

# BETHEBALL

## ZEN AND THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT SWING



## Zero In to Go Low

Train your brain to play Target Golf and you'll learn to fear no flag **By Patrick Cohn, Ph.D.**

**W**hen two-time PGA Tour winner Ted Tryba was in college, he played a practice round with Jack Nicklaus and Tour veteran Jerry Kelly. Tryba and Kelly posted red numbers at the turn while the Olden Bear was battling his every swing. As they walked to the 10th tee, Kelly turned to Tryba and said, "We've got the old man now, Trybs. We'll just bury him on the back side." Jack shot them an icy stare that said, "Who

are you calling old?" And just like that, Nicklaus elevated his game. His approach shots become pin-seeking missiles: He attacked flag after flag en route to a back-nine 30 with six birdies. "I was in awe," Tryba says. "Jack just decided to turn it on, and he did—and he made it look easy."

The lesson is twofold: Don't wake a slumbering Bear, and—more to the point—don't underestimate the power of concentration. By forgetting his mechanics and focusing on one objective—teaching those whippersnappers a lesson—Nicklaus began playing Target Golf, which is sort of a subdivision of the Zone that combines fearlessness, feel, and visualization. When you play Target Golf, every flag looks like a goalpost. Though you may not shoot many back-nine 30s, you're capable of great golf. But unless you're pouring in 40-footers, you'll need to rattle a few pins to go really low.

Golf is a target game, not a mechanical game. To perform your best, you need feel and imagination. We've all heard how hard Tiger Woods works on his swing plane. What we rarely hear is that Tiger works on his swing plane *off* the course. On the course, he forgets mechanics and focuses on the target and the feeling he needs to hit the desired shot.

Most of us have, if only for a few holes, freed ourselves from the conscious effort of making a swing and played Target Golf. It takes a calm, uncluttered mind. Mechanics *are* important, but when you obsess over nuts and bolts, you paralyze your brain and stifle your swing. Sure, you still need to calculate the distance, pick a target, and plan the shot, but your main focus should be the ball flight and the feeling of a good shot.

To go low, you need to learn to play Target Golf instead of mechanical golf. Of course, some sadistic flag placements should be off-limits for even the most aggressive Target Golfer. Also, consider each situation: If you're one up on your oppo-

ment with one hole to play and a halve will get you half the cash in his wallet, go for the fat side of the green and get out. This is Target Golf, not Van de Velde Golf.

Here's how to leave the mechanics on the range and find any flag.

### HAVE NO FEAR

In the last round of the 1977 Memphis Classic, Al Geiberger was 10 under as he stood on the 15th tee, and he knew he was nearing uncharted territory. "My gosh," he said to himself, "what have I got myself into?" But Geiberger didn't stop to count or worry about how many birdies it would take to reach a certain number. He calmed down and stayed on the attack. "You're hitting the ball better every hole. Just pull out all the stops and be aggressive," he told himself. This mind-set led to three more birdies and the first 59 in Tour history.

Low scores arise from that kind of confidence. Take the typical weekend golfer. After a muscular, dead-center drive, he'll often approach his next shot with fear: "If I don't screw up, I might make par or birdie. Oh, please, make it be a good swing." If that's your mind-set, just jot down your double bogey and walk to the next tee. When you play scared, fear puts a tether on your swing, and you'll steer the shot with a conscious, defensive swipe. Instead, go after your short iron with the same boldness you used on that mammoth drive. It's the same swing with the iron, after all—just a shorter arc.

### (DON'T) ANALYZE THIS

Tour pro Grant Waite has always worked overtime on his mechanics, but early in his career, he didn't have the confidence to surrender the science and embrace the swing. He spent countless hours reviewing video, deconstructing his swing piece by piece and trying to make it flawless. This earned him a reputation on Tour as the sweet swinger who couldn't score.

During his final-round 60 in the 1996 Phoenix Open, he was able to let go of the mechanics and just play golf. Without trying, he found himself in a unique state of total focus. "It was a feeling of immense calm," he said. "I had the belief that I was going to shoot in the 50s. If you can reach that point where you totally convince yourself that you can do it, then all the nervousness and anxiety leave and it's a state of

total focus without trying to focus."

Using one, and only one, swing thought is the best way to initiate your swing without deconstructing it. But avoid mechanical cues like "left elbow straight." If you obsess, say, on the elbow, God knows what trouble your hips, legs, and hands might get into. Save the mechanics for the range. The best swing thoughts are about tempo, rhythm, and balance.

### SEE IT, FEEL IT, HIT IT

Quarterbacks aim for the numbers. Point guards shoot at the basket. Pitchers throw at the mitt. But golf is the rare sport in which the athlete isn't always watching the target—the hole—so it's important to visualize one before swinging. This way, you'll maintain target awareness and combat distractions like fear and swing flaws. Trust me: The image of the target is about all you

## TO PLAY LIKE THE PROS, YOU HAVE TO PRACTICE LIKE THEM. BEATING BALLS JUST WON'T CUT IT.

need to initiate the swing. With some practice, you can learn to "sense" the target in your mind's eye as you pull the trigger.

After you see the target, try to see the shot. This is similar to seeing the target, but with more information: Picture a bowed string that mirrors the desired ball flight or a frozen rope curving in the air. This way, you see the shape of the shot as well as the target. The best players simply see the shot they want to play. While you can't practice as much as the pros, you can still use this method—provided you visualize a shot you're capable of hitting. If you don't practice or play a draw, don't waste your energy visualizing one. If you play a 15-yard fade on every shot, envision the fade, not the draw you wish you had in your bag.

If you're a feel player, you might have trouble with visualization. That's okay. Go

with the feel. Close your eyes, and try to capture the feel of a good shot. It might be an even tempo. Or a solid feeling at impact. Or a sweet follow-through. Each of us has a feel that's particular to his style and swing.

Feel players are in tune with the sensation of a good swing and don't rely on visual cues. Use your practice swing as a rehearsal for a good shot. If it doesn't feel right, take another. (This is golf: You don't have to hit until you're ready.) Now carry that feeling into the shot, and use it to trigger the swing. A small dose of non-mechanical information is all your body needs to pre-program the swing.

### PRACTICE TO PLAY

Earl Woods used some creative methods when training a young Tiger. When they were on the practice tee, the story (perhaps apocryphal) goes, Earl would try to distract his son by screaming at him and even flinging range balls at him in mid-swing.

Head-buzzing X-outs were undoubtedly a distraction, but Tiger learned to disregard them. Today, no one is better than Woods at ignoring external stimuli and seeing only the target. The reason for this is his practice routine.

To play like the pros, practice like them. You won't find any Tour veterans aimlessly beating balls on the range. But that's how most amateurs do it.

Practicing like the pros requires shot-specific focus and imagination. You have to consider club selection, ball lie, distance to the target, wind conditions, and other factors. Beating balls just won't cut it. Pick a target, calculate the distance for the shot, and select a club. (Pick out a specific target: Don't aim for the 30-yard space between two trees; aim for a tree trunk.)

Imagine and/or feel the shot as you go through your pre-shot routine. Imagine you're hitting a familiar shot on the course. Imagine the ball flying to the target, and then go through your normal aim, alignment, and setup procedure. Take it a step further, and play 18 holes on the range by defining fairways and targets that approximate the holes you'll play on the course.

And always aim for the flag. ○

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