R. A. Whitcombe SAYS
GOLF'S NO MYSTERY!

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GOLF’S NO MYSTERY!

A book for golfers and beginners

By R. A. WHITCOMBE

Open Champion

With a Foreword by

Peter Lawless

Illustrated

with thirty

photographs

LONDON

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FOREWORD

This book beats cock-fighting!

As I read it Lewis Carroll's lines came tumbling into my head: "What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators, Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?" So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply: "They are merely conventional signs!"

In trenchant style, with much of the vigour of his golf reflected in it, Reginald Whitcombe demolishes a hundred pet theories. Not for him are the cries: 'Hit against a braced left side,' 'Slow back,' etc.; and those who have filled weary years endeavouring to take the club back with the left hand will come face to face with the stark fact that they have been wasting their time. Golf is a natural game, he reiterates, and if it is approached the right way the player will find himself unable to avoid carrying out many of the very things he has been endeavouring to learn and put into practice.

The great artist is almost invariably a rebel because he finds existing conventions hampering the full expression of his emotions. When he is strong enough he overturns or breaks through them and establishes a new convention to suit his
own needs. In his own sphere Whitcombe is a great artist; but although much that he writes appears to be revolutionary he cannot be called a rebel for the simple reason that he is an out and out Conservative.

Yet, by the sheer simplicity of his teaching, by his adherence to the basic principles of hitting a stone with a crooked stick, I prophesy that he will arouse some of the bitterest controversy a controversial game has ever known. Old friends will be parted and long-standing partnerships broken in the smoke-room when the part the right hand plays comes under discussion.

Of intense interest to golfers is his approach to health. The influence of deep breathing on the game is something which no Open Champion has ever before demonstrated, though its value in more vigorous sports has long been appreciated. By his system playing golf to keep fit and keeping fit to play golf are synonymous.

Simplicity is the keynote of the book. The exercises are simple to understand and easy to perform; golf as he explains it is truly no mystery. To start to read the book and put it down before reaching the end of it I found impossible. It is a splendid tonic: just to read it makes one feel a fitter man and a better golfer!

Having read it many will face the game with renewed hope and better waist-lines. And that body-turn will become easier week-end by week-end.

The victory of Whitcombe in the Open Championship of 1938 at Sandwich was accomplished in the most testing conditions ever known. A gale of great force swept across the course so that the least error brought disaster, and thirty-six holes in a day was a tremendous test of stamina. Only a man thoroughly fit physically and possessed of the soundest of golfing methods could prevail. At forty years of age Whitcombe was the man.

His win was a highly popular one, as a win by any of the three brothers would have been. They had all three been so near. Ernest, the eldest, was beaten at Hoylake in 1924 by the pursuing Hagen, who played his most brilliant golf from the ‘Field’ to the ‘Stand,’ and got home by one stroke. Charles, the middle brother, looked to have the title in his hands in 1934 when Perry won at Muirfield. In 1937 R. A. Whitcombe led the field until Cotton overtook him in a grand final round played in a deluge.

They were born, these three great golfing brothers, in a house looking across the Burnham and Berrow links, and were knocking golf balls about from their earliest days. Reginald’s first
club was a sand iron, with the face the size of a half-crown, which was given to him by the great J. H. Taylor. Pitching over houses was one of the favourite forms of diversion, and not infrequently the trio, with red-headed Charles as the ringleader, were called to account for broken windows.

It was in 1910 that Ernest, who had been apprenticed to the Burnham professional Ernie Ford, was appointed to Camedown as professional; and there, six months later, his mother became stewardess, a post she was to hold with distinction for many years.

In the same year Charles went into his brother's shop as assistant. Reginald had two more years of schooling before him with three miles to Monckton and back each day. Then he, too, was apprenticed to brother Ernest. That was in 1912; in 1914 came the War and Reginald, at sixteen years of age, enlisted.

It was a courageous move, the sequel to which is made all the more remarkable when one thinks of him battling with the wind at Sandwich. In 1916 he was invalided out with a weak heart, and despite repeated endeavours to get past medical boards he failed to convince those in authority of his fitness.

For a man with a weak heart Reginald's occupation was about as unsuitable as could be imagined. Ernest and Charles were both overseas; single-handed he worked on the Camedown Links, greenkeeper and professional, starting work at dawn and finishing only when the dusk made further work impossible.

Eventually all three were reunited, though Charles, who came back a wreck from Mesopotamia, did not join his brothers until a year later.

Once back at Camedown the brothers started systematic practice. Every morning early they were out, always with one club apiece, banging balls up to the flag. Then they would play a few holes with three clubs, the clubs being varied each day. In those three years of steady application to the game the three brothers made themselves into golfers who were to play a tremendous part in post-War golf. Between them they have won every prize in a game upon which, individually and collectively, they have had only the finest possible influence.

The first competition in which Reginald played was the Victory Competition at Westward Ho! in 1921. In it he had an experience which he was never to forget. In the second round he tore up his card, only to find that had he put it in he would have finished second behind brother Ernest. Never since has he failed to return a
card, for he vowed then and there that he never would again.

His first Open was in 1925 when Jim Barnes won at Prestwick and every year since then he has competed. Here, briefly, are some of the best things he has accomplished:

Won South-Western Professional Tournament, 1928, 1930, 1931.
Second in Penfold Porthcawl Tournament, 1933. Tied for fifth place in British Open Championship, 1933.
Won Roehampton Tournament, 1934.
Won Penfold Fairhaven Tournament, 1934.
Runner-up in Dunlop Metropolitan Tournament, 1936.
Third in Daily Mail Tournament, 1936.
Played in Ryder Cup Team, 1935.
Second in Open Championship, 1937.
Third in West of England Open Championship, 1937.
Fourth in Dunlop-Metropolitan Tournament, 1937.
Won Bournemouth Alliance Championship, 1937.

Peter Lawless.
Golf is a universal game with a universal appeal. It is a game for young and old, and nowadays for poor and rich. It is played for the relaxation it provides, for the fun of the thing, for the other interest it gives us, as a means to health and as a means of livelihood. Players are good, bad, and indifferent, but nobody ever played sustained good golf who was not physically fit.

A few words on health and physical fitness therefore are not inappropriate as an introduction to a book of this kind. And more especially since the subject has now assumed a national and world-wide importance. Our Government, I understand, even contemplates mass-training for the nation. Other Governments have already started.

If my first advice to all who play golf and to all who intend to play it is 'Be fit,' I have my very good reasons.

There have been times in the past towards the end of long, gruelling tournaments when I have
It may be that you are having trouble in getting that left arm to work properly to assist the right. However dominating that right hand may be, it cannot do the job competently unless the left hand assists. To start with, the left has, in most cases, nothing like the power of the right, and for that reason I want you to take special pains to develop it. When you swing a club for practice, swing it left-handed twice as often as you do the right-handed. When you exercise the grip on a machine or rubber ball, or work a newspaper into a ball, see that the left hand is given a full work out.

Incidentally, I recommend those who are not particularly strong in the hands to carry a small solid rubber ball—a ‘squash’ ball will do well—and knead it whenever they have a few spare minutes, waiting for a bus or train for instance. If, while doing it, you just feel with the free hand the muscles of the forearm working, you will be surprised to see how much they are affected, and
this will encourage you to continue with fresh vigour.

The muscles required for golf are not the bulging, slow muscles of the weight-lifter. You want lithe, sinewy development, and that is why I do not advocate strenuous physical training, dumb-bells or weight-lifting. It is not a question of how hard you can hit the ball, but how fast you make the club move at the time the face of it is brought to the ball.

If you are noticeably weaker in the left arm you may find at first that a club is too heavy to hit back-handed with in practice. In that case a walking-stick will do to start with, but you must concentrate on building-up that left arm and hand so that they can play their parts in a two-handed swing.

But however strong your left arm may be there can be other difficulties to overcome. Overcome they must be if you are to attain any real proficiency at the game. No two men are built alike, and movements that are simple to one man can be difficult to another. Powerful Hercules can be out-driven by slim men half their size.

I told you that big strong hands were a great help in the game. In the same way those with sloping shoulders, and shoulders set well forward, start with a distinct physical advantage over those with square shoulders and the bearing generally described as ‘military.’ Particularly handicapped are those with well-developed chests of the barrel type, and I think that this may be one of the reasons why so few oarsmen and Rugby forwards excel at the game.

In your practice you will have found an inclination on the part of your left arm to get out of the groove which you are making for your ‘bread-and-butter’ shot. This inclination may be in part due to the setting of your shoulder and your arm and the contour of your torso. To find out what is wrong, let’s go up to the top of the hitting position and then hit a ball, studying the left arm as we go.

In following the right hand the left arm is for the most part fairly straight. Here let me warn you against that ramrod of a left arm which was the parrot cry of the theorists some years back. Get out of your mind once and for all ‘the straight left arm.’ The straight left arm means tension, and tension, as I have reiterated in these pages, is the end of the merit of a shot.

No, going back, the left arm bends slightly in sympathy with the right, which is nestling around the turning body. If you look at illustration A1 you will see that it has gone back in very much the same position as it was in at the time of the
address. The left shoulder has followed it so that the only noticeable change is that the top of the forearm and the back of the hand have worked around to face away from the player and the wrist has cocked a little in sympathy with the right one. In fact, if I were to put the right hand on the club you would find that the ideal hitting position had been taken up: illustrations D1 and F.

There has been no rolling of the forearms, nothing but the natural outcome of the left hand following the right hand, and the shoulder following the arm. The left hand has followed that groove which is to become second nature to you.

I warned you against striving to get the wrists under the shaft at the top of the club. Whilst we are in the position with the hands ready to strike, just try the dangerous experiment before you banish it from your mind for ever—work your
wrist under the club. What happens? Immediately you get out of the groove, and you are poised to hit across the ball from outside it. Once you start doing that you are going to slice every shot you play.
CHAPTER X
MORE LEFT ARM

Now we come to the actual hitting and, as you hit, the club, for the first time, passes in front of the hands. The right hand, propelled with all the additional power of the wrist straightening out in its last terrific flick, moving with all its power applied, passes the left and goes on its path towards, on, and up to the target: illustrations D3 and G.

That split second as the club comes to the ball is the vital one in golf. Until he plays it to perfection the golfer will never attain length, or play his shots with that crispness which is always a marked feature of the professional’s game.

Go into the dining-room for a moment, and taking a couple of carving knives out of the drawer and grasping them firmly, sit with the blades pointing to the ceiling, the edges of the palms of the hands on the table and the arms extended. Now turn them smartly from left to right so that the back of the right hand and the front of the left are on the table. Turn them back again as fast as you like so that the back of the left hand is on the table. Power in that movement, wasn’t there? In the right hand particularly?

Put away your right-hand carving knife and take a grip of the left one with the right hand above the left. Flick them both over together from right to left. What happens is very much the same that happens when you are hitting the ball. Keep that picture always ready at the back of your mind—the left arm extended and the right hand passing with a snap over the left, for that is how you have got to apply the fullest possible power to the ball.

It is not a bad idea to imagine the left hand working back from the target; to visualize the hands, wrists, and arms as scissors.

When you come to hit the ball, that left may play various pranks. If it is not strong enough it will give way before the powerful right. The right hand will have nothing to snap over, and
a pushed shot with no crispness will result. Or, worse still, the ball will sail away to the right as the left arm buckles up.

*That left has got to be built up to be strong enough to give the right hand sufficient support actually to hit against and so increase its momentum.* Practise occasionally with the left arm looped to the right with a handkerchief.

As I said, build has a lot to do with the matter. If the shoulders are set far back there is always the inclination for the left arm to bend a little and work away ahead of the right. The same trouble may arise, too, from a powerful torso. Whatever your difficulties you have got to face the fact that at the moment of contact the left arm must be fully extended and firm enough to offer a sturdy resistance to the right.

That's where length and crispness come from. Keep on practising that snap movement. In it lies the difference between poor golf and good. And as you practise it do not forget that your shoulders are always trying to get in and usurp the power of the hands. So always play a few shots with your feet together. If your shoulders come in then you will overbalance. It's the hands that must be made to do the work. The hands must always beat the body.

**CHAPTER XI**

**THOSE THEORIES AND CATCH-PHRASES!**

Wherever golfers gather, talk about the game is inevitable, and some of their phrases will doubtless prove puzzling and even misleading to those who have been reading my teaching. Amongst these you will have heard: *‘Hitting against the braced left side’; ‘Hitting past the chin’; ‘Keeping the weight back of ball’; ‘Head up’; ‘Follow through’; ‘The inside-to-out theory’; ‘Hitting late’; ‘Wrists under at the top.’*

When I set out to write this book I made up my mind to tell you only what to do, and to avoid dragging in a lot of extra matter which might obscure the naturalness of the game. All the phrases above are popular catch-phrases, and I ask you until you have made considerable progress in the game to shun them as you would the plague.

I give you this assurance whilst you are still learning to hit the ball hard and consistently with your No. 7 iron. If you follow my instructions carefully and make no experiments of your own, you will make far better progress than
I have developed my swing and I have developed my punch.
CHAPTER XXI

BACK TO BREAD-AND-BUTTER

You have progressed a long way since you went out that first morning with your No. 7 iron and started swinging with one hand. If you have persevered your golf is built on sound foundations. Provided you can play the 'bread-and-butter' shot you will never go far wrong.

There will be days when you will play far better than usual, and there will be other days, alas! when somehow the game eludes you. (Did I not take eighty-four in the second qualifying round of the Open Championship at Sandwich?) Remember only the good days. A few minutes on the practice ground, hitting first with the left hand, then with the right, and finally with the two hands together, will soon get that 'bread-and-butter' stroke hitting the ball sweetly again.

Whenever you are in doubt study the photographs in this book. Have a look at them, too, when you're not in doubt. Learn them by heart, in fact.

You must have confidence and courage.

Because you miss one shot don’t let care stiffen your muscles. Go out to hit the next one all the harder, and keep on giving them all you know.

Never allow yourself to say: ‘I can’t play in a left-to-right wind,’ or ‘I can’t pitch.’ If you let yourself slip into the way of playing only those shots which come easiest to you you will never become a finished player.

Golf is a game of many shots, but the basis of them all is the ‘bread-and-butter’ shot.

The true basis of the ‘bread-and-butter’ shot is the right hand.

Golf is a two-handed game with the right hand dominating.

Get the right hand working properly and all the rest of you will follow naturally.

The right hand is the master of the golf shot.

Right hand;
breathe deep;
keep moving.
GOLF'S NO MYSTERY!

Golf is a natural game, the author contends, free of mystery, and as natural as throwing stones, with which it has much in common. One by one he shows that 'slow back,' 'hitting against a braced left side,' etc., are parts of the game which are unavoidable if the simple straightforward hitting of the ball with the right hand is adhered to. None of the familiar 'tips' is the least use as an adjunct to the game, every one of them is a natural part of a natural game.

That the right hand is the master to which the left hand is subservient throughout is a teaching which will make the game a far simpler one for many thousands who have been struggling for years to make the left hand dominate the swing. A right-handed forward hit is far easier to achieve than a back-handed swing with the left.

Of intense interest to players of all ages will be the part that correct breathing plays in the game. This has never before been explained. To a few simple exercises, free of all discomfort, and done without even getting out of bed, Whitcombe owes much of his great success. Once the breathing is fully controlled the player is master of himself. The nervous tension of the 'occasion,’ which spoils the chances of so many players, can be overcome.

It is a book full of surprises, and much of it is certain to cause fierce controversy. Many will disagree wholeheartedly with his teaching, for the Open Champion is the iconoclast amongst the theorists. But to disagree with an Open Champion, and one who is a member of a great golfing family, and then prove him wrong, is no easy matter.