STUDY THE
GOLF GAME
WITH HENRY COTTON
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Turning the clock back. Dai Rees watches me playing a push shot to the 3rd green on the High Course at Moor Park in the late 1930s. The club-face is held open and the same firm grip and braced left side—my trade marks!
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.
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.
IT IS NOW ACCEPTED as one of the most constant fundamentals in the game that the club should be gripped in the fingers of the right hand and across the palm of the left hand. This is mentioned regularly in golf books and articles throughout the world.

There is an accepted margin of difference as to where the V’s, formed by the index fingers and thumbs, should point, but it is agreed that the hands should be parallel in general. The V’s may point directly up the shaft or in varying angles between the right shoulder and the nose.

The Vardon grip—little finger of the right hand overlapping the index finger of the left—is accepted as standard, but many golfers, usually those with short fingers, find they can get a more consistent grip of the club if they interlock the index finger of the left hand with the little finger of the right. This keeps the left thumb on the shaft and the little finger does not slip.
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
Training the right hand to hang on. Very few golfers can play a normal right-handed shot—with the sort of action they expect the right hand to play—with one hand. This is a good action.

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 Whitcomb, 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 seals 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.
Practising at Royal Birkdale Golf Club, 1954
This photograph, taken in 1935 at Ashridge, shows the hit against the left side, seen throughout this book, and the head glued down. In the series of pictures in this section, taken 28 years later, may be seen the same body and hand action.
There is no very great problem in playing with the grass, down the grain or nap, because the club can hit the back of the ball in the normal sort of way, with very few blades of grass getting between the club-face and the ball. A normal sort of shot can usually be played. Against the grain or nap, it is a different problem and no player can guarantee a result from such a lie. The shot is a sort of guess—because the club-head tends to bury itself in the grass and not to slide forward; and a large amount of grass is brushed up on the club-face and the ball.

This ‘digging in’ is difficult to judge and most golfers, taking a lofted club, as might be expected when this situation occurs near the green, are inevitably short; the club-head will not go through. The attack on the ball has to be over-estimated and if anything goes wrong, a disaster can occur. A straighter-faced club such as a No 5 or 6 often gives a better result than the No 8, 9 or wedge.
A FURTHER PROOF

If any further proof is needed on how to swing a golf club correctly, here is a page from the latest American Teaching Manual of the National Golf Foundation (of Chicago). The club-face and left wrist are seen in exactly the position I have used and recommended for years. How far this is from the so called ‘square’ method with which the British golfer was indoctrinated heavily in recent years! Some professionals even made a name by teaching this ‘square poison’ and articles flooded the golfing journals.

Now there has been a swing back to the really reliable action of a lifetime—left wrist under the shaft at the top of the back-swing in varying degrees.

We do not play worse than our American rivals because they have a better method, but simply because they find players with more talent and offer bigger incentives for success at the game. They play golf at schools as a recognised sport and so their youngsters get competitive-minded from the time they start golf.

All right, it doesn’t matter! We play for fun, I know, and perhaps we are right and they are wrong, but to see most of our leading club manufacturers paying huge dollar cheques in royalties to American millionaire golf stars for having their names on clubs sold to British golfers is galling. Why not keep the money at home?

ALL GOLF STARS HAVE THESE FIVE FUNDAMENTALS

Common to the games of all of today’s greatest golfers are five features essential to the effective golf swing.

1. They are all firm with the left hand and arm. That is how they control the path of the club.

2. They all are slow at the top of the backswing. With many of them the pause at this point is quite noticeable. In this way they attain correct timing and coordination between the legs, body and hands.

3. They all have their weight forward (on the left foot) as club comes into the ball. That is how they are able to hit through the ball. The inexpert player’s commonest mistake is to want to scoop the ball instead of hitting down through the ball and letting the loft of the clubface perform its function of getting the ball up.

4. They all hit with their hands. That is how they get power and direction.

5. They all hit into and along the line, having the clubface square to the ball at impact. In this way they have greater assurance of a straight ball, the most important objective of the golfer.
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!
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Don’t think, please, that I am just being cynical—but some of the golf advice served up to the golfing public is enough to make a horse laugh! But I hope golfers still go on reading what we write or it would be an unrewarding effort. And, in any case, I hope you have read this far and enjoyed it.

I realise that what I write about golf is just my opinion, but during the years I have collected a lot of data together which gives me confidence to think I am fairly near the right way—if there is such a thing!

I hope you who have read this book will soon be trying to follow all your drives like the golfer I snapped here, shielding his eyes to follow better his fast-disappearing (in the distance) drive—I hope!

Good Golfing!

Signed

Harry Cotton