Lessons in Golf

BY
ALEX SMITH
Open Champion, United States and Western Open Champion

Held back a trifle

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(Photographs by T. C. Turner)

ALEX SMITH

Smith's Clubs
The head inclined a little forward
Turn the body to the right
Finish with a half turn to the left
Swing the walking stick around to the right
For the down swing
The right wrist turns slightly
Finish of the right hand swing
Finish of the left hand swing
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LESSON IV

The Short Game

There are many amateurs who can drive a fine ball off of the tee and even negotiate a full second shot in first-class style. But when they are called upon to approach the green, the weakness of their game is disclosed. It is in approaching (including the approach putt) that the professional player has the call upon the average "class" amateur, and I think this explanation lies in the fact that the professional realizes that his bread and butter depends upon his proficiency in all departments of the game. Consequently he really works at getting up his approaching strokes, while the amateur is generally quite satisfied to be driving well. It is really the difference between play and work. A scientific golfer will tell you that he gets quite as much pleasure from the nicely graduated mashie shot or closely calculated long putt as he does from the two hundred-yard drive. Very true, and yet who would play golf if driving were eliminated from the game? Full, free hitting, where the player has only to think of keeping reasonably straight, and then getting as far as he possibly can, is the essence of golf, and nothing can take its place. But this is the play part of the game, and once the full driving stroke is acquired, its exercise makes no particular demand upon the thinking powers and nervous system of the player. We all like to swipe away at the ball; we enjoy the freedom of the stroke and the opportunity it gives us to put in everything we possess of strength and determination. If we can drive at all, we are proud of our success; we never get entirely used to the pleasure of hitting that little sphere into space. A good golf drive is "a thing of beauty and a joy forever."
A SIXTY-YARD MASHIE SHOT
But golf is not all play, and the long driver, pure and simple, will not win many matches. The ball must be placed finally in a hole four and a quarter inches in diameter, and it is evident that to accomplish this we shall have to abandon the pleasures of free hitting for the studious attention and masterful control upon which the success of the shorter strokes depend. In other words, we must think, we must study, we must be master of our club in all its moods and tenses. Mere distance, combined with tolerable directness, is easy enough, but now we must be really straight and just far enough. This last is work rather than play, and puts a severe strain upon both the mental and moral faculties; the muscles are no longer allowed to disport themselves in careless freedom, but must become trained and obedient to their task.

Now, as I have said, the professional understands that he must be able to play the short game well if he is to reach the first flight, and so he is forced to work at the problem until he masters it. The ordinary amateur thinks that he is practising approaching when now and then, on an offday or for a few minutes before his match, he goes out on the course and plays a few "general" shots for the home green, with half a dozen long putts by way of good measure.

Another reason for professional superiority in the quarter shot is that many "pros" are graduated from the caddie ranks. Now a caddie, particularly in this country, does not get many chances to play the actual game, but he can nearly always manage to command an old iron somewhere, and balls may be picked up on the course. There is generally an unoccupied piece of green sward near the caddie shelter which he may appropriate for his own uses, and if the greenkeeper is good natured he will supply a discarded cup; or an old tin can will serve almost as well. The consequence is that the embryo professional grows up with his approaching club constantly in hand—is "teethed upon it," as they say. He learns his short game from A to
Izzard, and the knowledge is a most valuable asset in his maturer years. The amateur, on the other hand, almost invariably begins by playing regular matches, and so never gets one-tenth of the approaching practice that his caddie puts in. Now, a first-class short game, with quite indifferent driving, will win every time against tremendous swiping and sloppy approach work. Finally, the professional, as a class, is usually in better physical shape than the amateur; he has fewer nerves and a less insistent imagination. The delicate shots twenty yards away from the green, the tricky putt up to the hole—these are strokes that demand the utmost balance of body and poise of mind, and the amateur is apt to let himself get out of hand through sheer nervousness and a too realizing sense of his responsibilities. The perfect golfing machine should be one without nerves or imagination, and here is where the professional scores.

Enough has been said to emphasize the supreme importance of the short game; let us now proceed to define it. What is an approach? In one sense, the short hole which we can reach from the tee, is an approach. It may be a driver or it may be a mashie which we use for the shot, depending, of course, on the distance; the essential point is that it is possible to reach the green in one stroke, and we must therefore play for both distance and direction.

But these tee shots for the green are, after all, quite simple. The ball is placed so as to give us every chance, and we have only to know what our normal distance is with the various clubs, and then make reasonable allowance for the wind. Really, we shall have no excuse to offer if we fail to get within putting distance.

Again, we may say that we approach when a half brassie or a full cleek will land us at the hole side, but really the play differs but little from the ordinary course of the long game. We are still driving, and distance is a trifle more valuable than direction.
HIGH LOFT WITH MASHIE OVER A CLUMP OF TREES
The actual zone of the approach shot begins, let us say, at a hundred and twenty-five yards from the green. This is a distance that everyone can negotiate after some fashion, with an iron club, and it is with our metal furniture that true approaching is done.

You remember that when I gave you the list of clubs that you would need for your first essays I omitted the mashie. The reason I did so was because the mashie is a difficult club to master, and its practice should begin at the opposite end to that of the driving clubs—starting with the shortest possible stroke and working back. Full mashie shots are a dangerous form of amusement, since the increased amount of loft is very apt to hook the ball. Personally, I never play a full mashie unless I am a long way from the hole and it is absolutely necessary to loft the ball over some exceptionally high hazard, such as a clump of trees.

The mashie, that is, a good one, is not an easy thing to find. The most popular model is that known as Taylor's, with a deep, broad face and a substantial sole. The quality of balance is important, and it is a mistake to buy a light-weight club. In these mashie shots the weight of the head has a good deal to do with the making of the stroke, and if your club is too light you will try and make up for this deficiency by forcing a little—striking too hard. The shaft should be perfectly stiff.

Now, before we attempt any actual stroke, I want to say a few words on the spin, a subject about which much has been written and which yet remains a mystery to many good players.

We are already familiar with the spin to the right which produces slice, and with the corresponding spin to the left, which shows itself in the pulled ball. We know, too, that a straight ball from the tee may have either a direct over spin or a direct under spin. In the former instance, which is analogous to the follow-shot at billiards, the ball has a long run; in the latter case the ball is inclined to rise or
tower near the close of its flight and falls comparatively
dead. Finally, slice or a spin to the right is generally ac-
companied by under spin, both of which tend to shorten
its flight. The pulled ball, on the other hand, has both left
hand and over spin and is the longest ball that can be driven.

Now, all of these different spins from the play and
driving clubs have a distinct influence upon the ball’s flight,
but their scientific use in the long game is a subject
too advanced for these practical papers, and as I have
already said, I am not sure that the “game is worth the
candle” with the one exception of the pull. But when we
come to iron play, we shall have to take them into account.
In the first place, I advise you to leave the cut or sliced approach severely alone. It looks very pretty to see a ball cut up to the hole side, falling on the green a little to the left and then sliding over towards the cup, but there are not many golfers who have really mastered the stroke so as to be able to use it at will. Moreover, since the cut is put on by drawing in the arms, it tends to get you in the habit of slicing other shots, and it is hard to get rid of the habit—slicing is the one almost universal vice. In my own game I am quite content to depend upon the simple over and under spins, and to play the ball straight. Better to have two shots that you can use than a bag full of fancy tricks which may fail you more than half the time.
We have, then, the two straightforward spins—the over, which corresponds to the follow at billiards, and the under, which produces in some degree the effect of the draw. How are these spins produced?

My theory is that the quality of the spin depends almost entirely upon the amount of loft on the club. The mashie and niblick are laid back farther than any other club, and their natural tendency is to put an under spin on the ball. It is the lower half of the blade that first meets the ball, striking it below the centre. The consequence is under spin, or draw, just as in billiards. With the midiron, the driving mashie, and the cleek the blade is more and more upright, and it meets the ball at the centre line or a little above it. The consequence is the over spin, or the billiard follow-on. Normally played, the cleek drives a lower ball than the driving mashie, and the driving mashie gives a lower flight than the midiron. The difference depends on the amount of loft, and the less the pitch of the club the lower the trajectory. The iron putter, for example, is straighter in the face than any other club, including the driver, and it accordingly drives the lowest ball of all. An interesting confirmation of my theory is a putter brought out a few years ago in which the face of the blade hung over the ball—the direct opposite of the ordinary loft. The theory was that it would strike the ball well above the centre and so put a forward or over spin upon it, and this is just what it did do.

We have, therefore, over spin as the normal result of play with driver, brassey, spoon, cleek, and driving mashie. The midiron stands just upon the dividing line, and then come the mashie and niblick, producing under spin. With this theory established, we may go on to put it in practice.

In the first place, for all half and quarter shots I believe in using the overlapping grip, with the thumb down on the shaft. (See illustration of this grip in Lesson II.) In all iron play, properly executed, more or less turf is taken, and
with the thumb on the shaft there is much less danger of the club turning in the hand. Again, we need the full power of the right hand to push the club through, and this can only be obtained with the thumb on the shaft and not curled around it. In the latter position the club is apt to fall into the web formed by the right thumb and right forefinger, and power, at a critical moment, is thereby wasted. Finally,

the right thumb on the shaft gives us an easy and certain method of arriving at a half swing. It is impossible to make a perfect full swing with the right thumb in this position, and we have therefore an automatic preventive against overswinging with our irons.

Once again we will distinguish in our approach work between the shots played with a stiff wrist and those in which
the latter are loosened up. With the flexible wrist the shot is what we may call normal, the club head hitting the ball in advance of the hands, and as a consequence the ball is sent into the air or lofted. With the wrists held stiffly, so as not to bend backward, the hands are in advance of the club head and the result is a low ball with plenty of run. Finally, if in this last stroke we allow both hands and left shoulder to go out after the ball, instead of swinging round to the left, we shall produce the shortened form of the push stroke already described. These then are the essential principles of approach play—the right thumb down the shaft, the stiff or flexible wrists, and the hands, either kept behind the club or pushed through in advance of it. All modifications of the quarter game depend upon our knowledge and practical mastery of these principles.
TOP OF SWING FOR CHIP SHOT ONTO THE GREEN
THE CHIP SHOT. TAKING TURF AFTER THE BALL IS STRUCK
For the approach shot generally the mashie is the proper club, and we will now proceed to deal with its mysteries, beginning, as I have already said, with the shortest possible shot and looking back.

Suppose the ball lies about twenty yards from the cup, with two or three yards of the ordinary course between us and the green. It is possible, of course, to run the ball up with putter or midiron, but I prefer to take a mashie and play what is called a chip onto the green. This is, perhaps, my favorite shot and, lying in this position, I am generally willing to back myself to hole out in two.

For the stance the right foot is still farther advanced, as shown in the illustration, and the ball lies nearer the right foot. The swing back is quite short, as short, indeed, as you can make it, for it is the weight of the club head that is going to do the work. The grip is firm with both hands, and be sure that the right thumb is on the shaft and not around it. A little turf is taken with the stroke *after the ball is struck*, and the hands are not held back, but go out after the club. As the stroke is a hit in the strictest sense of the word, the follow-on is shortened up and the hands and club head are checked about a foot past the ball. Now, with a putter or driving iron, such a stroke would have over spin, and consequently a low flight and a long run. But, as I have already explained, the excessive loft of the mashie produces under spin, and the result is a low ball with a drag on it. Such a ball may be pitched from twenty yards away to within a few feet of the hole, and its run will only be long enough to take it up to the cup:

There is great control over the ball in this modification of the jerk or push shot, and the tendency of the mashie to hook the ball is almost wholly nullified. The wrists, by the way, are kept stiff—not bent back—but, of course, they must work easily, and the grip, though firm, must not be rigid.
Be particular not to swing back too far; if you do you will instinctively try to spare the shot and the result will be a failure. Be equally careful that both hands are pushed through with the impact, and don’t imagine that you will have to put in some extra wrist action in order to get the ball into the air; the loft on the club will attend to that.

Now, if we play this identical shot with a jigger (a jigger is nothing more than a lofted cleek), a midiron, or a driving mashie, we shall get the same results except that these other clubs will put on over spin instead of under spin, and the ball will run proportionately farther. Playing the stroke with the midiron it will be necessary to pitch the ball about half way and let it run the rest of the distance.

This shot can be used for all distances up to the range of the half mashie, the only difference being that the club is taken farther back for the longer strokes. Moreover, it can be played with any iron club, remembering, of course, that all clubs, except a mashie or niblick, will give a run to the ball. With practise, you will be able to lay out a scale of distances for all your approaching clubs.

Let us now turn to the wrist shot proper. In this stroke the wrists are not kept stiff, but allowed to bend back as far as they will go. The stance is the same for the right foot, but you may have the ball nearly half way between the feet. When the club comes through, the hands do not go after the club, but the left one is held back a trifle, just as in the driving stroke, and the left shoulder swings around. Not so much turf is taken as in the push shot. The ball will be lofted well into the air and, as before, it will have over or under spin according to the pitch of the club employed. The usefulness of the wrist shot is, of course, to get the ball over whatever obstruction may be in the way, such as a cop bunker. If we want a short, high loft, with plenty of stop on the ball, we may take the niblick, but watch out for its tendency to hook the ball to the left. Moreover, in all shots with iron clubs it is advisable to hit
with the toe rather than with the heel of the club head; otherwise we shall be continually hooking, foundering, or slicing our shots.

Playing my normal game, I prefer the push stroke first described to the wrist shot, as I find it gives better control both for distance and direction. There are occasions, of course, when it is absolutely necessary to get the ball well into the air, as for example, when you are quite a way from the green and stymied by trees or high bushes. In this emergency I should play a full wrist shot with the mashie, so as to get distance, loft, and a dead fall.

This, then, is my general scheme of action for the approach shot, and I admit that the theory looks almost too simple. There are scientific manuals on the game which make a great deal of the approach stroke, subdividing it into numberless variations, such as the three-quarters stroke with cut, the dead loft with the club laid back, and so on. I will acknowledge that if a man plays with only one club, say a midiron, it will be necessary for him to learn to use it in various ways to get the desired results. It seems to me a simpler plan to employ but the two strokes—the push and the wrist, and depend upon the particular club used for the minor variations. The requirements of the theorists are all very pretty on paper, but they require genius and a lifetime of practice for their mastery. My idea is to know less, but to know that perfectly.

To recapitulate: The stiff wrist goes with the hands pushed through in advance of the club head, and the result is a low flying ball. The heavily lofted clubs—the mashie and niblick—put on under spin, which stops the ball comparatively dead; the other iron clubs put on over spin, which causes the ball to run.

The wrist stroke proper is made with the wrists well bent back, and the club head goes through in advance of the hands, producing a high flight to the ball. As before, the heavily lofted clubs give under spin and the others over spin.
A PUSH APPROACH WITH MIDIRON AT SIXTY YARDS
In the running-up stroke with the cleek or driving mashie the ball may be kept low and its running power increased if the wrists are kept extra stiff, the right one turning sharply over as the ball is struck.

For approaches at long distances a spoon is an excellent club. The spoon is a wooden club, resembling the driver, but with a larger head and a face laid back as much as a brassey. The stroke may be either a push or a wrist.

Remember, finally, that in playing anything short of a full swing with the irons you must keep your right thumb on the shaft and use the overlapping grip, as already described. The right elbow swings back close to the body just as in the full driving strokes, and the right hand is always in command. Approaching is difficult and always will be, and it can only be mastered by hard and conscientious practice. Go out alone with nothing but a mashie and a half dozen balls and really work at the problem, and your trouble will be amply repaid in the lowering of your medal scores.
Alex Smith, the open champion of the United States, was born in Carnoustie, Forfarshire, Scotland, thirty-three years ago. Like all the Carnoustie boys he was in the habit of swinging a golf club from his earliest years, and it would be impossible to say how old he was when he made his first appearance on the links. Realizing that at golf more than at any other game practice alone makes perfect, Smith devoted himself most assiduously to the game, with the result that he attained proficiency at a comparatively early age. In 1895 he was placed among the scratch players of his club, and in 1896 the committee rated him so highly as to put him in that select class who had to allow strokes to the scratch players. At one time or another he won most of the trophies of his old club. His first big victory was when he secured the Gold Cross (scratch) and this was followed up by his securing twice in succession the handsome silver kettle presented by the Caledonia Club to its sister club on its Jubilee in 1892.

In 1897 he won the Stevenson Cup, a trophy for scratch play, having on the full medal course the fine score of 79. The Dalhousie Club presented a Jubilee cup to the Carnoustie Club, and in the first competition Alex Smith went right through the competition to the final, when he was defeated. In September, 1897, he succeeded in lowering the record for Carnoustie links. For some years it had stood at 75 until Smith came in with 74. In many of the team matches he distinguished himself. Playing against St. Andrew's he had the well-known player, David Leitch, as an opponent, and the Carnoustie golfer had Leitch one down at the finish, a result which was reversed when they met at St. Andrew's.
tie with Anderson. The play-off was at eighteen holes and Anderson won with 85 to Smith’s 86.

In 1901 Smith left Washington Park and came East, being engaged as professional by the Nassau Country Club, of Glen Cove, Long Island, and he has remained with that club ever since. It has a very excellent course of full length and no doubt some of the improvement manifested in Smith’s game must be ascribed to the opportunity afforded him of being able to play over so good a green. In the 1902 Open Championship at Garden City, which was won by Lawrence Auchterlonie with 307, Smith was again outside the money with 331.

In next year’s Open Championship at the Baltusrol Golf Club, Short Hills, N. J., he did much better, finishing fourth with 316. Willie Anderson, the subsequent winner, and David Brown tying for first place with 307.

1904 was Willie Anderson’s year, not Smith’s. The former player won the Open Championship at the Glen View Club, Chicago, with 303, Smith taking twenty-one strokes more.

In 1905 Smith made a very distinct advance, and gave the first unmistakable indication that he was soon to be found in that small and select class—the world’s great golfers. The first Metropolitan Golf Association Open Championship was held at the Fox Hills Golf Club, Staten Island, N. Y., and it brought out a strong entry list. Smith was notable at this tournament not only on account of his fine play, but because he used a club having a shaft fifty-one inches in length. With this formidable weapon he did great execution, as his winning of the championship shows, but he abandoned it some time after and was content with a shaft forty-six and one-fourth inches in length. He was not dissatisfied with the long-shafted clubs. To use his own words, he gave them up “simply because they were a nuisance to carry around.” He and his old rival Willie Anderson tied for first place, with 300, great going
left. In this grip the right hand is generally more over the shaft than in the cricket grip already described; in other words, you see the back of the right hand and not the fingernails. The left thumb is entirely covered by the right palm;

the right thumb may either coil about the grip or lie on the top, straight down the shaft. For my approach work I prefer the latter position as tending to greater accuracy.

There is no doubt about it that this overlapping grip gives the player great command over the club, as it prevents the possibility of the two wrists working against each other.

This is the reason why I use it in my short iron work, but I prefer my ordinary grip for all full shots. After giving the
SNOWING

TURN

OF

WRISTS

AFTER

CLUB

HEAD

HAS

PASSED

THE

BALL.

STANCE, GRIP AND SWING

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vided, that the right elbow moves around and close to the
body on the up-swing and the left elbow is kept close to the
body until after the ball is struck, the stroke will be a power-
ful and accurate one, the arms finishing as shown in the
illustration.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, let me say again that
my method is not the only one in which golf may be played.
A firm distinction must be made between the two schools
of swinging—perpendicular and horizontal. If a man plays
with an upright swing, then of necessity his stance will be
with the right foot drawn back; the club head will be carried
back in a long sweep close to the ground; the right elbow
will swing up and away from the body; the club will be
pulled down by the left arm and both arms will be stretched
out in the direction of the ball’s flight—the follow-through.
But if you adopt the horizontal swing, which is the modern
practice, and best exemplified in the play of J. H. Taylor,
you must do none of these things. The club goes back
around the right leg; it is thrown down by the power of the
wrists, particularly the right one, and the right elbow is
kept close to the body on the up-swing, with the left one
held back until after the impact. The perpendicular style
is more of a sweep; the horizontal rather in the nature of a
hit. Concentration of force is the characteristic of the hori-
zontal swing, and if you have ever seen J. H. Taylor play
you will understand what I mean. There is no wandering
away of club head, arms or elbows. Everything is kept
under severe control, but not an ounce of power is wasted
or misapplied. The old-fashioned loose-jointed style of
swiping at the ball is very pretty to watch, but it is an art
that can only be learned imitatively and in youth.

It will be well in practising the full swing to stand with
the sun directly at your back. You will then be able to
detect any sidewise movement of the body or head, particu-
larly to the right. Accuracy depends upon keeping the body
strictly perpendicular, and the head as immovable as pos-
sible.
FIG. 11.—ORDINARY SHOT WITH IRON CLUB JUST AFTER IMPACT