The Secret of Hogan's Swing

TOM BERTRAND
with
PRINTER BOWLER

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When Tom Bertrand first called and said he wanted some help writing a golf story, I must admit I quietly groaned. In the last few years I’d written my own golf book and helped someone else write another. Enough books about golf already! I thought, as Tom started telling me what he had in mind.

When Tom mentioned that he had been a student of, and later a partner with, former Tour player John Schlee, I thought, Okay, that must have been interesting. But my antennae shot straight up when he told me that Schlee had been among the rare few to receive extensive personal instruction from the great Ben Hogan over a period of several years. Set aside the occasional tips that Hogan sparingly meted out, and you can count his serious students on one hand. Everybody wanted to learn golf from Hogan, the undisputed self-made master of the game, but you couldn’t buy your way into his inner circle. You got through that door by invitation only.

Then it struck me: here I am talking to a direct link to that circle. Now I’m all ears.

Tom told me how Hogan had taught John Schlee secrets and
insights of the game that very few others, if any, knew about. John, in turn, had passed those gems of knowledge on to Tom while they worked together during the 1980s at John’s Maximum Golf School.

Since then, Tom’s pot of gold had simmered on the back burner while he raised a family, worked a regular job, and occasionally taught golf students the Hogan techniques he’d learned through John. Now he felt that the time and circumstances were right to set the table and invite golfers everywhere to pull up a chair and partake of his offering.

“That’s the story I want you to help me tell,” he said. Now I’m thinking, Maybe we just don’t have enough of the right kind of golf books. Lately I’d been feeling that the golf world is slowly starving on a fast-food diet of tricked-up equipment and patchwork analysis. I caught the scent of a gourmet feast in what Tom was saying.

By the end of our conversation, my response had evolved from a silent groan to an audible gasp. As a golfer and a writer, I wanted to be in on this one, so I told Tom I’d do my best to help him.

I had only one condition: this should be a story, not so much for the aficionados and gurus and analysts of the game, but for average, workaday, regular people like me and the forty million other flustered floggers around the world. We’re those battered souls who huff and flail away on the practice range, who read and try all the golf tips with sporadic success. We love this game for the anticipation and the thrill of finding that sweet spot, even though we’re constantly befuddled and beaten up by its confounding, fickle ways. We can’t afford to spend a week’s take-home pay on the latest equipment fads, even though we sometimes do. We long to hear inspiring tales of our heroes and some straight scoop on the secrets of their success.
Tom heartily agreed to this condition, and off we went. As with most uncharted adventures, we didn’t realize where the trail would take us until we got here. Our journey has been filled with unexpected revelations about Ben Hogan and the golf swing that set records still standing today. We also unearthed some interesting history of the game that was previously unknown to the general public. Add to that an undercurrent of Shakespearean drama driving our players onward through their turns of fortune.

In the end, I believe we’ve brought forward a worthwhile contribution to the lore and lustre of our favorite sport. You, of course, will be the judge of that.

So, fellow handicappers of the world, this is for you. It comes on a clean beam from the heart of the master himself straight to yours. I hope you find some useful information here to help you master the challenges of your own game. Good luck, swing smooth, and let ’er rip.

Printer Bowler

I don’t know how many times I tried to complete this project over the last fifteen years, but interruptions became a way of life. Family obligations always came first, so I decided that I wouldn’t start seriously teaching golf again until I was nearly fifty years of age and my children were at least half grown up.

Then about two years ago I closed down my store, Bertrand’s South Jersey Deli, and an opportunity arose for my wife to be the sole breadwinner. That allowed me to work full time to chronicle
Tracking the Secret

A note from the authors: We searched everywhere for a complete chronological summary of when and how Hogan disclosed the many aspects of the secret he first mentioned almost seventy years ago and the impact that each revelation made on the golfing world. Bits and pieces of information were scattered everywhere, but we found nothing that collects all the main facts and observations into one place to give us an overview of its development. We also conducted street polls of average golfers and found a rash of misconceptions and huge gaps in awareness about Hogan—his secrets, his contributions to the art of the golf swing, and his record. So we figured that we'd better dig in and compile this retrospective ourselves. It's the first time, we believe, that anything like this has been done. What follows is a survey of the birth and development of Hogan's secret, along with decade-by-decade highlights of its evolution to the present day.
With a newly revived game, Hogan again takes the money title in 1946 and 1948. He wins the 1948 U.S. Open and the PGA. He discreetly lets it be known to a few close friends that he is working on something, but doesn’t say what it is. He has unearthed several secrets by now, and the public is clamoring for whatever he’s willing to hand out. Near the end of this decade, he is the dominant force on Tour with 37 victories, including three majors. Then in 1949, Hogan’s car accident almost ends his life and certainly, doctors believe, his career is finished.

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1950s
In 1950, Dr. Cary Middlecoff observes Hogan’s miraculous return, with apparently the same swing that a pre-accident Hogan had used, with increasing success. Although Tour stats are few, it is obvious that Hogan is now consistently hitting the highest percentage of fairways and greens on Tour. He wins the U.S. Open at Merion. The secret is paying big dividends, and the public’s curiosity is revitalized in the wake of Hogan’s amazing comeback.

In 1951, Royal Hogan, Ben’s older brother, proclaims, “I’m the only one he ever showed it [the secret] to,” while Ben is helping Royal prepare for his opening match in the U.S. Amateur Championship. Whatever the secret is doesn’t hold up, however, as Royal is eliminated in the first round. Hogan wins the Masters and the U.S. Open at Oakland Hills and continues to keep his trump cards tucked out of sight.

At the 1953 British Open in Carnoustie, John Derr, a CBS broadcaster covering the championship, reports that Hogan gave him “five factors critical to every golfer. . . . And yet it was never
the same five things with everybody.” (See chapter 5 for an explanation of the actual five factors.)

By the autumn of 1953, after Hogan wins his third major championship of the year at Carnoustie—completing the Triple Crown—the hunt for the secret turns into an international frenzy and a flurry of speculation. One news story reports it as a twenty-minute training routine that Hogan practices every morning when he wakes up, apparently still in his pajamas. (At the time, it wasn’t commonly known that Hogan’s first hour out of bed each day was spent in a hot Epsom salts bath to ease the pain in his aching legs.) CBS-TV is negotiating a special interview to discuss the secret, but the deal falls through.

Then, in 1954, Hogan accepts Life magazine’s offer for exclusive rights to unveil his “mysterious secret,” to be published the following year. Life runs a preliminary article on April 5, 1954, asking some touring pros for their thoughts on the secret behind Hogan’s now legendary golf swing. Each has his own widely differing opinion, which reveals the infant state of golf swing analysis at that time. Claude Harmon observes Hogan’s body not turning but sliding forward during the downswing, led by the left hip. George Fazio notes that Hogan keeps his shoulders level and thus creates a symmetrical arc similar to a baseball swing. Mike Turnesa sees Hogan opening his clubface more at address to prevent his dreaded hook.

Fred Gronaue is among the few to notice that Hogan keeps his right knee in place as a pivotal point around which his body coils and returns through the impact area in perfect balance. Sam Snead sees Hogan shortening his swing and staying behind the ball to hit higher trajectory shots.

Hogan’s feisty and sometimes bitter rival, Gene Sarazen, notices Hogan’s use of pronation to open the clubface wider than
normal to help prevent a hook. Sarazen says that today no self-respecting professional uses pronation. He claims it is like a pill taken to cure one ill that soon requires another pill to remedy the side effects of the first one.

After beating Hogan in the 1955 U.S. Open, Jack Fleck professes that his inspired play is the result of finding the master’s secret. “He might have used a secret,” Hogan later tells Life magazine, “but it wasn’t mine.” (On the final hole, with Hogan poised to win a record fifth U.S. Open, the golf gods inexplicably abandon their disciple. Hogan’s foot slips, and the old demon hook, rarely seen since his comeback, snaps his drive into the deep rough. Thus ends his last realistic chance to win his favorite of all championships.) Immediately following his defeat, a despondent Hogan announces his retirement from tournament golf; however, he will often return to compete in the Masters and U.S. Open over the next several years.

Hogan, now entering the twilight of his competitive years, feels free at last to have some fun with his unsolicited notoriety. Quoted in Life magazine, he plays his fans along with remarks like, “It [the secret] is easy to see, if I tell you where to look.” He goes on about his discovery and daily practice sessions, saying, “It was like learning to play golf all over again.”

On August 8, 1955, the highly anticipated Life feature on Hogan’s secret at last hits the newsstands. Herein Hogan explains that long ago, when the Scottish pros came to America, they taught pronation, a movement that involves rolling the hands to the right on the backswing and then rolling them back to the left on the downswing. “In itself, pronation is no cure for a hook. If anything, it helps to promote one,” Hogan says. “But ... I had added two adjustments, which on paper made pronation hook-proof, without any loss of distance. The first was in
the grip. I moved my left hand so that the thumb was almost directly on top of the shaft. The second adjustment, which is the real meat of the ‘secret,’ was nothing more than a twist or a cocking of the left wrist.”

Some skeptics wonder, Is that all there is to it? How do you do that? Others believe that Hogan isn’t telling the whole story and is taking *Life* and its readership for a ride. Many average golfers feel discouraged by the end of the article, where Hogan adds, “I doubt if it [the secret] will be worth a doggone to the weekend duffer and it will ruin a bad golfer.”

Two years later, Hogan’s *Five Lessons: The Modern Fundamentals of Golf* is published and becomes an immediate hit. Some conjecture that with this enduring best seller—which today remains a sacred text to professional and amateur alike—Hogan may be answering his critics by saying, in effect, “Here’s the best shovel I can give you, now go dig out your game like I did.”

1960s
In a decade of civil unrest and accelerated social change, public interest in Hogan’s fundamentals and the secret gradually declines. Power players like Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, now seen by millions on television, become the new forces in professional golf.

Hogan almost realizes his dream of winning a fifth U.S. Open in 1960 at Cherry Hills. In the Saturday 36-hole final rounds, Hogan hits 27 consecutive fairways and 34 consecutive greens in regulation. Dow Finsterwald describes Hogan’s performance as “the finest exhibition with irons I’ve ever seen.” In spite of his
balky flatstick (34 putts in the morning, 35 in the afternoon), he is tied for the lead when his approach to the final 17th green lands in perfect position but spins back into the water. Usually not one to look back, Hogan later admits that “there isn’t a month goes by that that [loss] doesn’t cut my guts out.”

Hogan turns his attention to creating golf clubs instead of golf swings. The new club-making company bearing his name, now owned by American Machine and Foundry (AMF), is busy supplying a growing demand for his signature Apex forged irons and persimmon woods.

In 1965, Hogan wins a classic match against Sam Snead on Shell’s Wonderful World of Golf, where he routinely hits every fairway and every green in regulation. During this decade, he competes in three more U.S. Opens but never again makes the top ten.

The decade also ushers in a more upright swing, perhaps best typified by a young Jack Nicklaus, in marked contrast to Hogan’s flatter swing plane. Many touring pros (such as Tom Weiskopf, Tom Kite, Jerry Pate, and others) adopt the upright swing, which features the hands high on the backswing and high on the finish. Where Hogan’s swing involves a level body turn with arms kept close to the torso, the upright swing follows a more up-down-up motion, with the “flying elbow” that will preoccupy golf swing analysts for the next twenty years.

“Most people are too upright because they disconnect the arms from the body,” Hogan observes. He says he can’t understand why people would choose to swing a golf club like that.
while. A melding process will take place gradually as you gain enough confidence in your new swing to start using it on the golf course. You will know when the time is right to switch over and commit to your new swing.

I wish you the best on your adventure into the world of Legendary Golf. If you have any questions or complaints or just want to talk about anything in this book, please get in touch. I'd be happy to visit with you.

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