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Practice like you play

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Whether you play golf for recreation or competition, focused, quality practice will help you play better than just beating balls inattentively.



Vijay Singh proved practice makes perfect with his PGA Championship triumph. (Allsport file)

their best on the course.

If you want to make better use of your practice time, or if you hit the ball great on the range, but can't take your "practice game" to the course, pay close attention.

John takes two favorite clubs to the driving range, a 7-iron and driver.

He starts smashing balls with his driver one after the other down the

Everyone wants to get more out of practice in less time, but the question is how?

It comes through integrating proven methods of motor learning and sport psychology into practice to speed learning and retention, ultimately improving your game.

The best players in the world know how to practice effectively so they can play

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range. John doesn't bother to pick out targets because his goal is to hit it over the fence at the other end.

After a few minutes, he grabs the 7-iron. He hits every shot to the 150-yard flag without ever changing clubs or finding a new target. He swings and pulls in ball after ball with no rest or no thought to each shot.

Great exercise, but poor practice.

This example, though extreme, epitomizes how many golfers practice.

John is not engaging in focused, goal-oriented practice.

Athletes in most other sports practice and play on the same field of play.

The first problem for golfers is that golf separates the field of practice from the field of play. Golfers practice on a practice range and play on a golf course.

What is quality practice? It adopts a goal-focused and concentrated attitude, which most players are not accustomed to.

Quality practice embraces a deeper level of concentration, creativity, imagination and the propensity to practice in the same manner you play on the course.

Beating balls on the range does not transfer well to playing golf shots on the course.

Every shot hit on the golf course is unique with its own challenge. Every shot you play requires high-level thought.

You are forced to think about club selection, lie of the ball, distance to the target, wind direction and speed and other environmental factors.

The conditions of the course and changing weather conditions add more variation.

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Nick Faldo is constantly tinkering with his mechanics. (Allsport file)

Other unobservable factors increase the unique challenge of each Shot including thoughts, images, level of focus and confidence.

You also never have the same putt twice during a round of golf. The length, speed, amount of break and look change with every stroke.

Practice putting greens do not present the same challenges you get on the course.

Good putting practice is about learning to read greens, developing imagination and visual skills and improving touch. Good putting practice is not about grooving a perfect stroke.

**Quality practice is focused and goal-oriented.
If you practice the wrong way,
you just get good at the wrong thing.**

Like John, most players don't consider how or what they should practice.

After a lesson with their instructor, golfers are left to fend for themselves on the practice tee. This is why it's very important to get your instructor involved in your practice.

The best way to practice is to simulate game-like conditions. Many great athletes use specificity training when they practice, and golf is no different. Great golfers often practice with the same intensity as in competition.

Performance tips:

- One step at a time: Practice one skill or mechanical change at a time.

If an instructor makes four swing changes, pick one change to work on at a time. Stick to one swing thought or one drill at a time.

- Use feedback to enhance learning: When you are alone hitting balls, you don't have feedback from an instructor telling you what's right and wrong.

You will learn much faster if you use external sources of feedback (or knowledge about your performance). A good source of feedback is a video camera.

- Play shots, don't beat balls: The most important practice for learning and performance is playing golf shots.

Play shots with focus and intention. Don't just smash balls one after another. Pick a target each time you hit a shot. Imagine the ball flying to the target.

- Variety is the spice of golf: Take all your clubs to the range and hit everything from wedge to driver.

You use all your clubs when you play so why not practice with all the clubs in your bag.

Don't just hit balls from a flat, perfect lie on the range. You hit all kinds of shots on the course, so why not get good at them in practice first?

Editor's note: Instruction features appear every Wednesday on GolfWeb.

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