STUDY THE
GOLF GAME
WITH HENRY COTTON
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INTRODUCTION

IT IS ALWAYS interesting for older golfers like myself to take a look at the younger star players and see if they are playing and thinking about the game in a different way and to wonder if they are having more success than we did. This was no doubt the way the champions I succeeded viewed my efforts some thirty odd years ago.

When I see the ball pounded out around the 300 yards mark from the tee, and courses 7,000 yards long reduced to play no longer than the 5,500 to 6,000 yards courses available to champions forty odd years ago, it does seem to explain in some measure the reason for the low scoring done in championships today.

Today, as yesterday, the top players are getting up in two shots everywhere and putting for ‘eagles.’ It does not seem to matter if the par five holes are now well over 550 yards in length. We all know that length is not everything, for beyond a certain minimum the extra super length does not guarantee winning—it just makes it fractionally easier.

Little Gary Player, only 5 foot 7 inches tall and under 11 stone in weight, although outdriven 30 yards by Jack Nicklaus, 5 foot 11 inches and weighing over 14 stone, can still hold his own, simply because Player is long enough for all courses and his short game is great. I think that if any change, or rather modification, has come about in the techniques of hitting a golf ball, it has come about because of the fabulous distances the golf ball is being sent by a considerable number of leading players throughout the world.

The opening drive to my record round of 64 in September, 1936, on the West Course at Wentworth. Note the braced left leg finish, which has almost become a trademark of mine. I must say the golfing dress of those days looked very neat.

I am no pioneer, but when I see the way the teaching of golf—in changing cycles—has altered since I came in, and how the grip I have always used is now ‘the thing’ and the accent has come to be on the hands, I do feel that the method I landed on and expounded as a young man was just about the best I could have found.
These power players have to fly the ball down. All the golf world knows that a driver with no loft on it—which, in theory, might seem indicated for players seeking to produce a lower flight—is useless in practice, for it does not ‘grip’ the ball and give it enough back spin so essential for control. So, surprisingly, quite lofted drivers are used (not too deep-faced either) with loft up to 10 or 11 degrees; and then the loft is diminished on impact by pushing the hands forward. This is virtually the old-fashioned push shot, used by ordinary golfers for many shots through the green, but not used by them for the long shots because they do not have enough strength.

The unfortunate point about all this is that the average golfers, seeking to follow the newest golfing heroes, are tempted to alter the standard method of play to this strong man’s way.

So much is talked of about the left wrist position at the top of the swing that it is confusing to the golf student, who often gets only half the story. ‘A little learning is a dangerous thing,’ the old maxim runs. When studying the left wrist position at the top of the back swing, and the angle of the club-face, it is essential to know how the player was gripping the club at the address. I have always played with a two-knuckle grip, the back of my left hand parallel to the face of the club. This is used by a number of top players today, but there are many, indeed possible a majority, of top-bracket players who ‘show’ three knuckles of the left hand at address. This means that the club-face is not parallel to the back of the left hand. Therefore, if they attempt the left wrist position of the two-knuckles players, the club-face will appear more shut at the top of the back swing. And not only ‘appear,’ of course, because it will be more shut, and so adjustments in their body and hand action will be needed.

There is another point I must put down here for consideration by the student attempting to speed up the club-head in the hitting area with his hands. If he has a four-knuckle grip, the most powerful feeling grip at address, but the weakest in play, he will only succeed in knocking the shaft out of the fingers—losing control of the club and risking damage to his left elbow joint, which is locked by the four-knuckle grip. I come across this almost every day when I teach golf, because four-knuckle grippers have to be stiff wristed and so push the ball all in one piece. This gives fair but limited results, I have observed, among weak and supple bodied folk, when beginning golf, and seems to be a flattering way of getting off the mark, as the locked left elbow hides a weak left arm.

There is one more point to remember, too: if the golfer looks at the ball well, hits past his chin and keeps his right shoulder back at impact, then he will need to let his wrists cross over sooner in the follow through. This does not mean that his chances of becoming square at impact are less, but that he cannot follow through for an extended distance along the flight of the ball, with the club-face held square. One champion says he keeps the club-face in this way for 5 feet. I find to attempt to do this is back-breaking and, I think, unnecessary.
THE NATURAL SWING

This follow-through is perhaps the most common one in the golf game by untrained golfers. It is in fact the 'natural' swing-through by players with untrained muscles. Over the years, by building up a specific set of muscles, it has been found that the ball can be propelled better, further, and more consistently, so what we call 'the golf swing' is taught.

This golfer with 'no left arm'—i.e., untrained to play its best role—and no idea of hip or foot action, has used his shoulders in a horizontal arc to help to work up speed in the club-head.

One thing is clear—he will never slip a disc playing this way, but he will never improve and never be consistent.

Is it worth his while to learn to swing through and under his head? Of course it is; and if he trains his hands to take the shock he must improve, a lot.

The greatest satisfaction in golf is to succeed in playing a hundred per cent nominated stroke—be it drive, iron or putt—but most of us settle for a percentage blow; an eighty or ninety per cent effort pleases the majority, and that includes the professional players. There was always a lot of interest in the way I played and on the tee below nearly all the spectators are watching me strike the ball, possibly to see if there is anything to be learned from my action. If I may say so, I have never known a better 'looker at the ball' than myself. Naturally I have often seen my action in photographs and films, but it is odd to see (as in this pre-war photograph) a whole group round the tee almost to a man—or woman—looking at my swing, not following the ball.
DISCOVERING THE OLD

IT IS ALWAYS interesting to me to notice the way our American cousins are always discovering "historical facts." That "king of the swipe," George Bayer, has discovered that if he uses a two-knuckle grip with his left hand—left thumb on top of the shaft—he plays more controlled golf. He says: "It is the best grip for accuracy."

This is nice to have confirmed for I wrote of this in my first golf book in 1930 and it has been mentioned, even stressed, in all my books ever since. Perhaps British golf books are not studied in America!

Bayer has been playing with a more controlled back swing lately; not hitting the ball such colossal distances, but getting as a net result more prize money. I could have forecast the shorter swing for him, anyway, on age grounds alone, but George feels that his left thumb down the shaft has worked wonders.

The value of the hands parallel and the V's up the shaft is that it gives the maximum opportunity to play all the shots. Good golf can be played showing three and four knuckles of the left hand, but the scope for controlled varieties of shots is limited. We have numbers of professionals today, in the prize money, too, who cannot play all the shots. It is nothing to be ashamed of naturally, but I should have felt I had not mastered the game if I could not have played all the shots and under pressure, too!

George Bayer's new grip showed how the weight of the club rests on the pad of the left thumb. As the left hand has to turn down towards the ball in the last section of the down swing, it is obvious that the club-face can be squared up more easily if the grip between the index finger and thumb is strong.

Harry Vardon recommended this over 60 years
DISCOVERING THE OLD (continued)

ago, by the way, and he was a most accurate striker of the ball all his life.

It is not that there are not thousands of golfers with the two-knuckle grip today, but so many are inclined to follow what the champions do and what some golf writers say the champions do, and when a new champion comes along they all turn to follow him.

We might find the interlocking grip having a vogue now because Jack Nicklaus has almost taken over Arnold Palmer's spot. My grip has remained unchanged, in principle, since I first began to play golf; though I have experimented with all sorts of places for the left thumb within the right hand, and all sorts of variations in the points of pressure, as well as a double-handed variation (even interlocking) and with all sorts of knuckles showing, from one to four.

There is one inescapable fact, whatever the hand placing on the shaft—there is no way of avoiding squaring up the club-face at impact with the fingers. It cannot be set to happen automatically, as so many hope to do. Players can talk of passive hands, but the last say in the matter rests with that invisible sense, 'touch' or 'feel.' Much strength is necessary to do this squaring up at great speed and to hold the shaft firmly so that the club-face is not deflected on impact, when the club-head is slowed down some 20 per cent by the ball.

The left hand and arm must be taught their roles, then they can help the powerful right to make the timed blow, so sought after and yet rarely found.

POINTS TO STUDY

PLAYING AS I DO with a two-knuckle grip with the left hand, it is essential to use the hands to hit past the body, because not only is the club-face brought up square at impact this way, but the full play of the flexibility of the left wrist is available.

As the left hand is twisted more over—to show more knuckles, that is—then the right shoulder comes forward with the blow, because the placing of the left hand tends to block the left arm and make the whole arm play more as one unit.

This means that it is very difficult and can even be damaging to the left arm (resulting in tennis elbow) if an attempt is made to whip freely at the ball with, say, a three-knuckle grip.

I have noticed so often, when teaching pupils who come to me to learn to use their hands, that a free-wrist action with a three or four-knuckle left-hand grip only serves to knock the shaft right out of the fingers. That is why successful four-knuckle grippers are pushers, never whippers.

Norman Drew using a four-knuckle grip
YOU MUST LEARN TO DO THIS

THE ACTION THAT PUZZLES beginners. How the left hand brings the club-face to square at impact.

As the back of my left hand is parallel to the club-face (a two-knuckle grip at address), it does simplify the task for me. But in Nos 1, 2 and 3 the left hand is gradually turning down and, of course, the club-face follows.

Beginners can get in the position in No 1 reasonably well, but find it difficult to square up the club-face without bringing the club-head off its track with the right arm and shoulder.
ON TAKING THE CLUB AWAY

SO OFTEN DOES THE wheel turn, in ‘selling’ the so-called latest method, that it must cause a lot of confusion to golfers. As I do not find there is any reason to alter very much the classical way of playing, I only hope that those who seek to follow the latest trends do not get too ‘mixed up.’ Many of our golfers take a lot of trouble to study the most successful players of the day, often taking no notice of the differences in physique. Some even go to America to play with the players who collect the top prizes and so get advice from the horse’s mouth.

Then only too naturally the next desire is to tell all they have learned and to put the accent on the differences, if they have noted any, between the ‘old’ and the ‘new.’ I really thought that the very latest was the one-piece start-away (which I have always done) with the club-face held down, but not forced, against the natural desire to allow it to open fully with the turn of the shoulders. Square it has been called. Now I read that it is recommended to break the wrists as early as possible going back, at the same time keeping the club-face held down—the opposite to the wide one-piece start-away. Oh dear! This is what I saw Frank Stranahan doing when he first came here after the war, and while his results at times were no doubt good, it looked a bit odd, I thought! I was not alone in seeing his action this way, and when I see golfers like Jerry Barber doing just that today, it seems to prove once more that there is still only one way of striking the ball—that is, in the hitting area—but many ways of building up to do it. Nevertheless, the blow must always be square for success.

It seems to me that those who need to break the wrists very early in the back-swing, do so only because they find it difficult to achieve a full wrist-cock at the top of the back-swing or even gradually as the back-swing proceeds. They need to get the wrists in the accepted cocked position early on—or, possibly, they may be very tall and do not wish to get too wide a start to their take-away.

The young French amateur, Gaetan Morgue d’Algue, who although not yet in world class has played many good rounds, when asked what he had learned in America, came out with the statement that ‘the pros he had played with had told him to break his wrists earlier as he starts back.’ As he is a tall man and was probably overdoing the wide one-piece take-away, it seems to me a natural observation to make. But there is going to come a point sooner or later when he will be ‘picking up’ the club-head too steeply and then a bit of the old ‘stuff’ will help to restore a balance. Golf is like that!

It is always this sudden switch to the ‘opposite’ which I have long known never to be permanent—it is just a gimmick, like some of the many I outlined in my last book, Henry Cotton Says.

Morgue d’Algue is a studious young player, who admits that he is seeking twenty yards on his drive and more precision with his irons. The surest way for him to succeed would be to toughen up physically, as Gary Player did, but as Jack Nicklaus, Sam Snead and Arnold Palmer have never needed to do. They are just lucky in being naturally strong, which gives them a different approach to all golf problems.

Players who have continued to plug a so-called new method, when in fact they are using only a sort of gimmick, rarely stay good. Their star may shine brightly for a few years, but soon the chopper falls on their play; they quietly play themselves out of competitive golf and some I have noted even give up the game.

This is why I like to see golfers sticking reasonably near to the classical action, which had stood the test of time and which the majority of the best players still use.

I hear from a golfing friend of mine, Mr Allen Clarke, a low handicap senior golfer, and a member of the Los Angeles Country Club, in California, that he has noticed lately that the teaching pros in his part of the world are beginning to talk more of using the hands again. It seems the pendulum is swinging back ‘my way’ as it were. Quite funny really! ‘No golfer is better than his hands’ is still my motto.
No 1 G. Morgue d'Algue, with his old wide take-away, as taught to most golfers.

No 2 G. Morgue d'Algue with his latest take-away, a quick pick up.

No 3 Sam Snead showing how he takes the club back.

No 4 Henry Cotton with a quite similar action.

No 5 David Thomas takes away a No 3 iron.
NO GOLFER IS BETTER THAN HIS HANDS

NO GOLFER IS BETTER than his hands. I repeat this statement often, because to me just to hear a golf ball go off the club tells me if the club has been held firmly or not. It is either 'a sweet note of music' or a false one. Yet we have thousands upon thousands of golfers looking for something else wrong in their swing when they mishit the ball. They do not want to know about the hands. Of course, even if the club is held correctly and firmly, it is possible to mishit the ball and misdirect it, too; but at least the golfer has a chance to build up a sound and consistent game—with bad, weak hands, there is no hope.

I have chosen three photographs to illustrate the point I am always making about the value of strong hands and fingers. In No 1, the golfer I have snapped let his right hand slip completely under the shaft as the speed increased. He lost grip of the shaft with his left hand also and, in fact, presented the socket of the club to the ball. So there was nothing of the club presented for...
impact but the hose of the club. It speaks well for his aim that he sent the ball as much as 80 yards, along the ground naturally!

I did not question him at the time because I discovered the reason for his poor shot only on developing the film, but I am certain he would merely have said that he topped it, because no-one would have told him about the possibility of a club-slip.

When I get numbers of golfers to check over—and I have examined as many as 300 in a week—I rarely find one who hangs on well enough to pass my tests. One pushed out, when practising, one high one, one to the left, one straight, then one pulled will not indicate variations in the swing as so many suspect. Look for a fault in the gripping as the speed increases and the impact has to be absorbed.

In No 2, of myself playing a No 2 iron, one of golf's hardest clubs to play (Nicklaus, Palmer and Saunders had No 1 irons in their bags at the Open at Royal Lytham in 1963, I noticed), I have got myself into the ideal pre-impact position; the blade is coming on to the back of the ball squarely. If my hands hang on, then I must get a good result. How good, depends on how square I am at impact and how well I have judged the strength of the blow and my aim.

How a golfer grips hold of the club depends on the shape and size of his hands; and with Nicklaus setting the pace with an interlocking grip, successfully used by the Whitcombes, Gene Sarazen and Lloyd Mangrum in the past, it might become a popular grip for those with short fingers.

American Doug Saunders (No 3), whose small hands bring him success with the normal overlapping grip, has to tie his index finger and middle finger of his right hand together to avoid the skin splitting badly between them, as these fingers are stretched apart when he holds on firmly at impact. I had never seen this happening before, but when Doug took off his tape to show me the scars left from continual splitting in the past, I could see that he had invented something to help his golf, something which would stop the hard tissue splitting open every time he played. I had seen all sorts of running repairs done for splits and rubbing on other parts of the hands, but this was a new one to me. By the way, sticking plaster can be used to tighten up a loose left hand glove if put across the back of the hand.
FACTS ABOUT THE GOLF SWING

WHILE NOT FULLY COCKED until the down-swing begins:

No 1 My wrists are cocked here 50 degrees—a full horizontal club-shaft would give approximately 35 degrees of wrist-shaft angle.

No 2 Wrist cock increased to 40 degrees.

No 3 As shoulder speed increases, and the pull down speed with the left arm grows, too, the left wrist, still fully cocked, is obviously preparing to unleash.

No 4 The unwind of the left shoulder begins to slow up; it has helped to begin the pull down from the top and has brought the wrists to their moment for speeding up. The club-head begins to move quite fast at the point marked with an X.
FACTS ABOUT THE GOLF SWING
(continued)

No 5  Here the shoulder level makes a 90 degrees angle with the left arm and the wrists have moved the club-head through 72 degrees from No 4, while the shoulder has moved only 20 degrees.

No 6 Then, while the shoulder stays almost still, the wrists move after impact through 36 degrees more. So the club-head moves through an enormous arc, while the arm moves only little.

The shoulders unwind just up to position in No 3, then slow down as the arm takes up the speeding of the club; and then, when the arm has reached its peak, the wrists take over. This is how I have long seen the way the speed is built up—85 per cent wrists, 10 per cent arms and 5 per cent shoulder (i.e., the body).

The shoulders do not contribute a great amount of speed—they serve as a travelling base. Of course, they are important for they convert the arm and wrist vertical actions into a golf swing. The point to remember is that the three sources of power—shoulder, arm and wrist—do not deliver their power independently.
THE STRONG LEFT ARM

Where the building up of the left arm is essential! Compare the swings of these two young golfers (handicap around three or four) with my action. In the case of both young men the left arm has not been able to stand the strain—it has collapsed. It does not mean that the ball cannot be hit this way, but it can be hit much better and much more consistently with a strong, trained left arm. Harry Vardon had a bent left arm at the top of the back-swing, but as he started down he straightened it and stayed firm through the impact area.

TRAINING THE ARMS

There are no better exercises than one-handed shots, I have found. Most good players are quite expert with individual hands, but these exercises become worth-while only when they are done with ‘the hand in charge’ and the body kept out of it. This golfer is trying it, but his right shoulder is supplying too much power; his hand needs training to take the blow of the ball on the club-face, without stiffening or freezing solid.

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No 3 IRON:
STARTING DOWN

No 1 The first movement down again! Golfers can usefully practise this action. The right elbow is forced forward as the hips lead the action and the arm is pulled down. The left knee position shows this hip and leg movement very clearly. Note how angle of shaft has changed—the club-head goes back as the hands drop.

No 2 The angle at which the arms lie on the shaft at address very much affects this position. Broad-shouldered golfers with short arms bring their arms to the address with the elbows inevitably well apart.
THE FOLLOWING SEQUENCE of photographs shows a full shot with the driver, taken from the front. Compare them with the series on pages 31-45.

Nos 1-3 In all classical swings there is still a slight forward press and a dragging away of the club-head by the hands, as can be seen in Nos 1 and 2.

I have always been a good looker-at-the-ball and I am certain that the habit I acquired early on of looking at the ball with my master eye (the left), with my head cocked definitely to the right, has helped me in this good golfing point.

In Nos 2 and 3 there is no question about the way I take the club back. It is the natural action of the arms swinging the club away from the address position with the minimum of tension.

Nos 4-6 Only in No 4 does the left arm become fully extended and by then the left shoulder is well round. The wrists up to this point have done nothing except respond to the instinctive action of swinging the club-head away from the ball.

In No 4 the club faces to the front, which is a feature of the back-swing of all players, whether they hood the club-face ('square', some call it) in the first two feet or not.

In Nos 5 and 6 the wrists begin to cock as the club-head continues to swing upwards and round the body. The left heel is well raised in No 6 and the left shoulder already points to the ball.
No 14  The hips face the ball first, the shoulders are nearly square, but the club-head is still shoulder high. This delay of the hit requires very strong wrists. The left leg is beginning to brace and the right knee is pushing inwards as the thrust begins on the inside of the right foot. Note how the bent right arm hugs the side.

No 15  Now the wrists begin to speed up the club-head. The secret of the good player is here—how to square up the club-face from open at this point in the fraction of a second it takes to reach the ball. The back of the left hand must be twisted or turned down, while the club still stays on this arc, inside to out. The hands are again well clear of the body.
YOUR CHANCES OF DOING A HOLE IN ONE (continued)

any one short hole. Many of the 200 yard and over short holes would be out of reach anyway.

More interest has been taken in the hole in one feat since huge awards began to be offered for this 'fluke' at golf tournaments. A number of professionals have won these vast sums for doing—really nothing!

ONE SWING FOR ALL THE CLUBS?

IF THE BALL IS on a tee each time, there is really no need to alter the swing for the big irons and the woods.

There is a belief that, at many short holes, the ball can be gripped better on the club-face, and so will fly better to the target, only if it is teed very low and squeezed between the club-face and the ground. I think this belief is partly due to the fact that many top players do place the ball on the turf or just knock up a little bit of ground with the club or tee the ball very low. As keen golfers practise all their iron shots from the turf, very often cutting out huge divots, they are accustomed to this particular 'hit down and through' action for these clubs. It does not mean, however, that the ball cannot be struck cleanly and played successfully from a tee, although few play this sort of shot with irons. So many high handicap golfers think it wrong to 'swing' at an iron shot—they feel they must punch it.

My advice to the higher handicap players is to give their best driver swing a chance sometimes, just as I am demonstrating here. There is no difference in the two actions—No 1 with a driver and No 2 with a No 3 iron, both off a high tee. The ground on which I am playing my iron shot was as hard as a road and a normal divot was out of the question anyway, but good shots can be played off a tee cleanly. With the shorter club, there is a natural tendency to 'squat' a little more—this is the only difference.
Here I am in 1948 receiving the Open Championship Trophy for the third time, from Mr R. M. McLaren, Captain of the Royal Company of Edinburgh Golfers—the full title of the golfers who play on the magnificent links at Muirfield, on the east coast of Scotland. Standing behind Mr McLaren is Commander ‘Sandy’ Carson, who was then secretary of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews. Behind the microphones (right) is Mr W. B. Torrance; behind him Fred Daly, runner-up, and to Daly’s left Jack Hargreaves.

My driver helped me to win this time, for with very heavy rough right to the edges of the fairways, a shot off the course meant almost a full stroke dropped. I missed the fairways only four times in four rounds—four times in 56 drives! In case some people think I never did putt well, I remember holing a lot of good ones that week, too!
THE DRIVER: FROM THE FRONT

No 7

This represents the top of the back-swing for me. The club-shaft does get to be horizontal at times, but my limited bend in the left wrist dictates this angle.

I show here a comparison between my top of the swing position and that of Sam Snead, which is interesting because there are many similar points to be observed. Sam’s very flexible left wrist, a big natural advantage, puts his club-shaft horizontal. It has been seen often dipping below that line. Sam gets his hands exceptionally high in the back swing. My hands are usually head high only.

No 8

There is again an interesting comparison, for as the club is tugged down from the top, my wrists seem to get back even more than Sam’s. Here can be seen again the points mentioned on page 21. The hips lead, the shoulders follow. The eyes seem to be looking at a spot well behind the ball and the left heel is already well grounded.
No 25 There is a distinct resemblance in the full finish between Snead and myself—the left foot position still being the main variation.

THE LONG BACK-SWING

To get back to the ball from such a long back-swing is quite a problem. This supple-bodied, flexibly-wristed lady golfer would find her golfing problems greatly reduced if she could have my controlled back-swing, but there is little one can do if the golf club—once it gets swelling naturally back—goes unintentionally this far, with the grip held firmly.

The only simple cure is to wear a tight-fitting jacket, but when I suggested this was worth a try, I felt it was not going to meet with much success. Perhaps it would not be popular in a New York summer!