesis is not a viable alternative to hitting the ball with a club. While the (technical) 10 percent of the above equation sounds trivial, it is critical for improvement.

You must have the essentials of technique firmly established to implement the ninety percent effectively. A house without a solid foundation will eventually crumble.

There are three mechanical prerequisites which form the foundation of every effective swing. These three essentials are much easier to master than you are led to believe. Adhering to the above maxim, ninety percent of this book is devoted to helping you master your mental arena. Every instruction book offers a different perspective on proper swing mechanics.

It's my hope that the chapter on the Three Essentials will allow you to incorporate them quickly into your unique style. They are offered as signposts to help you avoid the recurring dead ends that many golfers encounter in the search for their innate swing.

One of the fundamental concepts of NLP is the power of habits or rituals. If you had to think about which pant leg to pull on or which shoe to tie first, your daily existence would grind to a halt. Habits are essential to help us navigate smoothly through our day, however, they can cement beliefs and shut off your potential to explore new possibilities.

How does this relate to your golf game? Good question

Your handicap is the result of habitual ways of thinking and acting. Over time, this pattern creates a wall to improvement that appears insurmountable.

Until you become aware of your rituals and learn how to develop new empowering ones, the wall remains intact. You have more natural ability than you realize.

The first step to breaking through the wall is to uncover it...



## YOUR INNATE SWING

*"I've learned to trust the subconscious,  
my instincts have never lied to me."  
Tiger Woods*

Have you ever hit a perfect shot? A shot that just felt right; a shot that you *knew* you couldn't hit any better? If you have, then you've tapped into your natural ability, or as I like to call it, your innate swing.

For many golfers, this out-of-mind experience is a happy accident that occurs when we least expect it.

Perhaps you were trying to lay up to a hazard and hit the ball 20 yards further than you intended. Maybe you were caught up in a conversation and didn't realize it was your turn to play, so you just stepped up and hit the shot. Many golfers experience this anomaly during the first game of the season - no expectations, no pressure. You get the idea.

Did you dismiss this phenomenon as a fluke, something beyond your control? This apparent accident was your true swing. Helping you access it on demand is the goal of this text. Stop for a moment and replay the shot in your mind. Can you recall what you were thinking just before you hit the ball? I'll bet you weren't thinking about the nuances of swing mechanics or past failures. Just look at the target and hit the shot. Piece of cake!

Every golfer has experienced the frustration of hitting perfect shots on the practice range, then dubbing the first tee shot 20 yards along the ground and watching helplessly as the ball comes to rest ignominiously on the forward tee.

Words cannot describe the humiliation!

What the hell happens during the 10 minute walk from the practice range to the first tee? No wonder it's called the longest walk in golf.

You've probably heard the standard advice: "...practice like you play. Make every shot count."

The notion of making your practice as realistic as possible makes perfect sense, but practicing and playing will never be the same.

Does that mean the only ball that counts during practice is the last one? Apart from good aerobic exercise, what's the benefit of hitting hundreds of balls, week after week, year after year?

These questions deserve a plausible explanation.

This text has four fundamental goals: (1) to help you discover your natural ability (2) to help you develop empowering habits (3) to offer guidelines for accessing your innate swing (4) to help you take control of your progress.

The most important prerequisite is an open mind.

By the end of this text, you will be in the driver's seat; you will understand why you keep "spinning your wheels" when you attempt to integrate the latest cutting-edge information on proper swing technique.

If you are expecting a simple variation of the classic "keep your head down" variety, then you should return this book and get your money back. I can offer you the tools to take your game to a new level, but how you use them (and the results you achieve) rests squarely on your shoulders.

Let's begin the journey to unleashing your untapped ability as you uncover...

# **THE KNOWLEDGE TRAP**

*“Try smarter, not harder.”*

*Moe Norman*

How long have you been playing golf; one year, five years, ten years or more? Are you constantly improving or have you hit *the wall*?

Do you ever get the feeling that you could, or even should, be playing better than you do, but can't seem to find the missing piece of the puzzle?

If you do, then read on.

This text offers an alternative to traditional golf instruction. Once you understand the habits that keep you confined to your present comfort level, then you have the first key to unlocking your potential.

## **The Learning Paradox**

The thirst for more knowledge is a laudable goal, but it comes with a condition. The more you learn about swing mechanics, the more essential it becomes to switch off your conscious mind for one and one-half seconds and just hit the damn ball!

I recall the sage advice from a mentor (who scored in the low 80's) cautioning me about an obsession with swing mechanics. He stated, as if reciting an undeniable fact, that for every golf book I read, my score would go up by two strokes. At the time I silently scoffed at the caveat.

The old adage “knowledge is power” contains the underlying assumption, that one understands how to use the knowledge effectively.

Learning the technical nuances of proper form, without knowing how to apply them, is akin to winning a million dollar home in a lottery without the key to the front door.

## YOU AND YOUR HABITS

*“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again,  
and expecting different results.”*

*Albert Einstein*

Your golf game is a product of habitual ways of thinking and acting. The longer you've played, the more ingrained the habit. If you've developed the habit of focusing on mistakes, then you will unconsciously reproduce them ad infinitum in one form or another.

To paraphrase Dr. Karl Morris, “our nervous system craves familiarity”.

Habits are essential to maintain our sanity. At times, however, these rituals (sounds like we are trying to placate a capricious golf god) prevent us from discovering better ways to accomplish our goals.

Have you ever realized that you were travelling the wrong way on a highway, the route you automatically follow every day, when your destination was in the opposite direction?

The first step to uncovering your dormant ability is awareness. Once you understand your automatic reactions to specific triggers in the environment, the next step is to eliminate ineffective rituals and replace them with empowering ones.

It will take some diligence. We tend to follow the path of least resistance.

For most of us, even the slightest change can be a scary proposition! If you can devote five minutes a day, every day, a new habit can be developed in just 30 days. The key is regular daily maintenance.

The procedures illustrated are tipping points. They are offered as a stimulus to help you develop new patterns of thinking about your golf game. There are no absolutes, only guidelines.

How you use the guidelines is up to you.

## **APPEARANCES ARE DECEIVING**

*“How can I swing like Fred Couples  
and play like Fred Flintstone?”*

*Dave Johnston*

There is one fundamental principle that separates a low handicap player from his double-digit counterpart.

Are you familiar with the maxim, *form follows function*? The phrase has a scholarly ring to it alright, but what does it actually mean?

The best players in history are those who have been criticized by purists as having unorthodox swings; styles which are beyond the limits of aesthetically pleasing.

Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, Moe Norman, Jim Furyk and Annika Sorenstam are only a handful of players whose swings are not pure in the classic sense.

Every generation has had prominent players who seem to violate the apparent essentials of perfect form. The longevity of their careers testifies that they have learned how to deal with their flaws and overcome their effects most of the time. But they still retain the idiosyncrasies that make their swings unique. We tend to regard these deviations in style as exceptions, when in reality, they are the norm.

An aesthetically pleasing swing is a fortuitous by-product of developing a swing that repeats itself.

The silky smooth swings of Fred Couples, Ernie Els, Gene Littler and Julius Boros (sorry, showing my age) make many golfers drool with envy. Admiring their form is understandable. Attempting to copy it is disastrous.

It's an exercise in futility to try and copy another player. There are essential elements found in every effective swing. Understanding these elements and helping you incorporate them is the task of a competent instructor. The trick is learning how to adapt these essentials into your unique style. You have to discover the motion that feels right for you, work on refining it, and let the aesthetics take of itself.

## THE LEARNING PLATEAU

*“Conquer the fear of failure and you conquer the fear of success.”*

*Dr. Karl Morris*

During the first three to five years, most players improve rapidly. They learn the fundamentals, acquire a basic swing and break 100 regularly. Despite investing in lessons, the latest high-tech equipment and watching the golf channel religiously, the majority of golfers never break 90.

You might attribute this lack of improvement to time constraints; between work, kid's activities and social commitments, you just don't have time to beat enough balls to develop any consistency.

It certainly sounds reasonable doesn't it?

If you honestly believe this statement, then you are shutting off any access to your untapped natural ability. I'm not implying that all of us have the god-given talent to shoot par every round.

A chosen few of the games' disciples have been granted the natural ability to swing a club over one-hundred miles per hour (My back starts to twinge when I even think about swinging a club that fast!)

No doubt about it, the golf gods are fickle. Even though you may not be one of the chosen few, you have enough innate ability to score in the eighties consistently. Many of my students, have a comprehensive knowledge of swing mechanics. They've learned the subtleties of the swing; the nuances of pronation, supination, hitting from the top and the delayed release - but they were never taught how to use this knowledge to improve their own games.

I can think of no better phrase in this regard than one often enunciated by the late Canadian golf legend, Moe Norman.

During our impromptu conversations at the Scarlett Woods Golf Club in Toronto, he would repeat the same maxims time after time in his inimitable high-pitched style. It has taken me 20 years to appreciate the significance of these phrases.

The meaning behind this particular one has been percolating in my mind for the last 10 years: “be a mind beater – not a ball beater.”

## **REVERSING THE LEARNING PARADIGM**

Contrary to popular belief, your ability to memorize the intricate details of the swing is not a passport to improvement.

A second cousin to this belief is the conviction that the key to your best golf is perfect mechanics. Traditional golf instruction is based on the premise that (especially if you began to play after 10 years old) our natural instincts betray us and must be constantly suppressed.

The ability to repeat a motion consistently must take priority over technical perfection.

At this point you may be thinking: "...sure, easy for him to say. He's probably been playing since he was 4 years old. What does he know about struggling to break 90?"

Permit me to indulge in a brief biography, and I think you'll see that the principles outlined in this text provide the elements that can unlock the mental vault and elevate your game to a whole new level.

## **THE LURE OF PERFECTION**

*"If what you're doing isn't working, then try something else."*

*Anthony Robbins*

I had no intention of teaching golf as a career. Since I was 16, my goal was to pursue a career in clinical psychiatry (I know, I know, that explains a lot).

Having only played twice before entering university, I regarded the game as a silly pastime played (at the time) mostly by men who had nothing better to do than waste an afternoon trying to bury a ball in a hole.

My father played twice a month. He subscribed to Golf Digest, Golf Magazine and the local newspaper to read the weekly serial by Jack Nicklaus. My Dad could describe the technical flaws in any swing, yet he struggled for years to break 100.

Every year from age 12 to 16, he tried to convince me to caddy for him in the annual office tournament. Every year I refused. In the fourth year, after running out of excuses, I finally agreed.

Once beyond the scope of the pro shop, the casual atmosphere (and free beer) prompted my Dad's colleagues to give me a club. With only a basic grip and no knowledge of proper technique, I hit a number three wood about 150 yards down the middle of the fairway.

My father's typically stoic demeanor transformed to a look of sheer amazement! Upon completing the round, he immediately registered me for a series of lessons with the club professional.

Up until this point, I had played football, basketball and baseball reasonably well, but they held no particular attraction to develop my skills. Suddenly, hitting a golf ball now held a peculiar fascination. So far, the story is pretty much what you would expect, right?

Sit tight. It gets better.

During the summer, I spent six hours a day practicing the square to square method which was in vogue at the time. The paradigm focused on a flat wrist in the backswing and driving the knees in the downswing.

Obsessed with developing proper muscle memory, I built several devices which (in retrospect conjured up images of the Spanish Inquisition) would force my body to follow the requirements of sound technique.

In order to flatten the back of the left wrist at the top of the backswing, I constructed a brace consisting of two pieces of plywood about half an inch thick, 3 inches wide and 6 inches long. There were two bolts at either end to maintain a constant pressure and force the wrist to hinge properly. (I still have faint scars where the plywood was pressed so tightly it cut off the circulation.) I wore the brace every time I practiced.

After three months of practice, I could keep the wrist relatively straight by conscious effort. I was eager to play. Can you guess what happened?

Playing my first game in three months, I scored 102! Dejected doesn't come close to describing the empty feeling in my gut. I was reasonably athletic and, heaven knows, analytical to a fault. Yet with all this practice, any natural ability I had to hit a golf ball had completely vanished!

Perplexed as to my next course of action, I booked another lesson with the pro. Perhaps I had ingrained some tragic flaw by hitting thousands of golf balls. After watching me for half an hour, he assured me that I was on the right track and that, sooner or later, all the hard work would pay off.

It never did.



I played four more games that season. My best score was 92. If I hadn't been a decent putter, I would have been lucky to break 100. The clubs were banished to a dark corner of the basement and remained there for four years as I continued my education.

Having graduated with a degree in Psychology, I decided to take a year off to assess my vocational options. Daunted by the prospect of four more years of medical training plus an internship, I pondered the potential real-life applications for my current knowledge.

Teaching was a viable alternative, but I had had enough of four walls and lecture halls. I vividly recall the moment that changed my life forever.

Killing an afternoon by wandering through a local bookstore, my eye snagged on a picture of Jack Nicklaus on the cover of Golf Digest. The caption read: "The Deadly Flaw in Jack's Swing." The article went on to describe how this technical flaw had to be fixed in order for Jack to have any success on the PGA Tour. The so-called flaw (his flying right elbow) was never fixed. Nicklaus went on to win eighteen major tournaments. The apparent flaw was an endemic part of his swing. If he had given credence to the critics and tried to eliminate it, I seriously doubt that he would have become the oldest golfer in history to win the Masters tournament.

I scanned the magazine rack and discovered five more golf publications. The feature story in each one focused on the most common mistakes made by the average golfer. Lifting the head too soon, bending the left elbow and the reverse weight shift were the most popular deadly sins. The implication was that the golf swing was not a natural motion. The ultimate goal was technical perfection.

I spent the next 30 years searching for a method that would complement a golfer's natural ability and gradually refine the technical aspects without sacrificing his/her unique form.

Get ready to take your game to a new level! You're about to discover the secret to...

## MIND OVER MUSCLE

*“The ball gets in the way of the swing.”*

*George Knudson*

One of the most common delusions among the mid to high handicap golfer is the expectation that practice makes perfect. The number of practice shots you hit, good or bad, have absolutely no causal relationship to how you play. For years, I entertained the idea that the more I practiced, the better I would play.

Does this sound familiar?

This firmly entrenched belief was challenged on a golf vacation, when I was paired up with an older gentleman in his late fifties (I was thirty-two at the time, so I considered anyone over forty old) who shattered my belief in the value of practice. We met on the practice range twenty minutes before our tee time. My swing felt effortless. Every shot traced a perfect parabolic trajectory towards the target. I could hardly wait for the accolades from my partner.

I glanced over periodically and couldn't help but notice Bob's short, choppy backswing and abbreviated follow-through. His shots varied from fair to good to worm-burners and fat shots. I'm ashamed to admit that the prospect of spending four and half hours looking for lost balls, almost impelled me to feign a mysterious illness and ask for a raincheck.

If I had followed through with that impulse, today I would be spending countless hours lying on a therapist's couch struggling to come to terms with the inequities of the game.

I played reasonably well that day and shot 77. My playing partner shot 75!

A gnawing voice somewhere in the back of my mind kept screaming that the score wasn't a true reflection of our respective abilities. Was there no justice?

Tinged with frustration and burning with curiosity, I had to find out how Bob (not his real name) flipped a switch and went from a total duffer on the practice range to a very respectable player under pressure. There were no bets involved, so the thought that I was being hustled quickly dissolved.

Trying to assuage my guilt, I offered to buy the beer. We pulled up a small table in the clubhouse overlooking the practice range. Barely restraining my irritation, I blurted,

“How did you do that?” A wry smile played across Bob’s face as he tapped his temple with a forefinger.

“I’ve learned to keep practice and playing at a distance, like relatives. In separate rooms, everyone gets along, but put them all together and (pounding an open hand with a fist) look out!”

While I could relate to the analogy, my question remained unanswered. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Bob sipped his beer and placed his glass on the table. He rose, went to the bar and returned with two napkins. He lay them down on the table, smoothed them out and wrote Playing on the top of one and Practice on the other.

“Okay. Let’s do a little comparison. I’ll jot down your answers under the respective columns. Ready?”

I nodded.

“First question, how many balls do you play on the golf course?”

“One obviously”, I replied curtly.

“Right.” Ignoring my condescending tone, Bob jotted a number one under Playing then continued. “And how many balls do you hit on the practice range?”

I shrugged, “Well...anywhere from 40 to 80.”

“Let’s round it off at 60.” He scribbled 60 under Practice. “How about hazards - do you have any on the range?”

“No.”

“How about on the golf course?”

Recalling vividly the numerous rounds where I had paid homage to the sand god, I replied: “Average three sand traps per hole, so 54 traps plus three water hazards.”

“Okay then. Let’s say conservatively thirty-six.” The napkin was beginning to lose its shape as Bob’s pen scrawled halfway down the column.

“How wide is the average hole on your home course?”

“Maybe 40 yards I guess.”

“How about the practice range?”

I was sure the range was at least 100 yards wide, but I was beginning to feel like a suspect in a CSI investigation.

I replied smugly, “About 60 yards.”

Glancing down at my watch, I sighed audibly. “Is there a point to...?”

Bob eyed me askance then continued the interrogation, “Last question. Do you practice off artificial turf or grass?”

“Grass whenever possible” I replied indignantly, “I look for an area where the grass hasn’t been disturbed. The grass tee decks on most practice ranges look like the fallout from a groundhog convention. Sometimes it’s hard to find a perfect lie.”

In a tone tinged with sarcasm, Bob replied, “That makes sense. Why practice from bad lies on the range? You’ll get enough of them on the golf course.”

Momentarily offended, I grudgingly acknowledged,

“Alright, alright. I get your point.”

Shaking his head in mock despair, Bob continued.

“Why would you expect to play better or worse, based on your results on the practice range? In every other sport, you practice and play in the same arena, but most driving ranges don’t even remotely resemble the conditions you encounter on the golf course.”

I lifted my beer halfway to my mouth and stopped. “It sounds logical when you look at it that way” I replied “but what about pretending the two are the same? You’ve heard of visualization, practice like you play, that sort of thing.”

Bob smiled tolerantly. “Unless you’re a master at self-delusion, practice and playing will always be distant relatives.”

I took a mouthful of beer and placed the stein firmly on the table. The glass tabletop whined in protest.

At this point, I’m sure the frustration of hitting thousands of practice balls during the past twenty years, with only marginal improvement, was evident on my face.

Bob's logic, though undeniable, was somewhat disturbing.

My voice was prickly as I struggled to remain calm, "So what's the point of practice then, if not to correct your mistakes? Every time I glanced over, you were hitting a mixed bag of shots. After watching you on the range, I figured you'd be lucky to break one-hundred!"

Peering at me over the top of his beer glass, there was a mischievous twinkle in Bob's eye.

"I used to practice religiously, constantly trying to correct all the flaws in my swing. After thirty years of beating myself up, I finally discovered a better way to practice."

I leaned forward in anticipation. "And..."

He raised a forefinger as a warning. "You're going to think that what I'm about to tell you is crazy."

"Not after playing with you today I won't!"

Bob slowly drifted forward in his chair, glanced from side to side and lowered his voice, as if fearing other patrons within earshot might pick up the phone and have the "white suits" come to take him away.

"The trick is using the poor shots to automatically trigger good ones. One poor shot won't ruin a round, unless it leads to another. Every time I hit a poor shot, I never analyze the mistake. I've learned to resist the urge to dissect my swing. Whenever I hit a poor shot on the range, I do something to stop it from affecting the next shot. Once I discover the technique, then I apply it on the golf course."

Left hand supporting my chin, I glanced sideways at Bob under raised eyebrows. Bob gestured, palms up, and dropped back into his chair.

"I told you. Sounds crazy right?"

Feeling as if I had just sucked a lemon, I responded testily. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you don't try to figure out your mistakes?"

Bob nodded almost imperceptibly in response.

“Every golfer hits at least one perfect shot a round. It’s the shot that you just know you couldn’t hit any better. The trick is discovering the recipe or ritual you used to create that shot. Trying to dissect the poor shots is self-defeating. The key is understanding how to re-create the good shots rather than focusing on why you hit the poor ones.”

I had to admit that, for the past twenty years, I spent more mental energy concentrating on the *why* questions rather than the *how* ones.

Trying to wrap my head around this assault on my whole philosophy of practice, I replied cautiously, “But how can you correct the faults if you don’t know what they are? I mean, what’s to prevent poor muscle memory from setting in. Surely you have to be aware of the flaws in your swing in order to fix them?”

Bob smiled and sighed softly.

“That’s the trap so many golfers fall into. Why do you think the vast majority of amateurs keep hitting *the wall*? Anybody who can hit the ball 100 yards can break 90. It’s not a lack of ability. It’s a lack of understanding about how our nervous system works.”

He paused, took a sip of beer, and continued as if revealing some arcane truth.

“The concept of muscle memory is just a term of convenience. It’s a logical excuse for a lack of improvement. Your nervous system has a memory but your muscles don’t. Muscles don’t know the difference between right and wrong. They simply respond to your strongest memory. If you keep thinking about your swing faults, then you’re letting the past determine the future.”

I tapped my fingers on the table with a rising staccato.

“Let me get this straight. Are you saying that trying to figure out my mistakes increases the likelihood of repeating them?”

Bob made a twirling motion in the air with his right forefinger.

“It’s an endless loop. Are you familiar with the story of the boy and the dam? As soon as he plugged one leak, the water pressure built up and another leak appeared. Same thing when you try to repair leaks in your golf swing.”

Determined to preserve my hallowed belief in the sanctity of practice, I offered a rebuttal.

“Let’s pretend for now that what you’re saying actually makes sense. If I’m not supposed to think about mistakes, then *how do I improve?*”

Bob smiled wistfully, “Two steps. First, you have to interrupt or break the habit of automatically analyzing every poor shot. You’ve been watching too much CSI. It’s not a forensic investigation where you look for clues to a crime. The habit of dissecting your swing is the biggest roadblock to improvement.”

My right foot tapped reflexively. I pursed my lips.

Bob continued unabated. “Once you’ve broken the habit, then you fire off step two.”

“Which is?”

“Develop the habit of recalling your best shots; especially the feeling, both physical and mental, that you had right after the shot. You want to lock in that feeling so you can use it in the future. Reinforce the memories of your best shots regularly, and you begin to ingrain them into your nervous system. Eventually, it responds automatically under pressure. That’s the meaning of the phrase *playing in the zone*, or as I like to call it, subconscious golf.”

I emptied my beer with a gulp, carefully placing the empty glass on a coaster and leaned back in the chair. Bob must have sensed that I was at a tipping point. He capped his pen, slipped it into his shirt pocket then asked casually,

“Did you ever own a record player?”

Taken aback slightly, I replied. “Sure. I still have it somewhere in the attic. But what’s that have to do with...?”

“Stay with me for a minute and I think you’ll get the idea. Imagine your nervous system is like a record player. When you play a song repeatedly, the track gets worn deeper and deeper. Eventually, the needle tends to slip into that groove automatically. Follow me?”

“Yea... I guess.”

“When you keep playing the same *Flaws In My Swing* record over and over, year after year, the needle wears a conduit in your nervous system. I’m sure you’ve heard of a broken record? On the practice range, you can decide which record to play. Under pressure though, your nervous system overrides your conscious mind and automatically plays your favorite song.”

Bob glanced out the window towards the practice range. Several golfers were swinging back and forward in slow motion, checking their positions, hitting a few shots then repeating the routine.

Bob shook his head slowly and sighed. "It's a shame. Those fellows will spend hours looking for the critical flaw in their swing, trying to figure out why they can't hit two good shots in a row. No doubt they'll hit a thousand practice balls during the season. I would bet one-hundred to one, their score is basically the same at the end of the season as it was at the beginning. All that wasted effort."

Following his gaze, I could see myself in that group.

Reiterating Bob's theory, I continued, "Let me see if I get the idea. You're saying that focusing on swing faults year after year, is like playing the same song over and over again. Unless I record a new tune, my nervous system will keep playing the same refrain forever."

A hissing sound, like a slowly deflating balloon, punctuated Bob's reply "You got it."

"So how do I play a new record?"

Bob leaned forward, perched on the edge of his chair, and rubbed his hands briskly, like a safe-cracker preparing to assault a hermetically sealed vault.

"It's a two stop process. You have to stop playing the *What's' Wrong With My Swing* song and then record a new song."

I gestured impatiently.

"First, you need to discover a simple way to shake up your nervous system long enough to interrupt your habit of replaying the poor shots."

I considered a moment, and then replied, "Kind of like keeping the record needle suspended in mid-air?"

"Exactly!"

Feeling that I was about to uncover some magical formula, I snatched a pen and napkin from a nearby table. I held the pen poised, ready to record the details for posterity.

"What do *you* do?"

In response, Bob snapped his fingers vigorously. Startled momentarily, I snapped upright in my chair. Eyes wide, I waited for Bob's explanation. Instead he simply leaned back and smiled.

Slightly irritated, I interjected: "Well...what *do* you do?"



Bob chuckled as he replied: "That's it. Today I snap my fingers."

Capping the pen with a click, I couldn't fight the growing feeling that I had been duped into a free beer.

"Snapping your fingers is the key? Kind of childish isn't it?"

Bob's eyes widened. His dilating pupils conjured up an image of a hypnotist casting a trance. "Did you notice how you reacted just now?"

"I was expecting some revolutionary theory. Snapping your fingers is hardly worth recording for posterity."

"Perhaps, but it did interrupt your train of thought. You're looking for some technical, esoteric approach. It's really not that complicated. You just need to do something that stops you in mid-stride; like a re-set button."

My head was starting to hurt as the image of a giant record player hovered in my mind.

"So all I have to do is snap my fingers and poof! I start playing a new record?" I asked.

"Not quite. If it were that easy, everyone would be shooting par all the time. You have to constantly monitor the effect. With repetition, your nervous system adapts and the effect wears off."

He paused for emphasis then continued softly,

"You have to discover the buttons that are going to work on any given day. That's the real point of practicing before you play. Better players use the pre-game practice to find the triggers that will help them forget the mechanics of the swing."

Bob lowered his head slightly then looked up at me under raised eyebrows. "Ever had the feeling that someone or something pushed one of your buttons, either verbally or physically, and you just reacted, without being aware of it until after?"

"Oh yeah..."

"Well, you have to discover the triggers or buttons that *you* control."

Suddenly, it hit me!

Now I understood why certain holes always spelled disaster, no matter how well I was playing. The record player analogy was actually beginning to make sense.

I sat in silence for a moment.

“That does explain the blow-up holes that keep ruining my good rounds. But how can I override their influence when I don’t even know the triggers?”

Bob smiled. “Ah, that’s where the due diligence comes in. You have to start paying attention. Notice when you start to become tense. See if you can trace the source to something you did or thought. The first step is awareness. Sometimes awareness itself is enough to break the pattern. Once you understand the effects of certain events, then you can develop a method of cancelling those effects.”

Reflexively, I half rose from my chair and blurted out, “Yes, it all makes perfect sense!”

Unaware my voice had risen an octave, I was suddenly assaulted by a profound silence. Fearing to turn around, I could feel numerous eyes staring in our direction. I slowly sank back into the chair.

Bob asked softly, “You’ve heard of a pre-shot routine?”

Almost whispering, I replied, “Sure. It’s like a mental checklist.”

Bob waved an imperious finger, “That’s a misconception. Average players use it to review all the technical elements of the swing; keep your head down, left arm straight, transfer the weight, that sort of thing. Better players use it as a trigger to forget technique and just hit the damn ball!”

I must have drifted off momentarily, recalling my own desperate efforts to recall the most glaring swing faults to avoid during the six seconds before hitting a shot.

When I looked up, Bob was sitting patiently, hands crossed, wearing an expression somewhere between amusement and pity. I felt like I had been mystically transported to a sacred temple and granted an audience with the high priest of Golfdom.

He continued in a slightly didactic tone.

“Every top athlete has a habitual way of forgetting the poor shots and reinforcing the good ones. The announcers call it superstition, but in reality it’s the player’s recipe for re-creating their optimum state.”

Bob’s eyes glazed over as he seemed to be looking right through me into the horizon.

“The power of rituals is enormous. Look at Brandt Snedeker. He taps the clubhead on the ground twice before every shot. Phil Mickelson twirls the club. The top tennis players bounce the ball a specific number of times. Watch the best pitchers in baseball. They follow a fixed routine. Every top athlete has a unique method of trying to re-capture the conditions that produced their best performance in the past.”

I replied fervently, "So if I just try to reproduce everything that worked in the past, it will guarantee great results?"

Bob sighed and tilted his head slightly.

"There are no guarantees. The game cannot be reduced to a simple formula. The best hitters in baseball only reach base one third of the time. But, you have a better chance of accessing your best performance when you stop reinforcing the faults and start developing the memories of your best shots."

I had the feeling that Bob had bottled up all this top secret knowledge for a long time, as he continued in rapid machine-gun style.

"Now that you have the needle *on hold* as it were, you need to play a new record, one that will help you re-create your best shots. You have to find something in the environment, something you can control, to hook onto as an anchor."

"Mmm...you mean a reminder or some kind of memory trigger?"

"Exactly. Have you ever wondered why Tiger always wears a red shirt in the final round of a tournament?"

"I guess it's his favorite color."

Bob continued in a deliberate tone. "Tiger won his first major tournament wearing a red shirt. Since then, he always wears a red shirt in the final round when he's in contention. The colour is an anchor that helps him get into the zone. It helps him to start automatically replaying the memories of his best performances."

The glass tabletop trembled as Bob tapped it for emphasis.

"Make it a habit to replay your best shots over and over again in your mind. Make the picture as clear as possible. Do something that will replay it on demand. Snap your fingers, tie your shoes, play your favorite music, anything that will trigger the memory. Do it every day. Set an alarm to remind you if need be. As the link grows stronger, you're re-programming your nervous system to use these memories under pressure. Once you develop the habit, you'll discover how to practice less and play better."

I sat back and rubbed my eyes.

Inwardly I thought, "This is really weird. If I hadn't seen it in action during our game, I would have dismissed it as just another goofy theory. In any case, all the time I've spent hitting thousands of practice balls over the past five years hasn't produced any significant improvement. So what the heck. This stuff might be worth a shot!"

"You said something about seeing improvement in just thirty days. You're joking, right?"

Bob straightened up in his chair and continued in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Not at all, if you recall the memory of your best shots every day, and link it to something you enjoy, like that double tall cappuccino you have every morning, then you’ll start to develop the habit. Under pressure, you’ll begin to focus on where you want the ball to go instead of where you don’t want it to go.”

“It can’t be that easy.” I protested, “You’re implying that in just thirty days I can be playing the best golf of my life?”

Bob smiled wistfully, “If I could promise that, I would write a book. I *can* guarantee that you will be playing a more consistent game with less effort. Even more important, you will be on the path to constant improvement instead of doubting yourself on every shot. The game might actually be fun again.”

I had to admit that it had been awhile since I mentioned golf and fun in the same sentence.

“Fair enough”, I agreed, “But what happens after thirty days? When do I stop trying to record new songs?”

“That’s up to you. Just bear in mind that your natural tendency is to focus on mistakes. You will never totally eliminate it. You have to keep your guard up. Maintaining a constant vigil is the key.”

Now I understood why Bob lowered his voice. Most golfers would think this conversation was the ravings of a geriatric lunatic.

Actually, the record player analogy made more sense than some of the highly technical theories that I had heard in the past thirty years. The vibrancy of your memories determines which song will play. The song determines your state of mind and body. The trick is playing the right song at the right time.”

I was lost in thought when Bob took the conversation in a totally new direction.

“I assume you drove here?” Blinking several times, I stammered, “Yes, but I don’t see...”

Bob continued without pausing. “Do you think about every action you need to take in order to get safely from point A to point B? How much brake pressure to apply, how far to turn the steering wheel, how quickly to accelerate in order to pass...?”

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “Of course not. I’ve been driving for 14 years!”

Bob shrugged, “And what do you think would happen if you had to think about every single action?”

“Well, I guess I would have to slow down in order for my body to keep up with the commands in my head. In a way, I guess it’s kind of like being stuck in *new driver mode*.”

Bob clapped softly in response, “Bingo. Eventually you learn to let go and drive by instinct. If you don’t, you’re doomed to the slow lane forever.”

After what seemed like an eternity, he asked softly, “Does this driving analogy remind you of anything?”

An image of a golfer with a painfully slow backswing followed by a frenetic downswing popped into my head. My tone was mechanical as I responded, “paralysis by analysis.”

The clock over the bar struck 4:00 pm. We had been talking for nearly two hours. Bob’s eyes widened as he glanced at his watch.

“Whoa. I better run. It’s been a pleasure. You’re the first person in fifteen years that I’ve been able to share any of this stuff with. Thanks for listening. My wife’s waiting at the mall and I’m already twenty minutes late!”

Bob gulped the dregs of his beer and headed for the exit. I motioned feebly, hoping to get an e-mail address, but he was out the door faster than one of Tiger’s tee shots on a par five.

The creased napkins were still on the table. I began to crumple them, hesitated momentarily, then carefully folded them in half and slipped them in my pocket.

I walked absent-mindedly to the car, struggling to grasp the true significance of this accidental meeting.

## **STOP THE MERRY GO ROUND**

*"Tell me, I'll forget, show me, I'll remember,  
Involve me and I'll understand."*

*Confucius*

Looking back over my notes from that impromptu meeting, I shake my head at Bob's eccentric approach. If I hadn't seen the practical application first hand during our game, I would have dismissed him as just another crackpot who claimed to have discovered golf's Ark of the Covenant.

The potential applications of the record player theory were intriguing, but before trying to apply any of this left field stuff during my lessons, I felt obliged to use myself as a guinea pig.

For the past five seasons, I've averaged three games per month. Between teaching and stocking the pro shop, my schedule allowed me time to hit four buckets of practice balls per week.

I began carrying a small notepad with me. After every good shot, I would pause and jot down everything I could recall from the moment I walked up to the ball, to how the swing felt, what I heard, saw and even smelled immediately after. I quickly filled several pocket-size notebooks.

After two weeks, I began reviewing the notes and noticed some common elements. Whenever I wore a blue shirt, my practice sessions were more productive. Now I understood why Tiger always wore red in the final round.

What the heck, if it's good enough for Tiger.

I carried a stopwatch with me during practice and noticed my optimum time frame between addressing the ball and starting the swing was four seconds. After two weeks of practice, I had ingrained the feel of my optimum pre-shot timing.

Here's the biggie!

My practice sessions had always focused on correcting mistakes. It's amazing how one automatically looks for technical faults. Now I became less concerned with why I hit poor shots and more focused on how to trigger the good ones. You can't dwell on what's wrong when you focus on what's right.

"So did all this mental mumbo-jumbo really work?" you ask.

I played my first game after two weeks of practice. My score was still in the high seventies, but the mental fallout from the poor shots was minimal. For the first time in five years, I didn't have any blow up holes.

In the past, I would replay a poor shot over and over in my mind, trying to figure out the mistake. It would take me three holes to calm down. One bad shot would lead to two or three. For the first time in twenty years, I was able to let go and focus on the next shot. I wasn't emotionally drained by the end of the round. The game actually became fun again.

(Anyone who played with me five years ago could tell that, even when I played well, I wasn't having fun. Just ask Harvey).

My swing has changed - aesthetics have become secondary.

After years of trying to perfect swing mechanics, I am finally learning to play by feel. The secret to honing your sense of feel, is realizing that no two swings are the same.

Don't get me wrong. I'm sure there will be days when nothing feels right. That's an integral part of the game. Now I understand that the inconsistencies in my game are not due to flaws in technique, but rather in the quality of the memories and the efficacy of the anchors I use on any given day.

The most relevant aspect of this system is the simplicity of applying the concepts on a day-to-day basis.

Memories are at your disposal - anytime, anyplace. I'm convinced that any golfer can use these tools to develop their natural ability. The most difficult task will be giving up the long-standing beliefs you may have, regarding the technical elements of the swing.

If you're still with me, let's pursue a topic that seems to elicit strong diverse opinions from many amateur golfers.

Have you ever taken a professional golf lesson? Did you see positive results, or did you just give up and go back to your old style?

These questions are the topic of discussion, as I would ask you to consider...

## **A NEW SLANT ON GOLF INSTRUCTION**

*“There are too many wrong ways and the process of elimination in finding what is right proves tedious and discouraging.”*

*Ernest Jones – Swing the Clubhead*

Traditional golf instruction is based on fault-finding and error correction. The tacit assumption by both the student teacher, is that an awareness of one's swing flaws will automatically lead to improvement. Following this line of reasoning, the more time (and money) you invest in fixing your mistakes, the better you will play.

Has this been your experience?

The golf swing is, and always will be, a work in progress: unless you have the time, money and dedication to practice eight hours a day for eight months, (which would entail moving to Arizona. I can be available with 48 hours notice) it's an exercise in futility to attempt to eliminate every flaw. Every swing has flaws. The key to consistency is learning how to minimize their effects.

One of the tacit assumptions in traditional golf instruction is that our natural impulses must be suppressed, especially the so-called *hit impulse*. Our innate instincts serve as a starting point in baseball and hockey, but the unique features of the golf swing seem, at first glance, to be totally contrary to our natural tendencies.

Have you ever seen a well-meaning parent offering advice to a son or daughter who has just taken three wild swings and completely missed the ball? Immediately, the parent begins delineating the youngster's mistakes.

I'm not saying that mistakes shouldn't be corrected, but relating every mistake in detail to a student is not a prerequisite for improvement. Golf instruction should focus on discovering what a student is doing right, rather than obsessing with what they are doing wrong.

I often hear golfers on the practice range discussing their reticence to take a lesson. They are afraid of playing worse. Why pay someone to show you how to play worse?

Should you expect to play poorly after a lesson? That all depends on the instructor's method of communicating and the student's willingness to change.



Have you ever tried helping a spouse or friend with their swing and given up in frustration?

Most instructors have heard a student assert that they know what's wrong with their swing. Once you set foot in the labyrinth of trying to decipher cause and effect, you resurrect the legend of the hydra, correcting one flaw only to have it supplanted by another.

So what's the point of paying good money for professional golf instruction? Good question. A competent instructor will help you determine which swing flaws are superficial and which are deadly.

Imagine your swing is like a set of bowling pins. The fundamental flaw is the head pin. When you knock out the head pin, the others topple over - the domino effect. A proficient teacher can help you incorporate essential technical elements without destroying your natural ability.

Once you have these elements programmed into your nervous system, (which is much easier than you are led to believe) then the learning process should focus on refining the cues or anchors that will help you trigger your best swings automatically. This is the secret to playing in the zone.

Are you beginning to see how memories and habits determine your progress? Find your unique triggers and develop the art of selective memory.

Can you recall a situation where you employed selective memory – perhaps unconsciously?

## ROADBLOCKS ON YOUR MENTAL HIGHWAY

*“There is no try , only do.”*

*Yoda*

Do any of these phrases sound familiar? “Try not to bend your left arm,” “try to keep your head down,” “try not to think too much”. Trying is synonymous with more conscious effort – the polar opposite of subconscious golf. Have you ever been told that you’re trying too hard? Most of us have. But how can you try less?

Mmm...confusing isn't it?

Let's see if the following scenario rings a bell.

After weeks (maybe even years) of fruitless experimenting, you finally decide to take a golf lesson. Maybe you've been watching golf on television or your friends have told you the importance of keeping a straight left elbow. No matter how hard you try, the elbow seems to have a mind of its own.

You take a couple of swings for the instructor and, sure enough, your left elbow is bending like a pretzel. The teacher asks you to try and keep it straight.

Attempting to diligently follow instruction, you lock the elbow. It's straight now alright-ramrod stiff. Okay then. You definitely make better contact, but you've lost 20 yards in distance.

Maybe you should try not to keep it quite so rigid. That works for the shorter clubs but not so much with the woods. Let's try something else. And so the cycle continues.

Do you know the most deadly phrase in golf instruction? The *try not* to command. If you want to bring a golfer to a complete standstill, tell him to try not to think too much. How in heaven's name can you try not to do something?

Here is a classic example from basic psychology: “try not to think of pink elephants.” Come on now. Really try. Give it your best shot. You're not trying hard enough. I can tell the image of pink elephants is still clear in your mind.

Give up? Okay. Just forget about pink elephants – if you can. Here's an easier exercise. Try not to think about the water on the second hole or try to forget the last round where you hit two balls out of bounds on the ninth hole.

What's the point of this silly exercise you ask?

There is a fundamental principle that just might be the turning point for your game. It might be worth jotting down in a notebook and keeping it in your golf bag for future reference. Ready?

*You get what you focus on.*

That's it. Sounds simple doesn't it? Yet this innocent sounding axiom is critical to understanding why you progress to a certain level and then keep hitting a wall.

Are you beginning to see why certain holes always rise up and bite you?

Our brains cannot process negative commands. You have to eliminate the negative and decipher what's left. Take away the try not to and what's left? Try not to bend your left elbow becomes, you guessed it, bend your left elbow!

Positive directives have a much better chance of being absorbed. A command like "keep your elbow straight" is fairly straightforward. That doesn't mean you can fix the problem instantly, but at least you don't have to consciously decode the meaning.

## **THE POWER OF DON'T**

"Don't swing too fast," don't leave your weight on your back foot," "don't even think about your left knee."

The quickest way to throw a monkey wrench into a fellow golfer's game (even unintentionally) is to use a *don't* command. "Don't pay any attention to the sand in front of the green."

Take away the *don't* and what do you have left?

As you can see, don't and try are fraternal twins. How many times have you been the victim of a *don't* command?

Here is an abbreviated form of a suggestion I overhear constantly on the practice range. A fellow golfer is trying (whoops, nearly forgot) suggesting to his partner that the solution to his slice is "don't swing the club so much from outside to in on the downswing."

Yikes! Is it any wonder so many golfers look and feel like robots on the first tee?

Enough linguistics already; I don't want to be responsible for creating a mild addiction to Tylenol.

## **THE BIG BUT**

"You're on the right track, but not quite there yet." "Your backswing is better, but you're still swinging too fast."

The word *but* wipes out whatever came before it.

In effect, you're right back where you started from. The above phrases activate your analytical mind as you try and figure out the underlying meaning.

Our goal is to slip under the radar of conscious thought. At this point, you might be wondering why a golf instructor is devoting an entire chapter to linguistics and semantics.

The golf swing is not a difficult concept to understand. The swing is basically a circle or pendulum. As the club swings through its arc, the ball simply gets in the way. Our skill level is based on how well we can create this motion. The concept is simple, yet only ten percent of golfers score in the eighties or lower consistently. It's certainly not a lack of knowledge.

You know what to do.

There always seems to be something that prevents you from using your knowledge effectively. Apart from physical limitations, the only remaining variable is the language you use.

Finally, you've finished with all the mental gymnastics. I would recommend reviewing the key concepts of triggers and anchors, until you have a clear grasp of their value. If the record player analogy works for you then use it. If not, design your own metaphor.

You've reached a critical stage in learning.

Simply agreeing with the ideas intellectually will have no effect. You must start to put the ideas into practice. Set up your own blockades to ward off the fallout from the poor shots. Recall your best shots every day. Write down (in positive terms of course) everything you can recall: the more vivid the memory, the better your results on the golf course. Be aware of the language you use on yourself and others.

Congratulations! You only have two more chapters to go. Have a number seven iron handy and be prepared to use it as you learn...

## **THE THREE KEYS TO CONSISTENCE**

*“To complicate something is easy, to simplify it takes practice.”*

Unknown

Every effective swing is built on three basic technical concepts. Idiosyncrasies in style are the automatic result of developing a swing built on these principles.

### **Form Follows Function**

Even though this concept has been alluded to earlier, a closer examination merits a brief discussion.

The golf swing, perhaps more than any other motion in sports, is subject to an unspoken, unwritten idealized image. In layman’s terms, we tend to judge the value of a golf swing by its appearance.

Based on my thirty-one years of teaching, I have come to the conclusion that many amateur golfers entertain the idea that function (results) is a by-product of form (aesthetics). I’ve played with golfers whose swings resemble the histrionics of a maniacal lumberjack. Yet they score in the eighties consistently.

A swing that isn’t pleasing to the eye just can’t be right.

Low handicap players understand that the pursuit of perfect style is a slippery slope. If you discover a technique that produces quality shots and the form meets our criteria of aesthetics, then you are lucky indeed.

Using your innate swing as the foundation, you can (with the help of a competent instructor) gradually introduce improvements in technique. The addition of these new bricks will automatically produce a change in form.

How do you apply the form follows function principle?

Let’s get started by looking at the three cornerstones which are the foundation of every effective swing; the essentials of effective stance, ideal wrist motion and optimal body motion.

## **How To Determine Your Ideal Stance**

What are the key ingredients of the ideal stance? They include balance and freedom of motion. The standard guideline for a functional stance is shoulder width. Let's take a closer look to determine the finer adjustments that will produce the best results for you.

For a right-handed golfer, the right leg must remain at a constant angle in the backswing and the left leg must support your body rotation in the follow-through.

Wow! I bet you haven't heard that before.

Grab your seven iron and take your normal address position. (If you are indoors make sure the valuable antiques are outside the range of your swing arc). Slowly swing to the top of your backswing and stop. Note the angle of your right leg. The knee will flex slightly, however, it should remain inside your right foot.

If your stance is too narrow, the right knee will move laterally over your shoe laces. Too wide a stance will lock the right leg and inhibit a full shoulder turn.

Return to the address position. Take a few minutes now to find the optimum position for your right leg. Experiment with the angle of your right foot.

Once you've established the ideal angle, close your eyes for 10 seconds and feel the position. Now for the left leg.

Make a slow motion swing and hold your finish position for a count of ten. Your left knee should be directly over the shoe laces of your left foot and the right foot balanced on the toe.

Since we are all built differently, the angle of the left foot will vary, but the relationship between the left knee and shoe laces remains constant.

Have you ever used a tripod? What happens if you forget to lock one leg in place? When you rotate the camera, the leg slips and the camera ends up filming either the sky or the ground (nice shoes!).

Imagine your torso is the camera. As long as the legs remain firmly in place, the camera rotates on a level "plane."

While the tripod analogy is an oversimplification, it presents a clear image for establishing a stable platform.

## **The Ideal Grip: Strong, Weak or Somewhere In Between**

Let's take a look at your grip. There are as many grip variations as there are logos on Dustin Johnson's shirt.

If you've been playing for more than two weeks, you may be tempted to skip this section.

Before you zip through, please make sure your grip produces the ideal motion discussed below. A slight tweak in your grip may lead to a breakthrough!

You've probably heard about the position of the "V's" and the number of visible knuckles, holding the club like a bird and the strong versus weak position.

Do you know the criteria for judging the true effectiveness of the grip?

The ideal grip allows the correct wrist motion to happen automatically (imagine you are raising a bottle of beer to your lips). The wrists must hinge towards you. In order to achieve this motion, there are two critical positions – one for each hand.

For a right-handed golfer, the heel of the left hand must be on the front of the club. Most grips have a logo just below the top of the club. The heel of your left hand should cover the logo.

The majority of mid to high handicap golfers hold the club with the heel of the left hand underneath the grip. This position contributes to inconsistent wrist motion and a loss of clubhead control.

Here comes the litmus test. Grab your seven iron again.

Lay the club diagonally across the palm of your left hand and tighten your grip. Notice how the wrist can move freely. Now relax your fingers and set the club under the heel pad. You should be able to support the weight of the club with the little finger, ring finger and middle finger.

Can you feel the difference?

Imagine you are hammering a nail into a wall directly in front of you. The hammer moves with a back and forward motion. Contrast this with the incorrect movement of the left hand when it moves like a door opening and closing (left to right).

Let's move on to the right hand.



The motion of the right wrist mirrors the left. Place your right hand on the club. Look at your right thumb. Is it directly down the center of the shaft? If so, your hands are fighting each other.

Would you be able to drink a bottle of beer with your right hand, when your thumb is directly on top of the bottle? (I'll wait for a minute if you want to run to the refrigerator and grab a bottle.)

Alright then, place your right thumb directly on top of the bottle. Feel the wrist lock? It's pretty difficult, if not impossible, to get the bottle to your lips. In order to free up the wrist, you automatically move the thumb off-center to the left.

Take a look at the grip on your iron. Is the rubber worn down where the right thumb rests on the club shaft?

When the right thumb is directly on top of the shaft, the natural tendency is to push on the thumb just before impact. This pressure causes the clubface to open (you've just discovered the fundamental cause of a chronic slice).

In order for the right wrist to co-ordinate with the left, the right thumb must be off-center (to the left). When the right thumb is off-center, the pressure point alters just enough to automatically trigger the correct wrist motion.

Grip the club with both hands. As you look down, the right thumb and forefinger should form a trigger around the club.

Take a moment now to see and feel the position of your right thumb. This simple tip could make a huge difference in your distance and control with the driver.

So what about the "V's" and the knuckles and the pressure points? Why are there so many variations in these apparent essentials? Simple - these are guidelines or reminders.

Once you've determined the ideal grip for you, then use these checkpoints to insure that your hands are in the same position for every shot (Putting being the exception of course)

Intelligent experimentation will help you determine the personal adjustments that produce the best results.

## THE ESSENCE OF THE SWING MOTION

*“Internal awareness increases body efficiency, which in turn results in improved technique.”*

*John Whitmore*

You're finally going to learn about the actual swing motion. About time, isn't it?

Just a caveat before we begin. Golfers who have the resources to play three or four times per week, will have better flexibility and timing than those who are restricted to playing once a week or less. They can often compensate for flaws in technique; a luxury the casual player cannot afford.

The once a week golfer has to rely on proper technique to achieve consistent results.

The final concept is the relationship between the hands, arms and torso. Your hands and arms must remain in front of your body as long as possible throughout the swing. The farther your hands and arms move away from the center of your body, the more reliance on perfect timing to make solid contact consistently.

So what does this mean for the average golfer?

The hands, arms and body must move together as a single unit; start together, stop together. The length of your backswing will be governed by your flexibility; your ability to turn your back to the target. When your torso stops turning, the hands and arms must stop. For some golfers, this will feel like a three-quarter backswing.

Imagine a large rubber band connecting your hands with your sternum. As you turn back and forward, the elastic stretches but always remains taut.

Your hands and arms never travel behind your body. Initially, you may sacrifice a little distance in favor of consistently solid contact. (Although an improvement in ball flight may actually result in more distance with less effort. What a concept!)

Once again, you are responsible for discovering how far your hands and arms can swing away from your body before you notice a decline in results.

Now you know the three essential technical elements. Can you see how the tenet form follows function is a critical element for unlocking your innate swing?

Keep these principles in Mind. They will help you filter the incessant flow of information as relevant to your unique style and worth adopting, or to file as simply noteworthy points of interest.

### **The Fewer Moving Parts - The More Consistent The Motion**

The practical application of this principle is to allow your body to react to the motion of the club. Focus on swinging the club with a pendulum motion and allow your body to flow with it.

Any golfer who scores above ninety consistently, attempts to control the motion of the club by using deliberate body positions – the robot syndrome. Visualize the pendulum motion of the club and allow your body to respond naturally.

The epitome of this principle, when taken to its literal extreme, is the unique style of Moe Norman. The wide stance, locked knees (at address) and extended arms and wrists, prevent any extraneous body motion from interfering with the motion of the club as it traces a perfect pendulum back and forth in line with target.

Once you adopt the notion that the club directs the body, any swing can be analyzed in terms of body motion that either allows the club to swing towards the target (scratch players) or prevents the club from swinging with a natural pendulum motion (mid to high handicap players).

### **Your Swing Is a Work In Progress**

No matter how much you practice or how many lessons you take, your golf swing will always be a work in progress. There are simply too many variables to ever reach the level of perfection where any golfer can proudly exclaim, “Ah ha, I’ve got it!”

In most sports, the player only needs one implement – a baseball bat, a hockey stick or a tennis racket. The golfer has to wield fourteen different tools.

Every other sport is played in a controlled environment. A baseball diamond, squash court, hockey rink and football field have relatively stable conditions. A golfer has to negotiate uphill, downhill and sidehill lies, swirling winds and the added pressure of being paired with complete strangers.

A brilliant round one day may be followed by a humbling experience the next. Attempting to dissect the round in order to discover a rational explanation is an exercise in futility.

Relish the good rounds and store them vividly in your memory. Just because you played poorly one day, doesn't mean your swing requires major reconstructive surgery.

Learn to control your expectations.

Your innate swing is always there, on standby, waiting for you to activate it. The secret is constantly refining the cues that flip the switch to turn off your analytical mind and open the door to your subconscious.

## THE FINAL FRONTIER

*“The longest journey begins with a single step.”*

Confucius

Congratulations, you made it!

At this stage, either your curiosity is piqued and you're willing to experiment with the idea of triggers and anchors, or you've arbitrarily dismissed the concepts as delusional as you lace up your golf shoes and head for the practice range to beat an extra large bucket of balls.

If you are one of the elite players who have found a method that produces consistent results, then please give this book to someone else.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it!

The material is offered as an alternative to the complex swing theories that transform a fundamentally simple game into a study in quantum mechanics. The notion that your game is a habit may seem too simplistic, until you experience the pain of trying to break a well-established routine.

Stop and consider how many of our daily habits are automatic and how disturbed you are when the ritual is disturbed (like an extra long line-up in the Starbucks drive thru). You can see how powerful long-standing habits can be.

Breaking a habit can be a long, drawn-out process or it can occur within minutes. It all depends on your beliefs and motivation.

Set up effective pattern interrupts and replace them with new, empowering routines. In just thirty days you can crash through the wall that has impeded your progress.

Develop the habit of reinforcing your best shots and your conscious mind will start to “play ball” with you. Memories embedded in our nervous system govern everything we do. New habits build new memories. New memories lead to new actions.

There is a poem I first heard on a YouTube video with the late Canadian golfing legend, Moe Norman. The original author is unknown, but it illustrates exquisitely the power of habit:

“I have a little robot that goes around with me, I tell it what I’m thinking, I tell it what I see, I tell my little robot all my hopes and fears, it listens and remembers everything it hears.

At first my little robot followed my commands, but after years of training, it’s gotten out of hand. It doesn’t care what’s right or wrong, or what is false or true, but no matter what I try now, it tells me what to do.”

Thanks for keeping an open mind!

I look forward to helping you create more happy accidents, when your innate swing slips through the filters of your conscious mind, and lets you see the hidden potential that’s been there all along.

## **SUMMARY**

Congratulations on your willingness to explore new avenues in pursuit of a better golf game.

My fundamental goal is to help you see that joining the elite ten percent of golfers who score in the eighties consistently, does not require abandoning your family or taking out a second mortgage for professional instruction (I can’t believe I said that!)

Once you’ve mastered the three fundamentals, the key to improvement is learning how to access the memories of your best shots on demand - the more vivid the memory, the better your chances of re-creating the results.

This is a process you can rehearse anywhere!

On the following page I have outlined a few examples to get you “kick started”. They are offered as tipping points for you to develop your own unique system.

### **STOP THE DEMOLITION!**

Tearing apart your swing after every poor shot is an exercise in futility. Yet the vast majority of golfers are duped into following this ritual for years.

If you think you’ve developed a critical flaw, then seek the guidance of a competent teaching professional.

Stop rehearsing your mistakes!

The odds are that you have temporarily “lost” the recipe for re-creating your best performance. Revive the memory of your best shots and the formula will come back.

Interrupt the habit of looking for mistakes. Remember the axiom: *you get what you focus on*.

Here are a few suggestions to help you break the habit.

Use Bob’s record player analogy. Imagine a huge needle scratching the surface of the What’s Wrong with My Swing record. Keep scratching it over and over until you can’t play it any more.

Snap your fingers. Pinch yourself. A little pain will do wonders to shake up your nervous system.

Talk to yourself (nicely that is). Whistle. Hum a tune.

Immediately after a poor shot, look above the tree line and smile. Focus on the next shot.

If you have to blame something, blame the ball.

Develop a series of pattern interrupts. Use your pre-game practice to decide which ones are most effective on that day. Whatever method you use, the key is to vapourize the emotional fallout of a poor shot.

Start a new habit.

Link the memories of your best shots to a regular habit; when you’re sitting in the Tim Horton’s drive-thru, start replaying the best shots from your last game.

When you’re at the gym, plug in the earphones. Review your best shots while listening to your favorite music.

For information on additional resources (additional publications, audio programs, seminars and private consultations) please check out the website:

[www.davejohnstongolf.net](http://www.davejohnstongolf.net).

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Special thanks to Pipeline Moe Norman for daring to be different.

### **About The Author:**

Dave Johnston obtained his degree in Psychology from York University. Foregoing a career in clinical psychiatry, he discovered that golf would be a perfect real life venue for studying the human psyche.

He has been the Director of Instruction at the Bloomington Downs Golf Club in Richmond Hill, Ontario since it opened in 1988.

Dave has taught over 11,000 lessons during the past 31 years. His focus has been helping the once a week golfer discover their natural ability, which is often buried under an obsession with proper technique.

This manuscript is the product of a lifelong search to help students find an answer to the question, "If I can do it once, how can I do it again? "

Part II: [\*The Gorilla Is Loose: Your Innate Swing Unleashed!\*](#) is available in most major digital bookstores.

Part III: [\*Playing Our Of Your Mind: Moving Beyond Swing Mechanics\*](#), is available in major digital bookstores.



## **ADDENDUM**

### **Bob speaks out**

About twelve months after our accidental meeting, Dave sent me a draft for this manuscript. While I was honored that he made me the central character, I was afraid that his readers would get the impression that their game would magically improve by simply snapping their fingers.

If that was the message you inferred, it was not my intention. There are no panaceas to your best golf. Learning to control your mind could well be the most difficult task in the world.

Difficult, however, doesn't mean impossible.

Golf is the most frustrating sport ever invented. Even the best players in the world have no idea how well they will play on any given day. One day the driver feels like a sledgehammer and the next day it feels like a feather. One day every putt is attracted to the hole like a magnet. The next game, the hole is the size of a pin head.

That's the nature of the game. There are no absolutes; no recipe for guaranteed results.

The basic premise underlying this manuscript (in my opinion) is learning to play by feel. The average golfer is so bound up with proper mechanics that his/her sense of feel is completely submerged.

Learning how to reduce the natural tendency to focus on mistakes is the first key to re-awakening your sense of feel. Most of us will never totally eliminate the tendency, but awareness is often curative.

I am certain the ideas presented in the chapter on golf instruction are not intended to demean or discredit the association of certified teaching professionals.

As a former 25 year member of the Canadian Professional Golfers' Association, I can relate to the challenges of providing simple, effective golf instruction to the casual player, who has neither the time nor money to invest in regular practice and lessons.

Perhaps a slight shift in viewpoint, from concentrating on mistakes, to reinforcing a player's natural ability, would work wonders in lowering the average handicap.

As Dave points out, our god given talents vary widely. But all of us can play a more consistent game if we understand the mental barriers and learn to overcome them.

Dave singles out his target audience as the golfer struggling to break ninety. Nonetheless, his discussion on the effects of language on performance is applicable to all skill levels.

We are conditioned to equate results with effort. In every other sport, success is commensurate with trying harder.

Golf is the polar opposite; your golf game will only improve once you accept the fact that less is more. This shift in paradigm is one of the most difficult concepts for many players to accept.

Yet this is exactly what happens when the apparent “fluke” shots appear out of nowhere.

The notion of habits may seem overly simplistic. Yet our habits govern our existence. Our daily existence is based on a collection of habits that have been ingrained with years of practice. The concept of comfort zones is simply a convenient way to describe a collection of unconscious habits.

While Dave discusses the power of habit, he glosses over the fact that habits serve a purpose. In order to break a habit, you must replace it with a new empowering habit. Our mind and body are constantly seeking balance.

Our nervous system always seeks the path of least resistance. It craves mental stability. Change is the biggest fear we face, in life and in golf. The “fly in the ointment” is that you will keep doing what feels comfortable – even if it doesn’t work!

The self-protection mechanism to maintain the status quo is often irresistible.

Nevertheless, the habit of reinforcing the memories of your best shots on a regular basis is a worthwhile venture.

Attempting to incorporate all the suggestions in this text can be mind-boggling. Pick and choose the ideas that make the most sense.

Give them time to develop. Slight changes are huge!

Once you discover your innate swing, I am convinced that you can, with a little patience and intelligent experimentation, take your game to a new level of consistency.

## **BONUS CHAPTER**

Excerpt from

### **The Gorilla Is Loose: Your Innate Swing Unleashed!**

#### **Chapter 1: Rattling The Cage**

After taking a series of lessons from various instructors, my game deteriorated from scoring in the seventies to barely breaking one-hundred!

The advice was always the same, "... it takes time to ingrain new techniques. You have to regress before you get better. It just takes time to ingrain new muscle memory."

How long would it take?

That depended on how much I practiced. Dissatisfied with the vague standard answer, I began a twenty year search for a system that would guarantee constant improvement.

The first step in my search for a different approach to learning the game was to see the golf business from the inside-out.

I obtained a position working in the Pro Shop at the Scarlett Woods golf club in Toronto. I played twice a week and hit two-hundred practice balls every other day: a paltry regimen compared to the touring pros, but enough to guarantee some degree of consistency.

You would think.

I experimented constantly, hoping to discover some eclectic secret that would elevate my game beyond the level of swing mechanics.

I read hundreds of books, listened to numerous self-hypnosis tapes and actually bought a dozen swing training aids to try and ingrain some proper muscle memory.

It seemed hopeless. I could hit practice shots on the range like Fred Couples. More often than not, I played like Fred Flintstone. One of the regular patrons at the golf club was kind enough to tolerate my emotional roller coaster and we set up a regular Tuesday afternoon game

After a particularly frustrating front nine, I resolved to just forget score and whack the ball around.

The fourteenth hole at Scarlett Woods is a short, 320 yard par 4. There is a large tree guarding the green about 240 yards off the tee. My standard play was to hit a number three iron and layup, in order to have a clear approach shot.

Not today.

I grabbed the Driver, took one look at the tree and blasted away. The ball sailed over the tree and landed in the middle of the fairway about 20 yards from the green!

My partner gasped open-mouthed and exclaimed: "The gorilla is loose!" (Yes Harvey, this was the first time you uttered those immortal words.)

That was twenty years ago. It's taken me that long to figure out how to re-create that shot more often.

If I can do it, you can too!

**Coming Soon:**

**Limitless Golf: The Power Of Beliefs  
Audio Book**

**For updates, please check out : [www.davejohnstongolf.net](http://www.davejohnstongolf.net)**

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