

The perfect swing is all in my head

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Mark Burke and Tom Monaghan are golf teachers who run a company called the Next Golf Adventure. They work in Vancouver, where they try to help befuddled golfers improve, and they do the same on the resort courses where they play host to small groups. They were recently in Toronto, where they fell into a discussion at dinner with Laird White, an instructor at the Eagles Nest Golf Club.

"We were wondering why most golfers don't seem to improve," Burke said soon after their conversation.

Golfers' handicaps remain stagnant, despite improvements in equipment, course conditions and advances in the science of the swing. According to the National Golf Foundation data from 2005, the average handicap index for men has remained about 15 and for women about 23 for decades. The NGF, based in Jupiter, Fla., is the primary research and consulting organization for the industry.

Burke, Monaghan and White are excellent teachers who study the game closely. But none of the threesome were able to come up with a specific reason or reasons why most golfers don't improve, no matter how much instruction they take or how much they practise. But White did offer an interesting idea in a later discussion.

"The 45-minute lesson or a package of five lessons doesn't work," White said of the industry standards. "I'm part of that, too. I book those lessons."

White's view makes sense, but maybe there's more to it.

Bill Madonna, for one, refuses to take on students for less than at least a day that includes on-course instruction. Ideally, he'd like to work with a student for at least six months.

I recently spent a morning with Madonna, a Golf Magazine top-100 teacher and PGA master teaching professional, at the Grand Niagara course in Niagara Falls, Ont. Madonna's academy is in Orlando, but he's been teaching there this summer and will continue through this month.

Madonna faced a formidable task.

My handicap has gone from three to nine in the past 10 years. I've developed a regrip and a hitch in my backswing, followed by a few loops to reroute the path of my club back to impact and a bewildering tendency to collapse my left side through the ball. I turn a 10-degree driver into an 18-degree 5-wood as I deloft the clubhead and scoop the ball at impact. I turn a 5-iron into an 8-iron.

Under a hot sun, Madonna settled into his work with me.

He noticed I was lined up so far to the right that I had no choice but to reroute the club to get back to the ball properly.

Madonna introduced me to his CHEF system of alignment: Club behind the ball first, head over it, then eyes to the target and, finally, shift the feet into position. He also showed me, on video, that I stopped moving my left side through the ball. I could only flip my hands at the ball, thereby adding lofting the club.

I'd seen this before, when a smart young techie named Matt Bryce in Toronto took me through the MATT system: motion analysis by TaylorMade. And the late Ben Kern, then the head professional at the National Golf Club in Woodbridge, Ont., had pointed out my collapsed side. Norm Moote, a disciple of the late and great George Knudson, worked with me to move my body correctly back from the ball and through impact to the finish. Mark Evershed tried to get me into a better position at impact through emphasizing a flat left wrist at the ball.

I've worked hard on Madonna's suggestions during the few weeks since I saw him. However, I've been unable to correct my mistakes. My body won't do what I want it to do. It's not as if I haven't tried, and I intend to continue trying. Madonna believes that more extension through the ball is the key to my attaining proper impact position. Knudson felt that way and so does Moote. I believe they're right.

Still, I can do that in my practice swing, but my failure to do it in my real swing raises a fundamental question: Why is it so difficult to make changes in one's real swing? Is a golfer's swing like a signature, all but immutable?

The difficulty lies not only with amateurs, but with golfers right up to the very best. Major champions such as Seve Ballesteros and Ian Baker-Finch lost their swings to the extent they had to withdraw from competitive golf. Craig Perks, the 2002 Players Championship winner, for some reason tried to improve his swing after the tournament. He's had nothing but trouble since and is thinking of leaving the game. Bruce Lietzke, the 1978 and 1982 Canadian Open winner, meanwhile, has never tried to change his swing. He rarely practises, and he said more golfers than anybody wants to believe have lost their games while trying to retool their swings.

Still, most every golfer believes improvement is possible. Golf magazines know this, which is why instruction dominates their covers and fills their pages. I have at hand the Canadian magazine ScoreGolf from June, dubbed Special Instruction Issue. Next to it, glaring at me as if to scold, is the April-May of 1981 issue, which I edited. The cover tells the reader that inside is advice on curing five nasty habits.

Then there's the current issue of Golf Magazine, featuring the No Backswing Swing. Jim Suttie and his associate T.J. Tomasi describe their research that shows a golfer can eliminate a vast number of errors by starting the swing at the top, thereby resembling a baseball batter at address more than a golfer.

Golf Digest, meanwhile, has been advocating the hot stack and tilt method, as taught by Andy Plummer and Mike Bennett. Mike Weir switched to stack and tilt late last fall, in the interests of more consistency and lesser chance of injury. The idea is to stay centred over the ball and not to shift weight during the backswing.

I've written about and tried the no-backswing swing. I've stacked and tilted, having written the first piece in a major magazine on the method. That was in the April 20, 2007, issue of Golf World. I'm promiscuous when it comes to trying different approaches. Plummer and Bennett believe golfers should improve immediately if they're advised to make the proper corrections. That's not been the case with me, no matter what I try, or, I daresay, with the majority of golfers

But I like to practise and to field-test. Did I mention that I've written instruction books with Knudson and also with Nick Price and David Leadbetter? Still, my problems remain. Johnny Miller once said that a good player takes loft off a club at impact while a lesser player adds loft. It hurt to read that. It hurts to remember it now.

I've had endless instruction to try to attain a valid impact position. Tom Watson once told me that impact is all that matters, and I believed him. But confusion reigns. Leadbetter examined my swing a few years ago and said, "With the shape of your swing, I wouldn't try to do anything but fade the ball." Not long after that, I joined Chuck Cook for a game. Cook, the late Payne Stewart's swing coach, said nothing about my swing until we reached the 14th hole at the National, Canada's

ultimate examination of one's game.

"You know, I've been watching the shape of your swing," Cook said, "and if I were you, I wouldn't try to do anything but hook the ball." Each top teacher offered me opposite advice.

And so it goes, a steady stream of advice. I've already informed my family of my epitaph: "Finally, no more swing thoughts."

For now, though, I think of my instructors and their instructions. Patti McGowan, then a Leadbetter instructor, advised me during a two-day clinic to hoist a hefty medicine ball and turn my chest to the right before releasing it toward an imaginary wall, thereby learning the feeling of getting behind the golf ball. Rick Rhoads at the San Francisco Golf Club told me I had an unusual eye-line problem that caused me to toss my head back at the start of my backswing. Jack Nicklaus's teacher, Jack Grout, suggested I get my upper body behind the ball at the top. Moe Norman wanted me to swing long and low through the ball.

Then there was the legendary Bob Toski, the PGA Tour's leading money winner in 1954 and the first inductee into the World Golf Teachers Hall of Fame. He's 80 and can still drive the ball 275 yards. Toski yelled at me one day on the range at the Medalist Golf Club in Hobe Sound, Fla. "Stop thinking," he said. "Just hit the damn ball."

If I could, I would.

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