My first Open, with Harry Vardon, the English master. This was Vardon’s last appearance in our championship. He would have won except for being caught in a violent windstorm.

Plate 8.
GOLF IS MY GAME

Bobby Jones

With a Foreword by
BERNARD DARWIN

Illustrated with
photographs and drawings

1961
CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON
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CHAPTER 2

Striking the Ball

When I was playing competitive golf, I had, with some golf writers at least, a reputation for being a regular player. When I scored sixty-six in the third round of the Southern Open at East Lake in 1927, Kerr Petrie wrote for the New York Herald Tribune:

They wound up the Mechanical Man of Golf yesterday and sent him clicking around the East Lake course.

I remember the round quite well, and it was as nearly perfect as any I ever played; the only real mistake being a tee shot pulled into some woods on the fourteenth hole. That "Mechanical Man" stuff, though, did make me laugh. How I wished it could have been made to fit!

I have always said that I won golf tournaments because I tried harder than anyone else and was willing to take more punishment than the others. More immodestly, I will say now that I think a large factor in my winning was a greater resourcefulness in coping with unusual situations and in recovering from or retrieving mistakes.

Jim Barnes said to me once, when as a youngster I was in the midst of my lean years as a golfer:

"Bob, you can’t always be playing well when it counts. You’ll never win golf tournaments until you learn to score well when you’re playing badly."

I think this is what I learned to do best of all. The most acute, and yet the most satisfying recollections I have are of the tournaments won by triumphs over my own mistakes and by crucial strokes played with imagination and precision when anything ordinary would not have sufficed. And I think I was able to do this because I had learned so well what a golf ball could be made to do and how it had to be struck to make it perform as I wanted it to.
Of course, I learned these things by playing. I kept on hammering at that pesky ball until I found a way to make it behave. When I hit it one way and it didn’t go right, I’d try hitting it another way. I didn’t try different swings. I probably didn’t know there were such things, or even a swing at all for that matter.

I watched other players, too, and when one of them made a shot that I especially admired, I would begin to try to produce the same result. But I didn’t observe how they took the club back or measure the “body-turn” they used. I watched that clubhead strike the ball and saw how the ball responded. Then I tried to make my ball do the same thing.

A kid growing up without a teacher but with a golf club in his hands may be under a handicap, but he has some advantages, too. No one is trying to teach him to play. If someone should try to explain the golf swing to him, he would be completely baffled. Even more bewildered would he be by even the most elementary discussion of why a golf ball acts as it does. But he has plenty of time to learn these things for himself.

Those players we see today who have the appearance of naturalness and ease in their play are immediately identified as having begun to play as youngsters. I think they have this appearance because they first thought of the game in terms of striking the ball. So they set about doing this with no more self-consciousness than we would associate with chopping wood, throwing stones, or beating rugs.

I am confident that the adult golfer can and should approach the game in the same way. He may not have the time available to the youngster, but he has the advantage of adult understanding. In a few minutes’ study of the material in this chapter, he can learn as much about the possible means of controlling a golf ball as a boy could learn in years of play.

I am not one who enjoys heaping ridicule upon the average golfer. It seems to me that those grotesque characters we see in the cartoons are rare in real life. The unskilled golfer often looks uncomfortable, strained, unsure, sometimes even unhappy, but he hardly ever presents a ludicrous aspect. And I
think that a great measure of his discomfiture is derived from his conscious efforts to follow prescribed routine, to look and move like someone else, or as he has been told. I think he would present a more natural appearance if he should put his mind upon striking the ball, rather than upon swinging the club.

This will be the most important chapter of this book. It will describe the most useful learning you will ever acquire as a golfer. You may gain knowledge from the mere reading of this chapter that will help you in the playing of every golf shot you make for the rest of your life. This knowledge can make you a better golfer overnight.

If you are a beginner, this chapter will start you off on the road to a correct understanding of the nature of golf. If you are an average golfer, it will give you the means of deciding upon the club to use and the shot to play on the basis of reasoned judgment, rather than guesswork. If you are a better than average golfer, it will broaden your perception of the possibilities in the game so that you may become a player of imagination and resourcefulness. If you are weary of being told to concentrate without having knowledge of what you should concentrate on, this is it.

Golf is played by striking the ball with the head of the club. The objective of the player is not to swing the club in a specified manner, nor to execute a series of complicated movements in a prescribed sequence, nor to look pretty while he is doing it, but primarily and essentially to strike the ball with the head of the club so that the ball will perform according to his wishes.

No one can play golf until he knows the many ways in which a golf ball can be expected to respond when it is struck in different ways. If you think that all this should be obvious, please believe me when I assure you that I have seen many really good players attempt shots they should have known were impossible.

The first diagram (figure 1) is intended to represent a ball being struck by a clubhead moving precisely along the intended line of flight with its face square to the objective.
Fig. 2 Slicing contact
the absence of wind, of course, the only possible result is a straight shot directly on target. This is the ideal for most golfing situations.

If you have ever been told that the clubhead should strike the ball while travelling from inside the line of flight to the outside, forget it. This advice may have been of temporary helpfulness on occasion when the player, in attempting to follow it, has corrected a natural tendency to hit across the ball from the outside. But the player who actually succeeds in hitting from inside-to-out more often finds himself plagued by a ducking hook.

The second diagram (figure 2) shows a ball being struck by a clubhead moving from outside the line of flight across to the inside, while its face is aligned at an angle of more than ninety degrees to the direction of its travel. This sort of contact will produce a slice, which is a curve to the right for a right-handed player. If the error is small, a satisfactory result may be achieved, because the curved flight so produced may serve only to be the correction for the initial impetus in the other direction.

The third diagram (figure 3) depicts the result when the player actually succeeds in hitting across the line of flight from the inside to out. As a practical matter, it is not possible to slide the face of the club across the ball in this direction, but the mere fact that the back of the ball has been compressed on the side nearest the player will cause it to spin in a counter-clockwise direction and therefore to hook.

The fourth diagram (figure 4) is included mainly to illustrate the meaning of two common terms. As will appear inevitable from the diagram, the pull is a shot which does not curve, but flies to the left of the objective, whereas the pushed shot flies straight to the right. With the face of the club aligned squarely to the line of its travel, no sidespin is imparted to the ball.

These are the basic conceptions which should be in the golfer's mind every time he looks at a ball in preparation for playing a shot. He must have decided where he wants the ball to go. He should have a picture in his mind of the flight
Fig. 3 Hooking contact
STRIKING THE BALL

he hopes to produce, and then he must swing his club with the very definite and determined intention of having the clubhead meet the ball in just such a way. This should be the object of his intense concentration.

These are the matters which affect direction. The second factor is, of course, distance or range. In driving, or in wooden-club play from the fairway, the only important point involving distance is to get enough of it. But in playing to the green, it becomes important to adjust the range of the shot within close limits. For this purpose three variables are available to one—the choice of the club to be used, the decision whether to swing the club at full strength or at something less, and the employment of backspin.

There seems to be no limit to the wonder that can be produced in the average gallery of spectators by shots off the clubs of experts that dance and jiggle on the greens from the vicious spin imparted by the pitching blades. Yet there is really no mystery about it, and the shot can just as well be produced by a high-handicap man if he knows what he is doing. Indeed, if the contact between club and ball be anywhere near flush, it is very nearly impossible that some backspin should not result. Figure 5 illustrates the only way, without actually topping the shot, in which the ball can be struck without backspin. The contact between club and ball, now shown in the vertical plane, is such that its force is directed on a radius to the centre of the ball so that no spinning effect results.

Backspin in its spectacular form is produced by striking the ball a descending blow. In figure 6 we see the effect of this kind of stroke with a lofted iron. The angle of loft of the face of the club makes possible a point of contact below the centre line of the ball so that the force of the blow is exerted partly in propelling the ball forward, and partly in causing it to spin. Obviously, the spinning effect is increased as the loft of the club becomes greater. One very important thing to remember in considering backspin should be readily apparent from these drawings. Since the spin is produced by the gripping effect between club and ball, the contact must be
Fig. 5 Striking the ball without producing backspin.
Fig. 6 Producing backspin with a lofted iron
GOLF IS MY GAME

clean. Should the ball be lying in lush grass or clover so that these lubricating agents must interpose themselves between the two surfaces, it may not be possible to produce an effective backspin. The player must be ever aware of this limitation, so that he may not rely upon backspin to stop a ball played from a heavy lie in rough or fairway.

Similarly, when playing from sand in a bunker it must be appreciated that backspin cannot be applied to a ball imbedded in the sand or lying in a heelprint. The mass of sand necessary to be taken removes the possibility. On the other hand, if the ball should lie cleanly on the sand, a mere wisp of it taken between the ball and the lofted club will enhance the spin in a spectacular fashion.

At the risk of being dogmatic and tedious, I am going to say right here that a person can no more play golf without a thorough knowledge of these spin-producing and spin-deny­ing contacts than he could play billiards without an apprecia­tion of the capabilities and limitations of follow and draw and a general idea of how a spinning ball will come off the cushions, or play tennis without knowing how his chops and twists were going to act.

Now, let’s see how the ball behaves in the air. This is but one other very important part of the picture the player must have in his mind as the immediate aim for which he swings the golf club.

When the first brave soul had the brilliant idea that golf balls made from gutta-percha would be superior to the feath­ery, he let himself in for one big disappointment. The first gutties were produced in smooth moulds. They looked very pretty, and I am sure it came as a considerable shock to their inventor when they refused to fly at all. Of course, to us of today this is no puzzle.

But when these first gutties were discarded and came into the possession of caddies and youngsters around the golf course, as they were hacked about and became nicked and scarred, quite amazingly they began to fly. At this point someone made the not too difficult deduction that the balls would fly because of their markings. So moulds were pre-
pared which produced pimples or brambles on the surface of the ball. It was sort of a catch-as-catch-can arrangement. There were no means of measuring the efficiency of the markings, but they did make the ball take flight, and that was enough.

The indentations or markings on our golf balls today are carefully designed. The total area, depth, and shape of these markings all have effect upon the playing qualities of the ball. The area and depth affect the thickness of the cover, and hence the durability and resilience of the ball. The depth and shape of the markings affect flight in a number of ways, notably in trajectory, and great care must be exercised that the coat of paint or enamel applied to the ball does not distort these markings.

Of course, the smooth gutties struck with a lofted club acquired some spin. But since they were smooth, the spin failed to produce enough friction with the air to support flight. It was not enough simply to project the ball upwards by means of a lofted club. Something had to keep it up.

The effect of spin on the flight of a modern golf ball can be illustrated in a simplified way by the accompanying drawings. In figure 7 we are examining in a vertical plane the action of a ball in flight. The arrow inside the circumference of the ball indicates the direction of the spin. Using everyday language, the markings on the back and under-surfaces of the ball grasp the molecules of air and build up air masses under the forward surface. The same action tends to reduce the pressure above the ball. In this way the flight of the ball is supported, so that a well-struck iron shot, especially into a slight breeze, seems to hang suspended in the air and drops lightly, almost daintily, upon the green. A ball carrying little or no backspin comes down fast and hard and goes bounding merrily away.

In similar fashion sidespin tends to build up air masses in the manner illustrated in figure 8, which depicts the action in a horizontal plane. The clockwise spin drags air molecules to the front of the ball on the left side and away from its front.
Fig. 7 Side view of ball in flight, showing effect of backspin
Fig. 8 Looking down on ball in flight showing effect of slicing spin.
on the right side, so that the ball must curve in the direction towards which its forward surface is spinning.

In actuality of course, the spin imparted to the ball is almost always a resultant of the two spinning effects illustrated here. It is possible to conceive that a ball flying perfectly straight, yet having backspin, would be totally lacking in sidespin. But any flying ball must possess some element of backspin. Knowing the possibilities of the various flight characteristics that we may be able to produce will enable us to visualize the kind of contact we should concentrate upon. The knowledge that the ball will fly as we hit it, and only as we hit it, should at least suggest to us that the most important thing in playing golf is hitting the ball.

I should like to propose at this point that the reader obtain a golf ball and any sort of lofted iron club and begin straight-away to fix these concepts in his mind. In his own living-room he can place the face of the club behind the ball, and without swinging, visualize the spinning effects which must result from the various kinds of contacts. He may also give himself some very worthwhile lessons in arranging his feet and body position in such a way that he may know that he is able to strike at the ball along the line upon which he intends to project it.

It is in this very way that a player should approach every shot he hits on the golf course, or even on the practice tee. Let him always decide first upon the result he wants to produce; second, upon the precise manner in which he desires to strike the ball; and then let him place himself before the ball in such a position that he knows he will be able to deliver the blow in this manner.

This is the obvious, direct, and uncomplicated way of going about the playing of a golf shot. It will always be many times more effective than any attempt to follow a prescription for placing the feet and adjusting the rest of the body posture. It will result in an easy fluidity because it is natural.

One may very easily and with great advantage carry this thing one step further. Indeed, for the best in performance, the player must keep in the forefront of his mind throughout
the entire stroke this very clear picture of the precise manner in which he intends to strike the ball.

Years ago I described the mental attitude I tried to attain in a tournament round as a concentration upon producing a desired result so intense as to preclude any possibility of concern with the manner of swinging. I liked to think of erecting a wall or other vertical plane containing the ball and my left eye, and then focus my entire concentration upon producing the desired result in front of the wall. I wanted to leave my swing to take care of itself. I was confident that the movement behind the ball would adjust itself to the proper striking.

I was very certain that whenever I could achieve this detachment, my swing would slow down to its proper rhythm and its effectiveness would be restored. As so often happened, a game which had caused me concern in practice would be pulled together by the strain of competition, whereby anxiety was proved to be a more powerful force than the will.

If anyone has not learned enough of golf by the time he steps on to the first tee, he has run out of time. He must realize that he has to play the game or the match with the equipment he has. Only results count from this point on.

I cannot see how one may avoid the conclusion that any player must swing and play better when he makes every move of his stroke with the aim of getting himself into position to strike in a clearly defined way, and delivering the blow in this way.

Before leaving this subject of spin, I should like to use it to point the way to help the average golfer in playing one of the shots he needs most in the game—the wooden club from the fairway. The chances are that he will never think of it as a backspin shot, but that’s what it is, and it should be played as one.

Figure 9 shows what happens when the inexpert player tackles a ball in a close fairway lie. With a lofted iron he can see some hope that the loft of the club will get the ball up. But he does not have this confidence with the wood. So he tries to get under the ball and lift it into the air. Result: he either catches his club in the ground behind the ball, or, if
Fig. 9 Wrong Way: improper upward stroke, improper spin
Fig. 10 Right Way: proper club loft, proper spin
he misses the ground, he commits a half or full top on the ball.

The proper method of playing this shot is illustrated in figure 10. The direction of the stroke is descending—not sharply, so as to take a divot, but enough to skin the grass from the surface of the ground. Even the meagre loft of the wooden club is enough to produce spin to assist in getting the ball up. If the average player will merely trust his club and strike the ball in this way, he need have no fear of his fairway woods.
The author at St. Andrews in 1930, after winning the British Amateur Golf Championship
Putting on the 11th green at Hoylake in the final round of the British Open
The "Freedom" ceremony in Younger Graduation Hall, St. Andrews. My wife Mary is the lady farthest to the right. My daughter Mary Ellen is immediately behind me. Bob III is fourth from the left. The motto on the arms of the town is "Dum Spiro Spero" which might do very well for a golfer. It means "While I breathe, I hope."

The lacquered chest behind me contains my important (to me) trophies—all medals. The middle cup on top is the miniature of the British Amateur Trophy sent by some friends at St. Andrews.
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There is no name in the world of golf from its very beginning that has the same ring of magic and romance as that of Bobby Jones. He conquered the whole world and after the 'Grand Slam' of 1930 he retired at the age of 28 from full competitive play. But he has never retired from the hearts and memories of those who knew him and saw his incomparably graceful swing—as perfect as a Shakespeare sonnet. Nor has he ever been absent from the heart of the capital of golf, St. Andrews, of which city he was made a Freeman in 1958. But Bobby Jones is in truth the Freeman of the whole world of golf.

Some famous sportsmen have to employ 'ghosts' to write for them. Bobby Jones writes for himself with the same directness, modesty, grace and authority with which he played golf. This is a book of practical and fascinating instruction and exposition—the essence of a lifetime's thought on the game. Every expert must read it. But it is a book imbued with understanding for the 'average golfers' who keep the game going. It is also a book of the mature philosophy and reminiscence of a great sporting gentleman, the greatest player of his time, perhaps of all time.