

BRAID OR VARDON, WHICH?

By R. STANLEY WEIR

WHO shall decide when doctors disagree, more particularly when the doctors are of such high eminence as James Braid of Walton Heath and Harry Vardon of Totteridge?

I am not aware that these distinguished professors of golf have had any private or public controversy on the interesting question which divides them; I have no doubt that their personal relations are as friendly and cordial as can be desired; I should be the last person in the world to appear to place them in violent antagonism or to confront them in any improper spirit with their differing opinions; and yet as these deal with a matter of absorbing importance to golfers in general, Braid and Vardon will, I hope, pardon me if I point out to them and their readers wherein their precepts differ with a concluding endeavor at reconciliation.

Some eight or nine years ago James Braid wrote an interesting and instructive little book called "How to Play Golf" and thereby made himself many friends and, let us hope, some adequate pecuniary reward. In the eighth chapter of this book he has written about long driving as follows:

"The initiative in bringing down the club is taken by the left wrist, and the club is then brought forward rapidly and with an even acceleration of pace until the club-head is about a couple of feet from the ball. So far the movement will largely have been an arm movement, but at this point there should be some tightening up of the wrists and the club will be gripped a little more tightly. This will probably come about naturally, and though some authorities have expressed different opinions, I am certainly one of those who believe that the work done by the wrists at this point has a lot to do with the making of the drive. It is merely an assertion of power on their part and if it ever comes to the player it will come naturally and in the course of experience. Directions about it cannot be laid down."

These words were rather tantalizing to the ambitious player; and it is no secret that Braid was besieged by many to let them into the secret of wrist-work. For a long time all he could say was: "I canna explain it. All I know is that from being for many years a short driver, I suddenly became a long one and able to hold my own with the best. The wrists have a lot to do with it."

When his notable larger book "Advanced Golf" came out, it was seen that Braid had made a more particular attempt to explain the secret of long driving and he did so in words which were received in some quarters with scoffing and incredulity, while most readers were mystified to a still greater degree by his singular pronouncement. Here is the paragraph which has occasioned no little argument pro and con both in America and England.

"Where exactly the wrists begin to do their proper work I have never been able to determine exactly; for the work is almost instantaneously brief. Neither can one say precisely how they work. . . . It seems, however, that they start when the club-head is a matter of some eighteen inches from the ball, and that for a distance of a yard in the arc that it is describing they have it almost to themselves, and impart a whip-like snap to the movement, not only giving a great extra force to the stroke but, by keeping the club-head for a moment in the straight line of the intended flight of the ball, doing much towards the ensuring of the proper direction. It seems to be a sort of flick—in some respects very much the same kind of action as when a man is boring a corkscrew into the cork of a bottle. He turns his right wrist back; for a moment it is under high tension, and then he lets it loose with a short, sudden snap. Unless the wrists are in their proper place at the top of the swing it is impossible to get them to do this work when the time comes. There is nowhere for them to spring back from."

This is very vivid writing. It is clearly the language of conviction as well. To conclude that Braid has employed or consented to employ mere rhetoric is to accuse him of being a charlatan. No, Braid is beyond question strongly of opinion that at or in the immediate vicinity of the impact there is a sort of flick, in some respects very much, as he says, the same kind of action as when a man is boring a corkscrew into the cork of a bottle. The fact that some critics completely fail to understand experimentally the process described hardly justifies them in denouncing it as grotesque and absurd. We shall attempt in a moment to explain precisely what Braid does mean (meanwhile affirming that his words are both true and sufficient), but desire to point out that his great brother-in-golf, Vardon, gives us not a hint of any such method. Vardon assents to the doctrine of "tension" and recommends a twisting and untwisting of the arms and body, but declares formally that he has no faith in the teaching that the long ball comes from wrist action. Here are his words. "I do not believe in the long ball coming from the wrists." Further he speaks of the theory that long driving is owing to "some peculiar kind of a snap—a momentary forward pushing movement with the wrists"—as a kind of "superstition." Really Vardon is quite severe in his derision of the doctrine taught or accepted by Braid. One would rather enjoy listening to a debate between the two doughty champions upon this topic. In his second book on golf Vardon appropriating the name of Braid's earlier book "How to Play Golf" (unwittingly no doubt), gives the reader seven golden rules for driving but says not a word about the snap of the wrists. It is thus abundantly clear, we think, that these redoubtable players do

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not quite agree about the grand stroke of the game. They concur in everything save the mysterious snap of the wrists, which Vardon scoffs at but Braid acclaims.

In our opinion there is unquestionably such a thing as a snap of the wrists in certain styles of long play and Braid's visualization of it as like a corkscrew action is quite just and accurate—it being understood that the twist of the operation is from right to left in a right-hand player. Some golfers (and others) ply the corkscrew rightwards; they are not our exemplars just now. Braid says it will come about naturally, implying that it is not always natural to a beginner.

The snap of the wrists is not easy to describe, but some of its characteristics may be noted. It appears to be a concentrated twist of the forearms, the right passing over the left, just at the impact. The feeling is of a lateral shake of the wrists, and probably something of the kind does take place at the wrist joints. Vardon and Taylor too, I judge, would appear to sweep through without any shake or snap; or, at least, they are not conscious of it.

The snap is scarcely perceptible to the eye, but the swish of it is readily recognized by the ear. The follow-through after the snap is a very swift effortless spring-forward of arms and club, which takes place without conscious control.

To the eye the only thing apparent is a rapid twisting of the wrists the right over the left at the impact; let us say during that spread of eighteen or twenty inches that Braid writes about. This turn of the wrists occurs, of course, even in a second-class swing, but there it seems spread over a much longer arc. In the swing with snap it is confined to a very small arc too rapid, so far, for photography to seize.

The feeling of the snap is, perhaps, the best guide to it. Just as the ball is reached there is what Andrew Kircaldy calls "a shove off the wrists." The phrase perfectly describes it. The wrists seem to give themselves a lateral shake forward for the benefit of club-

head and ball. The club springs up through the proper arc of the follow-through effortless as a bird.

The snap will never reveal itself to the slogger. Distance he may get, but not by essential golf and a break-down dogs his footsteps assuredly.

The snap is all-important not only because of the fine direction and movement of the ordinary shot, but because, by means of the forefinger, these slight manipulations which result in the pull or slice at will can readily be brought about. The player who merely sweeps through in broom-like fashion will never be a scientific golfer till he changes his conceptions and style.

The learner will find that, at first, the snap cannot be commanded at will. There will be times when the knack will seem to have been lost. Let him avoid too strenuous methods and woo the spirit of golf persuasively. Arnaud Massy, who can hit a ball as hard as anybody, says that the Art of Golf is a combination of skill and the timely application of force combined with a relatively insignificant dose of physical strength. Many players will find it hard to believe these words. We are all for hitting hard just now. Even Vardon bids us do so. Perhaps we are in danger of becoming mere sloggers from the tee. Arnaud Massy is content with a relatively insignificant amount of physical strength. It must be, then, that while he grips firmly he retains a certain flexibility of forearms that permits of that sweet emphasis just before and after where the ball rests, that shake felt in the wrists, that effortless follow-through, that unmistakable swish, that momentary restraint of the left arm until the right joins it, which is unquestionably the most delightful way of despatching the long ball.

Whether we essay the mighty Vardonian sweep or Braid's whip-like, corkscrew-like snap, let us beware of adopting one theory to the denial of any other possible one. It is a great satisfaction and advantage to be able to recognize and adopt both.

