

THE ART OF GOLF

By Sir Walter Simpson, Bart.

ANNOTATED BY THE HON. MR. RECORDER WEIR.

PART II.

CHAPTER VIII.¹

OF APPROACHING.

(Continued.)

One rule, without exception, is that no ball, however near the hole, should be played weakly. Even the shortest of all approaches—stymie lofting—can only succeed if the ball is swept away, the grip tight, the muscles taut. A weak tap, however long or short the distance, will prove uncertain and disappointing. The length of swing, not the firmness of sweep, should regulate the carry.

The attempt to play an easy full shot is generally recognized as a mistake, and most men consider it wiser to cover the distance with a drive from a weaker club, or an approach shot from a stronger. When it comes to these last, however, the folly of attempting to "spare" is not equally acknowledged.

Longish approaches are sometimes attempted to be made by means of a half shot. That is to say, the player addresses the ball as in driving; but

shortens his swing by getting his hands more under the club than usual, and by keeping all the joints above the diaphragm rigid. This mode of play is scarcely worth cultivating. I do not mean that those who always drive in this way and in no other, or those who, being bad at full shots with irons, have adopted this style with them, ought to reform; but it is difficult to acquire as an occasional means for limiting the length of a drive. The muscles are apt to assert themselves in their usual routine, and a miss to result from the conflict of intention and habit. Nevertheless, half shots of this sort are frequently attempted with a cleek or an iron; but it is an indirect proof of their unsoundness, that no one ever seriously tries to play them with a driver.

Unless under exceptional circumstances, to be considered presently, there are thus only two proper modes of approaching—by full drives from short clubs, and by what are called wrist shots. It will be found that the

¹The careful reader of the "Art of Golf" cannot fail to remark that the entertaining author, for all his wit and sparkle does not seem to hold any definite theory of the game. In fact he seems to fight shy of theories. Although many illuminating observations are contained in his text they are of the empirical sort. To some this characteristic may be a conspicuous merit, but the majority we imagine, will find it a disadvantage. Sir Walter Simpson clearly holds the view that the game of Golf cannot be reduced to rules on making, and yet he is full of

rules and maxims. I cannot find however that his dicta are very cogently related to any definitely conceived ideal such as Badminton or Taylor respectively expound. The enquiring golfer must therefore test the judgments of the "Art of Golf" by some very much more definite standard than that book contains.

Speaking broadly there are but two kinds of Golf, the more or less vertical and the more or less flat. Badminton expounds the one and J. H. Taylor (to my mind the keenest analyst of the day) the other.

best players have no styles between these two. According to length of swing for various distances, they speak of quarter, half, three-quarter, or full approach; but these terms are used for their own convenience, and refer merely to longer or shorter shots played in the same style. A half to them means a half wrist, not the half spoken of in the last paragraph. Beginners and others ought clearly to understand that whilst they ought to have one style for driving, whether with wood or iron, successful wrist play is a new departure, and that effective approaches cannot be manufactured out of fragments of a full swing.

What, then, is a wrist shot? For one thing, it is a shot which ought not to be played with the wrists.² Their usual name misleads many a beginner, and causes him to flounder hopelessly for years. To use the wrists alone is so neat, comprehensible, and compact an idea that he grasps it at once. He is conscious that using one set of muscles and joints alone, his sense of weight is more delicate. It will not take him long to learn, although it may be years before he is convinced that this is not the way to do it. It would be less confusing if approaches were called ankle shots. The ancients called them knee shots. It is to be deplored that, for no obvious reason, a term so tutorial became obsolete when baffys and feathers were superseded. Properly these joints are brought more into play than the wrists.

Without wishing to direct attention too emphatically to one point, it is nevertheless true that the left wrist joint has no part to play in good approaching, and must be rigidly restrained from taking any. Men who

are masters of the iron may say this is nonsense, and of course they would spoil their play by keeping that or any other point too much in view; but it may easily be noticed that such persons do keep that joint rigid, even although many of them give a preliminary flourish.³ I say many; but also it may be noticed that, contrary to what is the case in driving, most do not. The rule is to put the club undemonstratively behind the ball, and at once to strike. To the tyro, then, if he is getting on well, I would say nothing; but if he is not, a perfectly stiff wrist will do much to reveal the secrets of approaching. Of course, too much attention to and misapprehension of this point (as of most golf secrets) may lead to faults. The player may make wrist-bending impossible by getting his hand under the club, or by laying the spare end of the shaft along his arm. He is also apt to tuck his elbows into his sides, and play as if they were strapped to his body, or, going to the other extreme in order to give his left arm free play, stick it out so far that the swing must be a slice. The proper position is easy—the left hand well over the club: there is to be no effort even if the muscles fail to do the work of bone. Probably an excised joint would not be missed. But it is effort, not elasticity of wrist, which would give the maimed man an actual advantage. As a rule, players talk and think more about the position of the right than of the left hand in ap-

²I would add the word "exclusively" to this sentence, even though the paradox be marred.

³This is much too broad a statement. J. H. Taylor has clearly shown that good approaching depends chiefly upon the way in which the left wrist turns and returns as the club is drawn backwards and forwards (*Vide* Beldam's "Great Golfers" and series of articles in C. B. Fry's Magazine from January to May 1905). "A perfectly stiff wrist," such as Sir Walter recommends could only be disastrous, but fortunately, it is impossible.

proaching. They discuss whether the thumb ought to be down the shaft or over it, tight or loose. So long as the elbow is close to the body, these things do not seem to be matters of the slightest importance.

Approachers of equal skill indulge in all the variations. Indeed, some are not constant to their own fancy, sometimes having the thumb over, sometimes down the shaft. As in driving, the position of the right hand is a point too much attended to, that of the left too little.

Whilst, as we have seen, in driving a good deal of license is allowable in the matter of stance—some players placing their feet parallel to the line of fire, some with their back a little to it, some with their face—the last is the only proper position for approaching. One has but to take a club in hand, and the necessity for this will make itself evident. Let the experimenter actually pause after swinging back (say) two feet. Standing in the proper way, there will be no tendency on the part of the club to waver from its line. But let him stand square, or in front, and swing back the same distance: the position is stiff, and it is difficult to avoid describing a loop at the beginning of the return journey.

Assuming that the player has accepted the principle that the length of his approaches is to be regulated by distance of swing, he ought soon to become pretty accurate for distances from twenty-five to one hundred yards, one would think. Why men remain so uncertain is due to many causes. For one thing, they do not adhere to the principle. At short distances they are inclined to swing easily, which really means flabbily, and with a loose grip, or else to swing too little, and apply more force. At long distances they hit extra hard. Now,

to acquire accuracy, it must be realized that at all distances the grip must be firm and the muscles taut; and that the ball will be reached with more impetus, and therefore hit harder for every inch the club is drawn back. The temptation to over-stiffen one's self, and force for a long approach, can only be resisted by careful watching. There is a natural tendency to cover a little more distance by an ounce more of exertion—by quickening of the swing, rather than by an inch more of it—leading, if not checked, to a habit of jerking, which renders the regulation of distance impossible. This is a real difficulty; others are either self-made or due to ignorance. One of the latter, almost universal with tyros, is to attempt to scoop the ball up into the air. Nothing is more common than to see the face of the iron after the shot, held up as if for alms, whilst the ball is trundling along the ground. Let the golfer ever remember that it is the lie of the club, not a turn of the wrist, which is responsible for the loft. Some men can never make up their minds whether they intend to take the ball clean, or to shave off a little turf with it. Having made a good shot with turf, they regulate the swing accordingly, till (a fizzle must happen sometimes, however one plays) they take too much, or make a good shot clean. It matters very little whether a player takes ground with him or not; but it becomes serious if he is hazy as to his intentions. Again, the custom of using sometimes a heavy iron, sometimes a light one, sometimes a cleek, sometimes trying to run the ball, sometimes to loft it very high, postpones the day when comparative certainty may be attained. What the player ought to do is to decide what club he will habitually use; whether he will

take turf or not; note the height of his loft when he hits as he means to, and stick to this as his standard. This done, there ought to be nothing to think of, in nine shots out of ten, except the length of swing necessary to cover the distance, and accurate hitting.

The player who can make lofts from normal lies to within a yard or so of where he means, even although he fozzles in complicated situations, overruns ticklishly-placed flags, or fails to loft steep hillocks, is more effective than he who has as many styles, and as many irons, as there are holes in the green. A showy shot which comes off should be hailed as "good fluke," and its player ought to thank Providence instead of smiling round complacently. Do I mean that one ought merely to thwack at the ball despairingly whenever it is in a difficulty? Certainly not. But if it seems feasible to play a fairish shot in a normal way, that is better than to attempt anything gaudy. If something exceptional must be tried, let it be as slight a modification as possible of orthodox play—let it be a deduction from it. Out of a cup one's natural inclination is to try to spoon the ball, from long grass to mow it, against wind to force it. The golfer ought to ignore cups, grass, or wind as natural features, reducing each to terms of yards. There are very few lies which it is not the best policy to treat in this way. So long as there is an even chance of getting the ball to within twenty yards of the hole by ordinary means, fancy shots ought not to be undertaken, for there is little doubt that the latter oftener fail than succeed. I do not mean that proficiency in the showier kinds of approaches is impossible. Many a player makes himself the talk of the green for a season by his marvellous power

of lofting a ball so as to lie where it alights; but invariably the iron with which this is done breaks; or, in some other way, the proud owner of it loses his abnormal skill, and the last state of that man is worse than the first. His practice of approaching in the simplest way has been abandoned for this more fickle masterliness, and you see him topping, puffing, missing, with cleeks, irons, mashies, in the vain effort to strike out a new road to glory.

It may seem unnecessary to insist so much upon anything so self-evident as the necessity of adhering to one simple mode of approaching; but it is requisite, unless preaching is vain. The temptation to indulge in variations is almost irresistible. The devil seems to hover over the golfer, and ever to whisper in his ear, "Try this," or "Try that." He listens to the tempter. It would be so nice if he did chop it up in the air out of that hole, and lay it dead. "It may rise," he thinks, "whilst it will only look like a fluke if it scuffles up within holing, played in the ordinary way." He yields, tries, and odds are it goes but a few yards, eliciting the well-known cry of repentance, "I ought not to have tried it."

Take another case. The hole is just beyond a bunker. Playing properly, you must run past. The temptation to lay the iron back, or to put a spin on from the heel, or to deaded the fall by hitting off the point, or to employ some new system lately patented, is very great. That it is not the game is proved by the secret joy experienced when an adversary announces his intention of making one of these showy attempts. Even in a score game, six shots behind and three holes from home, the flames of hope begin to flicker in your sulky bosom.

Although rarer than golfers make

them, there are occasions when fancy shots are worth trying. For instance, if a bunker is between us and the hole, danger beyond it, and no chance of even a half unless we are in in two, the ball must be lofted high or else spun. Some players, in these circumstances, use a lofted iron in the usual way, others try to lay back an ordinary one. Both shots are difficult; but, to my thinking, that with the specially made club is the riskier. It must strike the ball with absolute precision. If taken too thick, the shape of the club makes it dive into the ground, and puff the ball a yard; too clean, it will skim it a hundred yards with the force that would have lofted it fifty. Laying back the iron is not so uncertain if properly done. One way not to do it is to play an ordinary approach shot, the face of the club pointing upwards. A top is as certain as if, in driving off the tee, you pose the lead instead of the sole of the play-club on the ground. Properly, the laying back is not done by rolling the club over on its heel, but by putting it on the ground in advance of the hands, and (this is the important point) drawing it back almost along the ground. So

low must the swing be that if made full (which it never is for this shot), it would be round the waist instead of over the shoulder. In this shot the ball must be swept away, not cut or nipped. There will be a spin on the ball, but woe to the player who attempts to increase this spin with a turn of the wrist! There is no reason why great certainty in this shot should not be attained. Indeed, it is a favorite with many at from fifty to twenty yards, but its application is limited to clean lies, and lies in soft grass, as is the use of the lofted iron. It is useless to try it on a hard green, still more so from a bad lie. However tightly the club be grasped, the attitude is not adapted for forcing a ball. Attempted in a bunker, the result is almost invariably disastrous. A tablespoonful of sand is too much for the strongest arms.⁴

⁴Taylor's method of playing this shot is simple and effective. Stand facing the left of the hole with right foot well advanced. Place club with toe slightly pointing outwards and then take your grip. Play your ordinary stroke varied in the drawback according to distance and hitting somewhat off the heel. The effect of the opposing influences of stance and club will produce a straight and lofted ball.

(To be continued.)

