



Technical Game, Physical Game, Mental Game

A Good Question

Several months ago, I was invited to a game of golf with award-winning Canadian golf writer Lorne Rubenstein. Lorne's day job is writing a golf column for The Globe and Mail, which he's done since 1980. Lorne writes for publications around the world and has written several golf books, such as *A Season in Dornoch: Golf and Life in the Scottish Highlands*, a great read that I enthusiastically recommend.

During that game, Lorne asked me a straight-forward question that he said he likes to ask teaching pros. "How come we [golfers] don't get any better? Most of us take lessons, read magazine tips, buy swing gadgets and golf videos, and endeavor to improve, but do we really ever get close to where we want to be?" He said, "I've taken lessons from just about every great instructor in the game and have some pretty sound swing knowledge." He wasn't kidding; Lorne was a close friend of George Knudson, the great Canadian player and teacher. The two co-authored *The Natural Golf Swing*, one of the best golf instructional books.

My immediate instinct was to protect the integrity of my fellow swing coaches by saying that many folks do get better with good instruction. But Lorne has a point. The vast majority of golfers don't get appreciably better. "We don't get better for a whole lot of reasons, Lorne" was my vague and quick answer. There is no silver bullet to improve one's golf. Golf is complex. In general, we try to establish a process that leads us toward confidence and consistency - and lower scores.

The following is my more thoughtful response to Lorne's question as to why we don't get better and to provide some ideas as to how we can improve. The first step toward improvement is to believe that we can improve even without being perfect with every swing.

We don't get better because we don't understand that golf's fundamentals are indeed fundamental. Even the best players in the world constantly work on the mundane basics. Aim, posture, and balance - your swing shape is born of these basics. Golfers and teachers take too much for granted. When I began teaching high-level golfers and Tour players, I learned quickly to assume nothing. No matter how accomplished the golfer, I take nothing for granted when it comes to watching for and discussing with the player the most elementary aspects of their golf swing.

Often we don't get better because we hit the pause button when it comes to our natural skills. The short game in particular is more intuitive - having "body sense" of what a pitch, chip or putt will do based on what we see and feel. We must be open to what our intuition tells us about the weight of a shot or putt, how to aim and land a ball relative to the space between us and the hole based on what's in front of us. We're often so "ball-bound" and focused on method that we abandon our own gifts of natural acuity.

I once watched Seve Ballesteros practice chipping: Seve took about twenty minutes to throw golf balls underhanded to various locations on the practice green, then repeated the process from the same locations only now hitting shots using various clubs. Some soft, dropping shots, some running shots, all based on feel and intuition - trying to replicate what he had learned from tossing golf balls to accomplish the same result.

We don't get better because we fail to recognize that golf truly is as much a sport as it is a game. We may lack the stamina or athleticism to successfully blend the technical and physical skills together over the length of a round or the days of a tournament. Today's successful golfers understand that physical training and nutrition are integral components of performance. The better conditioned, the better rested, the better fed and hydrated - all these work to make the player better prepared to take advantage of opportunities in their rounds, dealing with the elements, varying golf course terrain, fatigue, and fear.

We don't get better because we lack mental skills and the mental discipline to deal with the task at hand, especially when things are going in the wrong direction. It's a huge intangible skill: intangible because you can't dig it out of the dirt, measure it in yards, or see it on video. The single most important skill that separates elite golfers is their ability to focus on execution instead of being poisoned by thoughts of potential outcomes. Establish a simple routine to use for practice and play. Stick with it, and don't change shot-to-shot or hole-to-hole. Be specific about what you want to do; your brain can only handle one conscious thought at a time.

Most amateurs don't get better because they don't *need* to. They may want to, but they don't need to. Tour players must improve or look for a new job. Thus, they work harder on their skills and do the things necessary to change habit. Recreational golfers typically are not motivated in that way and to that end.

We don't get better because we're trying to be perfect within an environment that, although beautiful, is imperfect and fraught with obstacles. These challenges may be more than we can handle: Simply put, we're just not good enough. My mother has had a copy of The Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr hanging in our family home for as long as I can remember. Every time I go home to Connecticut, I find that prayer and think to myself, "This could easily be called the golfer's prayer." *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Perhaps I haven't answered Lorne's question as to why we don't get better, but I hope by identifying what I think are key elements in the learning process, I can help you improve your golf game. We all have to think about what "better" means to us based on our natural skills, time, and inclination to playing the game for recreation, competition, camaraderie, and most of all, fun.

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