

THE ART OF GOLF

By Sir Walter Simpson, Bart.

ANNOTATED BY THE HON. MR. RECORDER WEIR.

PART II.

OF PLAYING THE GAME.

CHAPTER I.

OF DRIVING IN GENERAL.

IT is a common complaint that, with so many things to be thought of at golf, accuracy is almost impossible. This is not the way to state the case. It should rather stand: If points of style are thought about and trusted to, bad shots will be frequent. That there is some secret which, if discovered, would make our driving infallible is a belief which dies hard. Nostrum after nostrum is tried day after day. Hope is quickly followed by a despairing desire to break the whole set or spitefully to present them to a friend, so that he too may suffer. Time after time the golfer thinks he has discovered what he was doing wrong.* He

*Time after time the golfer thinks he has discovered that he was doing wrong. The illusions and disillusionings of golf make up its well nigh inscrutable charm. Age cannot wither nor custom stale its infinite variety. We are constantly discovering and re-discovering. Nostrum after nostrum, says Sir Walter truly, is tried day after day; but the worthy baronet clearly has no faith in nostrums; there is no side road to golf. And yet in this very paragraph, as the reader perceives, Sir Walter presents us with a brand-new nostrum of his own and a very good one too. "Aim more accurately," he tells us. Nostrums after all are essential to golf.

gushes about it, or gives half-a-crown to the professional who has found it out. Alas! there is no side road to golf. It can never be certain. With careful aiming for each shot, it may become pretty steady, but even with this there will be better and worse drives. It would be going too far to say dogmatically that nothing but aim must have a place in the golfer's thought, although it is perhaps best so; but certainly if stance, or swing, or address are dwelt upon it must be as subsidiary points. 'There is something wrong about my style,' says the golfer, 'which is causing me to drive so short.' 'Not at all,' say I; 'aim more accurately.' Hand and eye and body must concentrate themselves on, restrain themselves to, hitting cleanly, fairly, firmly; not greedily, wildly, gaily. The golfer cannot afford to allow a favorite muscle to disport itself. The eye is officer, the muscles liners, each doing the duty required of them and no more. The tongue only may wag as it will without doing harm or good.

There is no alternative. It is of no use to say to the ball, 'I will make thee magnificent gifts if thou wilt yield thy secret. I am ready to wrench and thump for thee, to stand nearer or further from thee, to bend the knee. I will imitate the swing of a Morris to conciliate thee.' The ball wants none of these self-glorifying gifts. Abandon body and

will to hitting, and the hidden secret of the mystic 27½ shall be revealed.*

Still, the amateur golfer must be allowed to theorise to some extent. It is a necessary concession to him as a thinking animal. Within the indicated limits, it will do little or no harm; but because he does not think the professional is better than the amateur, the uncultivated beats the educated player. The former finds enough intellectual pabulum for his duller brain in the prosy principles of simply slogging. To grasp the idea of doing so, sufficiently occupies his thoughts. For an educated man to confine himself to so narrow a range is irksome. The professional's theorising does not go beyond 'I hit lazy—I heeled—I topped—I sclaffed—I toed.' To perceive so much is an effort of observation. The amateur must consciously exclude thought, if he is to confine himself to such elementary facts. It is noticeable that he (in distinction from the professional) asks, 'Why did I heel—top—sclaff—toe?'—and if golf is to be a pleasure, not a business, he must be allowed to ask these things. The amateur, if keen, is induc-

tive, deductive, inventive. If not, he is apt to give up the game as too simple. On the other hand, if he does not recognise 'hitting the ball' as his business, theory as his recreation, he becomes so bad a player that he nearly gives up.

'Keep your eye on the ball,' is the categorical imperative of the golfing world; below which there is room for much harmless digression. Say that I am playing very well, but that there is some irrational difference between my style with short spoon and driver. A professional would not know this of himself, or, if told, would not care. It is outside the range of his ideas. 'I'm driving fine,' he would say. But your amateur cannot rest till he has corrected one of the styles into uniformity with the other, or found a rational cause for the difference. If A. drives high, B. low, is it possible that A. with a university education, can rest satisfied with merely observing this fact? No. He will try to find out why, and, having done so, will either modify his style, or register to himself the conclusion that he prefers to drive high. The amateur ought to think.

*It will be seen that with all his humorous discourse Sir Walter does not attempt to analyze or describe any theory of swing. His categorical imperatives are two in number: 1. Keep your eye on the ball. 2. Hit it. Stance, swing and address are subsidiary. The main thing is to take careful aim and to hit "cleanly, fairly firmly; not greedily, wily, gaily." The whole chapter will well repay careful and even diligent perusal. So anxious are many golfers about stance and swing and correct wrist actions that they quite omit to take serious aim, in other words to keep an eye on the ball, with consequent disaster. To such Sir Walter's maxims should prove salutary to a degree.

But taking careful aim is not everything; it is not even the chief thing in golf. The chief thing about golf is the swing, and no golfer is worthy the name who does not possess a definite individual style and a conception of the swing that is proper to him. There is an immense difference between the strokes of the cricketer and the golfer, and something more than merely taking aim is required of the reformed batsman who is striving to master the royal and ancient game. Nobody by taking thought can evolve a good swing. It is acquired by imitation and

natural selection. A golfer may never take a lesson, but every player with whom he plays or sees play is a preceptor to him. Happy is he who, early in his experience, is blessed with the opportunity of contemplating good models.

One of the best attempts to analyze the swing is to be found in Mr. G. W. Beldam's book on "Great Golfers." Let the wrists, he says, take the club-head back first; let the arms follow, then let the body turn from the hips; in the downward swing the body turns immediately, the wrists take the club through, pulling the arms after them, then the body turns again and faces the hole. The cautious golfer will remember, of course, that the turning and swinging is all smooth and continuous not jerky or in sections.

An excellent illustrative maxim in Mr. Beldam's book is the following: "Let the driver swing round the body as if a large hoop were placed round the neck, resting on the shoulders and touching the ball." The imaginary hoop should rest rather above the shoulders, certainly not below them. As between a swing tending to the perpendicular and one tending to the horizontal the former has undoubtedly the greater power. Vardon and Taylor are representative, respectively, of these two styles.

The man who buys a baffle because he can't drive with a cleek has not a cultivated mind. If he carry both—if his set is composed of a lot of preposterous inventions of his own, all of which he uses in turn, he increases the difficulties of the game indeed, but is nevertheless noble in not accepting defeat at the hands of any club.

Experiment, so long as the major premise is not lost sight of, is the recreation which may be allowed to the golfer whilst attending to his business. It is a necessary concession to human nature; it is the spoonful of jelly with the Gregory's mixture; it is the working man's half-holiday, and a great many other analogous things. By all means let us have our clubs long or short, heavy or light, upright or flat. The golfer may be trusted in the long-run to give up anything which is too fanciful, although for a time he may spoil his play with a fad. It is harmless to buy clubs from professionals for gold, no better than what are for sale in the shops for four shillings.

The player may experiment about his swing, his grip, his stance. It is only when he begins asking his caddy's advice that he is getting on dangerous ground. A professional can play. It does not follow that he can teach others. He can comfortably assimilate foods and drinks (more particularly the latter) which would prostrate those he carries for on a bed of sickness. Is he therefore an authority on dietetics? But being constantly asked for advice, the professional has a few stock prescriptions which he gives recklessly, doing more harm than good. So anxious is the golfer to learn without plodding that he uses these eagerly. The truth is, your caddy is a good judge of distance and direction. He can advise well what club to take, but as to how to use it, he may show, but ought not to be

asked to advise. For instance, the player is persistently driving to the right or to the left of the line he wishes to follow. Let him correct his stand, but let him do so accepting the fact that he is standing wrong because his eye is at fault. Let him try to see straight. He ought to come away from his ball, and take up his position afresh with careful reference to his intended direction. But the usual thing is to accept the caddy's dictum (stand 'more behind' or stand 'more in front') blindly, and, without looking up, to scuffle about with the feet. When told, 'That will do,' the player either misses, being stiff and twisted; or—what is more common—he scuffles back to where he was at first, like a sitting hen moved from her eggs, and drives off the line. Having done this latter a dozen times, it seems that the position the caddy advises must be the solution of the difficulty. He, who has been driving persistently to the right, has got into the position shown in diagram No. 1; in

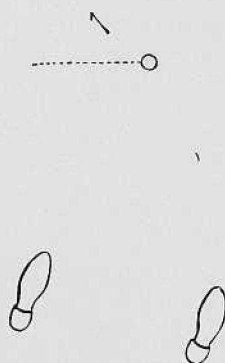


FIG. 1.

other words, his left foot has got nearer the ball than the right, which it has a strong natural inclination to do, and the tendency is to drive in the direction of the arrow, and not of the dots. What ought really to be done is that the player stand up naturally and aim carefully. The result of applying a correction such as 'stand behind' will not make the ball

go straight until the awkward position of diagram No. 2 is reached.

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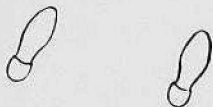


FIG. 2.

It may seem that if the advice, instead of being, as it always is, 'Stand more behind,' were 'Change the position of one of your feet,' the result would not be to produce the style of Fig. 2. But this would alter the player's distance from the ball, and, instead of being the beginning of a cycle of fatal and deceptive good driving, would inaugurate a round of tops, heels, or pulls, to the immediate discredit of the caddy. If I wished to be cynical, I should say, therefore, 'Change one foot' is the better advice. But no! the proper thing to do is to try again. Anything else is absurd. Were a caddy to say, 'You would drive better with my arms,' or were he to offer the loan of any other limb, the nonsense would be evident. Yet the absurdity of using his eyes does not seem apparent. The player allows himself to be put in position like a lay figure. Even suppose he understands the orders, and does pose as the caddy intends, a lay figure cannot hit a ball. One man's mind cannot work another man's body.

The following is a specimen of what may be expected if a player hopes to drive by taking advice instead of aiming at the ball with his own eyes.

Player (1st shot).—'Why did I heel that?'

Caddy.—'Drawing in your arms.'

Player (2d shot).—'Why did I pull that?'

Caddy.—'Drawing in your arms.'

Player (heeling again).—'There! I did not draw in my arms that time.'

Caddy.—'No, sir, ye cut it.'

Player (4th shot).—'There's that con-founded heel again.'

Caddy.—'Ye didna cut it. Ye hit it clean enough that time; but ye were stanin' that way.'

Player (examining his club face after a vicious top).—'Right off the heel too. What on earth is the meaning of it?'

Caddy.—'Ye're fallin' in on the ball.'

Player (6th shot).—'Another top.'

Caddy.—'Ay, ye fell right back.'

Player.—'Oh, hang it! with so many things to be thought of all at once, steady play is almost impossible.'

Having heard all that passed I here remark with a smile—meaning sardonic and oracular—'Not almost, but quite impossible.'

Another error, nearly as bad as to take advice blindly, is for a player, when standing wrongly, to try to pull or push the ball according to the correction for direction desired. Let him rather correct his stance. Faults covered by faults do not cancel each other. The second fault only gives the ball an additional chance of escape from the way it should go. Far the wisest course is to apply a direct remedy. The player whose driving is feeble should hit harder,* unless it is because he is nipping, or not hitting off the middle of the club, in which cases he ought not to nip, or should aim for

* Rather dangerous advice. Most players hit quite hard enough, but many do not get the power applied at the right moment. The feeble driver will usually be found wasting his force too soon or, too late, or dividing his energy so that wrists work against each other or the arms against the body. In such cases he will not mend matters by hitting harder. He must ascertain how his power is being wasted, and one of the best ways of doing this is to try a short swing and take it more easily. Hard hitting is a luxury for experts or anyone at the top of his form, but is almost invariably followed by a break-down.

the centre of the head. It must be admitted, however, that it is much easier, for the moment, to apply indirect corrections, and few indeed are the formed golfers on whose style the cicatrices of early patchings are not visible. Some of these are almost harmless; but others may cripple the player permanently, although at the time, like new brooms, they sweep away the ball clean. For instance, there is a class of stereotyped faults whose origin is traceable to a miserable time when every ball was hopelessly heeled. If the wretched man (oh, how despondent he was then!) had only attributed his misery to the true cause—namely, that he was heeling—the fault would have corrected itself. But he found a royal road to the middle of his club. You see the former victims of heeling either standing nine feet from their ball and taking a header at it, or so crouching on their haunches that you are astonished, when the stroke is made, to find player and ball are not both left seated. If you see a golfer draw his club so slowly back that ten is easily counted before it begins to return, as a tyro he has been one of those who fervently wished that balls had no top. Again, there are men who face the east when they mean to go north.* The sole ambi-

tion of these has been to drive a very long ball. They are victims to the truth that a ball so struck will sometimes go further north than one aimed to that part of the compass. But what does it profit when it as often goes east or west? Such fill men's gardens with golf-balls, and lose many more in the waves of the sea.

Do I maintain, then, the reader may ask, that every one ought to have the same style? By no means; on the contrary, for you or me to model ourselves on a champion is about as profitless as to copy out *Hamlet* in the hope of becoming Shakespeare. If we have a neat style, so be it; and if we began before our hair was grey or gone, it probably so is. But for a fat man to model himself on a swank youth is frivolous. We cannot ignore our deformities. Our shoulders are heavy, our fore-arm puny; it is useless to rebel. A very easy long swing is impossible with such a configuration. We may play well—beat the swank youth very likely,—but only if we are content with a stiff style. Are we lank and loose-limbed?—So will our driving be, if left to develop naturally.

(To be continued.)

* I cannot but think that Sir Walter, on cross-examination would have to admit that it is not only merely lawful but almost imperative to face the east if one would go north. To do so, is it not merely to stand at right angles to the line of flight,—always considered orthodox in

any tee-shot? Sir Walter is thinking of those who play for a pull; your pullers, wishing to sail north commonly fetch a compass east by south; in other words they face well towards the right, placing the ball nearer the right foot.

