PAUL RUNYAN’S BOOK FOR SENIOR GOLFERS

by PAUL RUNYAN
AND WORLD’S SENIOR CHAMPION

ILLUSTRATED

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Ronald Teacher congratulates Paul Runyan as he receives the Teacher Trophy and the winner’s check for the 1962 P.G.A. Seniors’ Teacher Trophy Championship for the second year in a row.
WHILE it is difficult to say too much about the grip and its vital influence on everything in the swing, I have often heard too much importance attributed to the stance. The usual mistake is to blame either hooking or slicing on whether a line across the toes points to the right or left of the target. The first is called a closed stance. The second an open stance. But this imaginary line really governs only the direction in which the ball starts. Of course, this direction is not always at the hole. And in the power shots, when you wish to deliver the fullest possible hit from the fullest possible turn, you aim this line down the right side of the fairway, so that a slight right to left flight and roll of the ball (hook) will bring you back into the middle. Conversely, with a pin well to the right of the green, guarded by a trap, you would aim ten or fifteen yards to the left and try to cut or fade the ball slightly from left to right.

In neither case, however, does your stance determine the drift of the ball. If you are a chronic slicer, whose shots usually start toward the left rough and fade back into the fairway, and whose feet, therefore, are pointing well to the left of where the ball actually ends up, you'll feel cheated if you suddenly adopt a closed stance to help you hook. The ball will merely start to the right, instead of to the left, and continue its customary rainbow farther to the right, probably off the golf course altogether. Your lack of
hand action in the hitting area causes you to slice, and until you correct that deficiency you are better off aiming to the left. The predictable error will at least leave you in play.

Similarly, the inveterate hooker who opens his stance and uses the same strong thrust of his wrists will only get a left-to-left snap that will put him in the left-hand rough.

Accordingly, a change of stance will not correct either a slice or a hook. Closing up (or drawing the right foot back farther from the ball) so that a line across the toes would point to the right of the target does give you more time to get to the ball in your downswing, and thus allows your hands more time to make the clubhead catch up. By the same token, an open stance, with the right foot closer to the ball, allows you to get to it more quickly and gives the hands less time to hit. Even so, in each of these cases, it is still the hand action that makes the ball spin one way or the other, not the stance, and I think it’s important to emphasize this fact.

However, if the stance only sets up the line of flight on which you start the ball, its effect upon trajectory is absolute. From the drive down to the nine iron or wedge each shot travels through a different flight pattern—the drive descending most gradually, and the nine iron most steeply. And each of these different trajectories is determined by the stance itself, or the address position.

The decisive element is where you place the ball in relation to the feet and to the head. Starting with the driver, the ball is played opposite the left heel. The feet as a general rule are spread to about the width of the shoulders, though obviously, like all general rules, exceptions must be made. The stance of the tall, narrow-shouldered person will be wider than his shoulders, that of the short broad-shouldered person narrower. I have seen Bobby Jones hit full practice drives with his heels practically touching; he did this both to facilitate his turn and to make himself stay put over the ball.

Actually to arrive at your own proper stance, you merely need to use a little common sense. If the muscles on the inside of your legs tighten up at address your stance is too wide. You will either
not turn properly (an important matter which we'll discuss later), or you will sway off the ball in trying to turn. On the other hand, if you lose your balance while pivoting your stance is obviously too narrow.

Now your head, which is the center of your swing and therefore determines the bottom of its arc, is held behind the ball for the drive, with the weight more equally distributed than for any other shot. The ball is actually struck on the upswing. Because the ball is on a tee, you can do this easily enough without hitting the ground. By controlling the ball's trajectory you minimize backspin and maximize roll.

For the fairway woods you must make a slight, but indispensable, adjustment of your address position. You move the ball back about half an inch inside the left heel. Your head comes forward exactly opposite the ball, instead of behind it as for the drive. The fairway woods should be hit precisely at the bottom of the arc, neither before the bottom for any pinching action such as you desire with the irons, nor after the bottom on the upswing as you hit the drive. This sort of sweeping action at the very bottom of the arc is properly called a lob and can be performed with any iron club as well, if on a given shot you want to get the ball up more quickly or have it roll farther than usual when it comes down. The trajectory of the normal fairway wood, because it is played closed to the center of the stance, shows a more gradual ascent and a steeper descent than the drive.

For the long irons the identical process is carried out. The ball is moved back a half inch more inside the left heel and the head is slightly in front of it now, so that you get a trace of pinching action, or backspin, to the shot, which starts up less steeply and comes down more abruptly. With the medium irons the head goes still farther in front of the ball. And for the most-lofted irons, where the pinching action can be most pronounced but the flight of the ball adequately high, the head is farthest in front of the ball. It is then struck with the steepest downswing.

So, if we say that for the drive our stance is normally fifteen inches wide, and that for the nine iron the ball is played in the
very middle of the stance, equi-distant from each foot, we have clearly moved the ball back approximately a half inch for each of the other thirteen clubs we use. Correspondingly, for each of those clubs the head has come farther forward. If maximum stopping action is desired, the head has to be farthest forward—which, of course, forces the weight onto the left foot. If maximum roll is desired—as with the teed-up drive—the head is actually back of the ball.

Of course, just as we discussed adaptations which different people might make in their grips, so individual stance variations are not only possible, but sometimes even desirable.

Turning the toes, especially the right toe, in or out, directly affects your pivot. If the right toe is turned in, you had better be very flexible of body, or you won't be able to turn your right hip freely enough on the backswing to hit from the inside out. If you are stiff-trunked, you'll turn much better if you toe that right foot out a little.

On the other hand, tall, loose-jointed people (tall women especially, like the very best of them all, Mickey Wright) often have a tendency to turn too far. A pigeon-toed, or knock-kneed stance helps them acquire stability, and they are still limber enough to turn adequately.

Finally, just as we mentioned that your hands had to adhere properly to the club shaft if you were to have any feel of the shots, so we should say something now about your feet fastening themselves to the ground. In my early days, when I used a rather extreme sway in order to get more leverage, I attached an extension spike to the left shoe to keep from losing all grip with that foot as it came onto the toe during the backswing. Even now, when I stay in place better, I favor an extension spike.

You should change your regular spikes, too, more often than you probably do. If you have something more substantial than stubs on the bottom of your shoes, you'll get the solid feeling necessary for a really full turn. The stress of the spikes holding, so that you actually have to turn against them, is a guarantee that you won't slip. Without such a feeling, you are not likely to trust
Yourself to turn fully: you will be afraid of not getting back to the ball solidly.

For this reason corrugated soles do not work for me. In dry weather the rubber-ribbed shoes are not too bad, although even then I notice they cost me six or seven yards through lack of anchor. And in wet weather I can barely stand up in them, let alone knock a golf ball very far. So pay attention to your footwear and make sure that your feet don't slip and slide around as you swing.

Now your grounding in the general fundamentals is almost complete. You know how to supervise wisely limited, but critical, physical conditioning. You've developed a valuable auxiliary in the right, helpful mental attitude. You take hold of the club soundly and consistently, and you are fully conscious of the range of stances, or address positions, to accomplish the whole range of trajectories, each with its specific effect upon roll, or lack of roll. Now we should talk about what everybody calls "the groove," and try to get you into it, before we take up the individual shots.
THE MEDIUM IRONS

THE short control shots played with the nine iron or wedge are, of course, not full shots. They require variable kinds of english, from variable stances, producing variable trajectories.

In this chapter we will consider full shots with the clubs from the nine iron down to the five iron. This may not be the conventional division—of short, medium, and long irons—but it seems more natural to me.

We still need versatility with these shots, but the possible variations diminish as the club becomes more straightfaced. I have more alternatives of trajectory and spin, for example, with a nine iron than I have with an eight, and so on down the scale. This is noticeable especially on those shots requiring right to left flight. As loft decreases, the controlled hook is harder to hit.

Nevertheless, the basic fundamentals remain the same. On a full shot with the nine iron, where we are trying to get maximum power consistent with control, the standard Vardon grip is used.

The gripping strength, again, is mainly in the last three fingers of the left hand, with a diminishing degree of force from the heel of the left hand to the index finger and thumb of the right. The ball’s position is just slightly to the left of center, with the weight sixty percent on the left foot. The stance is square in the case of a straight shot. And I take issue with golf books that state cate-
gorically the stance should be open for a straight shot. It may be that you want to fade eighty or ninety percent of the nine irons you hit, though this strikes me as a high percentage. If you do, you will certainly open your stance and make sure you cut the ball with your hands as you come through.

But in hitting the ball straight, or from right to left when the pin is far back in the left hand corner of a green, an open stance will multiply your problems. To get you inside the line going back, some sort of unnatural arm and shoulder action must take place, doing harm to the normal swing plane. The simpler solution is to change your stance.

So you come back a little inside the line, now, for the straight shot, with a fuller pivot which still does not transfer your weight completely to the right foot (Fig. 19). Your hands come up to a point somewhere above the right shoulder, opposite the curve of the neck. The swing itself, except for the variable planes we have already mentioned, determined by the different lengths of club, is a miniature of the fuller shots. The left side starts the backswing by turning toward the ball. Or if you want to say the right side turns away from the ball, I won’t argue. One motion can’t take place without the other. The left hand transmits the first hand motion to the clubhead, through the medium of the body turn. The grip end of the club thus moves fractionally before the clubhead itself, which finally leaves the ball. The sequence can be phrased any way you wish: left knee bending toward the ball, right knee straightening away from it; left shoulder turning toward it, right shoulder away. At any rate, the torque, or twist, of the body starts the backswing, and the hands deliver this motion to the clubhead. In the more bent-over position for a nine-iron shot, the pivot cannot be as full as for a drive without pulling your head off the ball or all your weight onto the right foot.

At the top of your backswing (though there really is no such absolute point), the left hip starts turning back toward the ball to initiate the downswing. It does so slightly before the clubhead itself has gotten all the way back, and exerts the pull or stretch on the muscles that contributes to the flexibility or slinginess of a
good swing. The left arm controls this downward pull until the shaft is past horizontal on its way toward the ball.

This is where the hands themselves take over, with the final releasing or thrusting of the wrists which gets them out of the way of the speeding clubhead and squares it up to the ball again. Some players can delay this catching up of the hands and wrists longer than others, and can continue the left arm's pull well past the horizontal position of the club on its way down. Their hands are still so fast that they will not be late in getting the clubface squared up. But even the weakest player must wait until the shaft is below horizontal before initiating his hand action. If he does not, he will actually be casting the clubhead (and wasting its speed) away from the ball, not toward it.

As the player comes back to meet the ball, he again approximates the address position. The whip-like throw of his hands completes the squaring-up process, reaching the bottom of the arc slightly in front of the ball, where the head is held throughout the swing, unless a lob is being attempted. As the ball is met squarely, and as the body turns past the place where the hit has been made, the clubhead continues to swing also, through another cycle until with the shaft horizontally forward the face of the club has gone ninety degrees past its original position (a hundred and eighty degrees from the top of the swing). At this time all body turn has died out and the swing is completed on its proper plane, with the hands at about the same position over the left shoulder that they reached over the right shoulder during the backswing.

If such a swing, on such a plane, does not produce a straight shot (even though the grip was correct to start with), faulty hand action in the hitting area was responsible. The more you practice, the more automatic a reflex this becomes. And the more automatic or repetitious it becomes, the better off you are.

But we must admit that this is a game of intricate timing; and unfortunately bad habits can be learned and grooved too. If the right hand, for instance, grips too tightly, it cannot get out of the way of the clubhead, and ends up impeding clubhead action rather than triggering or releasing it. Deliberate concentration
and thought, resulting in swings which for a while feel far from natural, may be necessary to break such a habit.

Muscular soreness, general fatigue, state of mind can all affect the way we swing. But generally—judging from my own experience—when you are beset by these timing problems you should sacrifice a little power for the sake of returning rhythm and smoothness to your swing. Often, when this is done, your hand action becomes synchronized again, and the swing gets back on the track, so to speak. The power then seems to return of its own accord, too.

You really can’t devote too much time to hand action. After all, the clubhead does not naturally swing by the ball without being helped. A powerful pivot and stretch of the muscles at the top of the backswing creates enough speed for centrifugal force to take over on the way down. But once this speed has been created, the hands must turn through the ball, too, in order to stay out of the way of the clubhead.

Recent high-speed camera studies (which we’ll discuss more thoroughly in the chapter on The Drive) have shown us that poorer players actually decelerate in the hitting area. So half the trick of getting good power lies in keeping the hands supple and flexible enough to help turn the clubhead through the ball once it has begun to move quickly. If I am playing an intentional fade, the arms are moving through their normal arc a little too fast for the hands to catch up. With the intentional hook, my arms move a little slower, so that the hands can not only catch up, but actually push the toe of the clubhead emphatically past the heel in the hitting area. In the straight shot, of course, the speed of arms and hands are meshed.

Now it may sound as though we’re asking a great deal from our all-too-fallible faculties, and, of course, we are. But if you don’t get proportionate satisfaction out of holding the game to a draw, say, in one or two cases out of a hundred, you’re in the wrong sport. With a nine iron, for example, you’ve got to expect to do more than just get the ball on the green. You want to get close enough for a reasonable chance to one-putt. And to do so consistently you must appreciate the necessary shadings, not only in
how to hit the shot, but also in what kinds of shots are most effective.

If, for instance, you’re along the left edge of the fairway and the pin is near the left edge of the green, you still have additional surveys to make. What is to the left of the left edge—a steep bank or bunker? Does the green itself slope so sharply to the right that if the ball flew in straight it would run off to the right, anyway? In these cases, a little hook to the shot would be absolutely necessary to give you any chance at all of getting down in two.

Now everything we’ve already discussed about deliberate hooking comes into play. The feet are squared up to aim a bit to the right of the target. In relation to the target itself, this means a closed stance. But again, stance alone won’t produce your hook for you. You have put yourself in a position where you can, and must, work your hands a little faster in the hitting area to make the ball drift slightly toward the pin from right to left in accordance with the allowance your stance has made for such hand action. Oddly enough, the clubhead itself is not accelerated by this action of the hands. Only the rotation of the toe past the heel is quickened.

Conversely, when you are trying to fade a shot, to meet opposite conditions of wind or slope or pin placement, the toe of the clubhead is blocked from passing the heel, and this hand action, or lack of it, is accompanied by a proportionately open stance. I may be repeating this until we’re both purple in the face, but only because I find hand action so gallingly and so universally misunderstood. Believe me, you will not be able to finish this book and still misunderstand it.

I admit there’s some danger in trying to be too tricky about hooking and slicing on purpose. But even so, the average player has a better chance of hitting his shots straight after he learns how to curve them. If he doesn’t understand what produces the variations, his chances of preventing them are slight.

The eight, seven, six, and five irons become less and less versatile as the face becomes straighter and straighter. Each iron also calls for a slight adjustment in the address position. You move the
ball about a half inch farther forward for each straighter-faced club, and your head that much farther back. This distributes the weight more evenly and, as the clubs get longer, makes the arc of the swing both wider and slightly flatter. The degree of pinch is minimized also.

A full nine iron, to me, means a shot of between a hundred and a hundred-and-ten yards long. For the major professionals, this is light hitting. But it is still longer than the average. A hundred-and-twenty yards—with no wind—means either a slugged nine iron or a comfortable eight iron, and I much prefer the latter. It's nice to say you've reached such and such a hole with an extremely short iron. But if you did so with the wind at your back, and by lobbing the ball so high that it didn't stop when it hit the green, you've sacrificed considerable control. And remember that these higher irons are primarily control clubs. It is never wise to force them.

The range of the seven iron, for me is a hundred-and-twenty-five to a hundred-and-thirty-five yards, the six, 135-150; and the five, 150-165. As the clubface becomes straighter, you hit down on the ball less. Because of different styles—punching versus swinging—certain players have always been able to play certain clubs best. A short, firm puncher is usually better with the medium or short irons. The swingers seem to play the straight-faced clubs better. Yet there are exceptions to this. Snead, for example, is a master with the medium irons, and equally at home with the long ones. I am a swinger, certainly, but I have always felt a relative advantage from the five-through-the-nine iron and wedge.

Perhaps you tend to slight your medium irons during practice sessions. They are not, to be sure, such spectacular shots as the long irons into far-away greens. But if you neglect them you are making a mistake, for they are more immediately rewarding. A good medium iron shot will leave you a short putt. An equally good long iron can't be expected to get you that close. So, if I had to choose between a practice session on the long irons and some work on the five-to-nine irons, I would take the latter choice. They pay-off better.
The long irons are the most demanding clubs in golf. In the first place, their proper execution depends heavily on power, for which there is no substitute. Sufficient clubhead speed is absolutely necessary to get the shot high enough to be useful. The Sneads and Palmers, Littlers and Hogans can hit the ball with such force. From a normal fairway lie they can use even the one iron and still get the ball up and away powerfully.

I myself only feel confident and strong enough with the four iron. As a matter of fact, because of its combination of power and versatility I prefer it to any other club. Step me down to the three iron, however, and I immediately feel doubts about what I can bring off, especially if the wind is behind me and the lie is not too good. I simply can't mash the ball against the air with enough force for a reasonable range of effects.

Let's return briefly to the muscle-strengthening exercises of our first chapter. There's no plainer case for their need than with these straight-faced clubs. In the days of unlimited clubs I carried the one and two irons. But I used them almost exclusively on par-three holes which had trouble everywhere except in front, so I could tee the ball up, and freeze it low on line. Even after passage of the fourteen-club rule, I occasionally left the seven iron out of the bag to carry the two iron for just such shots. But from cuppy