THANKS FOR THE GAME

The Best of Golf with HENRY COTTON

Sidgwick & Jackson
London
After over fifty years in the game, as a professional, championship winner and teacher, I feel I have earned the right to speak my mind on the game of golf, hoping that my words will reach at least some of the twenty million or so people throughout the world who enjoy, and sometimes suffer from, their involvement in this greatest of all sports.

Many years ago, when I first talked theory with the great Harry Vardon and asked him to write down what he had learned from a lifetime of golfing experience, he said, ‘I have tried on several occasions, but whenever I read through what I have written it all seems so elementary: I can’t help thinking that anyone not knowing that much already should not be playing the game.’ Another old friend, Reginald Whitcombe, youngest of the three famous golfing brothers, took up his pen after winning the 1938 Open Championship and chose as his title, *Golf's No Mystery.* Like Vardon, Reg stressed the fundamental simplicity of the game, even to the point of implying that all the player had to do was pick up the club and thrash the ball by instinct. Two champions with a common theme: simplicity.

And now I too have been in the game for so long, and have learned from a life that has passed all too quickly that to play good golf rests entirely on the ability to find the back of the ball with the club head square. Much is written and talked about the complexities and subtleties of this or that technique. Great importance is placed on the need for a classical swing or on playing ‘square to square’. Students everywhere seem to agonize over the finer points of the swing, or the position of the feet, or whether the head is quite still. All this emphasis on method: no mention of simply finding the ball – which is a development of a skill we all have from the day we are born. Small wonder that so many of today’s club golfers
There never was a more ambitious golfer than Cotton, nor one more absorbed in all the manifold ways of golf as a profession. He devoted himself to the cause of technical perfection and success with an intensity that even Hogan hardly surpassed.

PAT WARD-THOMAS

are tense and frustrated, worrying about details of method instead of simply getting out there on the course and enjoying this marvellous game, playing more by instinct than by theory.

My writing, my teaching, indeed the aim of this book, is to help people discover the joy in playing golf well. I love the game. It has given me a wonderful life, and I enjoy nothing better than to see others getting the same fun and excitement out of it. My beliefs and my methods have at times been considered antiquated, particularly by power-players and disciples of the so-called ‘modern method’, but I am happy to let results speak for themselves. While pupils of the modern school often work away endlessly because they are seeking one method only, with little or no improvement to reward them, my own pupils are relaxed, confident and see their game improving from the moment they start. ‘Square to square’ is fine for the power players who hit the ball so far they are in danger of hitting it out of play. Their need is to guide the ball so they push the shot rather than whip it. But how many golfers are power players? Very few. The vast majority, of course, need extra length. For them, better golf – and more enjoyable golf – comes from hitting the ball more consistently.

I have seen champions come and go like the short-lived daffodils and bluebells. Wine, women and song, and various other extravagances, have helped some on their way out of the headlines but for most the decline has been due simply to a lack of understanding of how to protect their talents from the ravages of time. Just a few, the truly great players, endure. They know their game, have good physiques, strong nerves, self control, a method they can rely on – and the sense to realize that the body changes with every tick of the clock. Many players alas believe that the technique they used in their ‘finest hours’ will be the key to success forever, and even when they lose form they reach back into the past, studying films of themselves in a vain hope of recapturing something which has gone. It cannot work, it has gone for ever. To be a lasting success a player must adapt his play to his changing body, using his years of experience and his knowledge of his own game to maximize his strengths. The ‘elder statesmen’ of golf today can still play a fine round, but it is not the game they played in their mid-twenties. It applies to every sport!

For years I have suffered the nonsense inflicted on a gullible golfing world by ‘experts’ – both acknowledged and self-appointed. I always expected that my teacher should at least be able to show me what I wanted, and needed, to learn. I felt that unless an instructor was capable of
demonstrating precisely and impressively the shot he was asking me to make, then his advice was at best suspect. How I bristled when I heard, as we all did too often fifteen to twenty years ago, that ‘You must have a square-to-square action’. Instructors can do untold harm drumming this maxim into entire classes. For what happens? One pupil in a hundred will play better golf. For the rest the results will range from frustration at best to slipped discs and strained muscles at worst. It is rarely mentioned now! No one method is right for every player. No single way of swinging a club can possibly work for the tall, the short, the fat, the thin, the weak and the powerful. All that counts in golf is to find the back of the ball squarely with the middle of the club face. Any style or method will do, and if it enables a player to strike the ball hard, square and consistently then it is a good swing, no matter how it may depart from the ‘classical’.

Even some of our greatest professionals seem to me to be way off the mark in their theories. It makes me shudder to hear certain players declaring, ‘Power is supplied by your legs, not by your hands.’ How can they say this when they are quite capable of hitting a ball 200 yards while standing on one leg? While Bob Toski, one of America’s best and most popular teachers, demonstrates a 200-yard drive while sitting on a chair.

Sixty years ago I remember that outstanding instructor Seymour Dunn proclaiming that golf was 85 per cent hands and only 15 per cent body. Nothing in a lifetime’s experience in golf has happened to make me think otherwise. How right he has been! The body action used by many players today – all knees and stomach – came into prominence when the strong men of the past attacked the large ball which, in those days, tended to balloon when struck really hard. This action is a means of forcing the ball to follow a low trajectory. It is a magnified push shot requiring more power than the ordinary player has at his command. It is still useful to the big power-men, but has no place in the repertoire of the average golfer.

When I started playing golf seriously I was not a big hitter and so my golf thinking and my methods were directed at ways of achieving greater length and consistently good length. Nothing has ever caused me to waver from my belief that this comes from the ability to find the back of the ball with the club face every time and from a fast whipping action of the club head at impact. Finding the ball requires only that a player develop a talent he already has. There is no magic involved. Few people have any difficulty in driving a nail squarely into a piece of wood. Why then make a complicated thing of hitting a ball? The golf club is admittedly a rather more unwieldy weapon than a hammer but the instinct is there and simply needs training. Even infants hit square when they slap at a ball with the open palm. As for that club head speed, all depends on the hands – strengthened individually using the tyre-practice described in this book and trained to work in complete harmony. Many of the old champions stressed that ‘when your legs go, you are through winning’; Sam Snead during his 1979 trip to Australia announced that he was almost through with competing in the ‘big leagues’ for his legs had gone, and of course strong legs are essential for control. Accept this as a fact, learn to use the hands properly, and like me you will enjoy a lifetime of pleasure-golf.

Henry Cotton
Penina 1980
The Buffer Action

When the arms pull down fast and the ball is struck, there is a shock, a ‘buffer action’ as P. A. Vaile, a golf student of the Bobby Jones era, put it. The effect can be seen in the way the loose sleeve of my cardigan has been thrown towards the target with the shock of the impact. There is no way a ball can be firmly struck without absorbing an impact shock; a sloppy sweep through the ball gives very limited results.
Complete scores on the tournament play of individuals, for the three days, including two rounds in the finals, follow. Asterisks designate amateurs:

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When I went to America for the first time in November 1928, I noticed that in general the top players were all hitting the ball from inside to out with a draw. The large ball in use there had to be hit this way and the dedicated American professionals, many of them much bigger fellows than myself, hit the ball quite a lot further and only used the balls which just went through a 1.68-inch gauge which every pro carried in his bag, i.e., the minimum legal size.

At that time I was, in fact, hitting the ball with a slice which I had developed through practising in our narrow family garage in London. That was the only place I had to play in as I could not get on a golf course as often as I liked. I practised for hours every night, hitting balls from a mat into a net, but the garage, being narrow, made my swing very upright. Whilst in America I realized I had to alter my angle of backswing. Although I finished third in my first U.S. tournament, the Sacramento Open, and played quite well with my hickory shafts against the rest of the field using the new steel ones, I lost really through lack of experience and because I could not handle the larger ball with my slice-prone upright swing in rough weather.

So I set out to learn how to hit the ball from
the inside, and this was a movement that I practised all the time, trying to get my hands down somewhere near my right leg with my right shoulder under and the attack well inside the line, practising the pull down endlessly without a ball, just to make sure I kept on the inside. Then if I had the club face a little more turned in, or even square, I had no difficulty getting the ball to fly with a draw. Of course, I was falling between two stools for quite a while, but by the time I started home from Florida in early April 1929 I really had quite a nice draw going which I think surprised people, as I was hitting a much longer ball off the tee.
Sandwich 1934

I have a special affection for this picture, taken near the first tee at Sandwich in 1934 after I had opened with scores of 67 and 65, which is still a record for the first two rounds of any major Open. I was talking to old J. H. Taylor (nearest to me), Jimmy Braid (in the middle), and Ted Ray. They were three of my golfing heroes and here was I on the brink of making history – the first home player, I hoped, to collect the big gold medal since 1923.

I am proud to say that although I was only twenty-seven I had played quite regularly with these great masters. We liked one another and I think they appreciated my enthusiasm and ability. They were founders of the P.G.A. and I was a newcomer, an ex-college boy turned professional, the first outsider, as it were, in British professional golf. At the age of sixteen I became an assistant to George Oke at Fulwell Golf Club, qualified as a member of the P.G.A. two years later, and have been a member ever since.

After the prize-giving at Sandwich I took the cup to the now defunct Guildford Hotel, right on the sea front, to show it to Harry Vardon who had come to Sandwich to see the play but was taken ill and had to stay in bed. I went to Harry's room and gave him the cup to hold again. He had won it six times, and with the trophy in his arms, tears began to run down his face. I sobbed unashamedly too! A moment to remember.
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I think the accent should be put on *striking* from the moment you start the game, and that to project a ball there is an impact and you must realize that there is a shock coming. In other words, the ball is bounced off the club face. It is not pushed along.

When I first began to take a serious interest in golf, the great international hero was amateur Bobby Jones. Jones was then the pure amateur. In those days the amateur atmosphere was the one. Golf was an amateur game and pros were caddies, they were not allowed in the clubhouse—that was the attitude then. The amateur was glamorous; he was the unpaid player with a wonderful free swing, a picture action, meriting the word glorious. The press stories about the Amateur Championship were equivalent to what we get today for the Open Championship.

When I studied Bobby Jones's swing I found that his hand action was particularly slack and loose. He did not deliver the club as squarely, or as solidly, as other players of slightly after his era whom I admired, like Byron Nelson, Sam Snead, and Ben Hogan. Jones's attack on the ball was a rather loose-handed one, with a certain amount of club slip in his fingers, and he had very smooth grips on the shafts too, which would encourage the club to slip. Yet, when people asked him about it, he said that there was a buffer action in the swing. This buffer action is what we today call the impact. He was aware that there was a shock at impact. He realized that the ball was 'shocked' off the club and that he had to absorb it. He wrote about this, but I do not think that many understood what he meant. I think that what he meant was that he was hitting the ball as though he was driving it under a suspended carpet hanging on a line. The bottom side of the carpet was the height of his hands; he would hit the ball and the carpet would check his hands, and the club head would spring through below it. In other words, there was in his swing a sort of left hand against the right, a resistance to the right hand somewhere, and I think people overlooked that, and still do.

Now, when a lot of players today write on the game, they ignore it too. They have been hitting balls for so many years that they do not realize...
that there is a point in the swing when you have to absorb the shock, to take it in your hands. Forty years ago Jones saw this and wrote about it, and this also applies to putting. This is worth remembering.

Some modern thinking has it that the left hand continues unimpeded through impact though there is a feeling of taking the impact shock on the hands. This is why learning with the tyre, where the impact is some 200 times more fierce than that of a golf ball, you can learn to anticipate the big impact, so toning up your muscles to absorb a golf shot almost without realizing it has happened.

One interesting point. I think that golf balls are now being made harder with higher compression and a more solid feel than they used to have when I was a young player and, in consequence, there is more noise from them at impact than there used to be. I am sure that I would have putted better in my playing years if the ball had given me a sharper impact noise. Now, with the harder golf balls, I putt quite beautifully, maybe partly because I am not putting for my living any more (just for fun, and so I enjoy it more), and now I can 'feel' the length of the putt by the noise of the impact—quite thrilling. ‘Rubbish’ you might say, but, if you want to appreciate how hearing is related to feel, you have only to stuff your ears with cotton wool to see what happens on the green. It feels as if you are putting under water!

Another aspect of feel: try wearing a thick pair of gloves. You have no feel at all for the shot. If you wore a thick glove on your right hand alone you would still have no feel because the right hand, being nearer the club head, should be the ‘feel’ hand, but it will be deadened. Sometimes it will help, however, to wear thick gloves when you are putting, because without feel in the fingers you are putting with your fists and arms and not with your fingers. In other words, you are shoving the ball with your arms and shoulders.

You can have the finest swing in the world and yet not hit good shots. There is no guarantee that a super swing will produce a good shot because a super swing does not guarantee the face coming square to the ball. But you can have a bad swing and the strength to hit squarely with judgment and skill—and be a very successful golfer. Experience has taught me that the primordial thing is to teach a pupil to find the ball, without any specific swing action. Once he can make a contact he can work on a method, hoping that the method will make the contact more mechanical.

Bernard Hunt had a short backswing which he certainly would not have taught, but it was sufficient to make him a ‘golden boy’. He could find the ball.

Arnold Palmer always had a rather fast swing, a personal action, tending to heave at the ball, but in that action was his fabulous gift of delivering a square hit more often than not.

Joe Carr had a frightful slashing, swaying swing, with the right thumb on the side of the shaft, and yet he was one of the best golf players in the world for a period. I feel that when he changed to play more in an accepted classical way, which he did by sheer will power and weeks of incessant practice, he was not really any more successful than he had been with his original instinctive attack on the ball. Even today, when I play with him, I still encourage him to put his right hand underneath to recapture the glory of his free, slashing days.

George Duncan, the 1920 Open champion who believed golf was an instinctive game, was a temperamental player himself. If he got a good start, a 69 was always on. If he started badly then he almost sulked. This was quite inadmissible really, he would not fight back to save a round, he just let it go to 80 or 82! Yet, he knew the game very well and loved it. His was a case of, ‘Don’t do as I do, do as I say.’ He almost hit the ball walking to it—on the move.

What is timing? I timed that one, why can’t I do this all the time? You can when you realize that timing a ball means that the left hand and the right hand harmonize perfectly. That is, the left hand does not stop the right applying its maximum power forwards while it does its maximum backhanded; only pushing when the right hand intends to push and only whipping when the right hand whips; you can’t mix a push with a whip and get anywhere.
Thanks for the game!

[Signature]
When I was quite young one of my greatest idols was Abe Mitchell - a man with a casual yet masterly swing and a totally individual dress sense. His playing outfit usually consisted of a tight fitting tweed jacket, neat plus-fours with immaculate creases down the front, a matching cap, and beautifully polished expensive brown shoes. The very picture of sartorial elegance. The group photograph, taken at Coulsden Court in 1928, shows, left to right, my brother Leslie, myself, Charles Whitcombe, and Abe Mitchell.

He would walk on to the first tee as though dressed for a day’s shooting, pick his hickory-shafted driver out of the bag, have one practice swing. Then he would take the club to the full horizontal position at the top, and with a terrific flash of the hands drive the ball up to 300 yards down the course. He would finish with the club shaft round the body at waist level. Abe did this time after time; it all seemed so simple. He tried to play with the steel shaft but could never play as well with it as with hickory; I think he missed the torsion of the wooden shaft. If a weak spot ever appeared in his game it was usually on the greens because he was highly strung and used to get anxious, especially if kept waiting. But I dreamed of one day having hands and wrists that would enable me to do what he did with the clubhead: swish it through the ball with a piercing whistle. So I tried and tried, and practised day and night until I realized that just swinging a golf club and hitting golf balls wasn’t enough. I was getting better, but too slowly. Abe had been a gardener as a young man and hard manual work had given him tremendously strong arms and hands and a tough yet supple back. I decided then that I too needed a stronger drill.

I had concentrated on playing and practising golf seriously since I was about sixteen and looking back I realized I should have done other
exercises. I ought to have carried on playing football and cricket, and gone on building my body in the gym, and done more running. So I began thinking of what I could do to drive the ball further and develop a faster impact. I finally hit on the idea of swinging in long grass as a way of offering greater resistance to the club head. I used to go to a quiet spot on the golf course and swing away for hours in the deepest rough I could find, using the club head like a scythe. It took some doing, and was extremely hard work, but it worked: I began to win tournaments.

Then golf courses became more manicured. There was less long grass and I couldn’t find enough ‘hay’ to mow. When I had practised for years hitting the ball one handed using each hand in turn, my left hand became so ‘well educated’ that I could use it alone to hit a four-wood ‘off the deck’ almost 200 yards every time. But with the long grass needed for practice becoming more and more difficult to find I had to discover a suitable substitute. Then one day at Temple, near Maidenhead, my home club at the time, I parked my car right behind the professional’s shop and saw an old motor tyre lying abandoned on the ground. Whoever dumped it there had no idea of the contribution he was unwittingly to make to the game of golf! I gave the tyre a good kick to move it out of the way and it suddenly occurred to me that this was the thing to hit with a golf club to strengthen and educate the hands. I popped into my shop, selected an old iron, and set about striking the tyre. It worked so well that I had mixed feelings: I was delighted to have made the discovery, but regretted it had come so late, for by this time I had practically retired from competitive golf.

In 1968 I finally moved to live and work in Penina, Portugal, where two years earlier I had
And so, step by step, going on his rather lonely way, undeterred by criticism and unwavering in hard resolve, Cotton built himself up into a remarkable figure, one which to the man in the street stands for golf in a way that no other in this country has quite done since the days of Harry Vardon

BERNARD DARWIN

completed building the new course. Pupils, and promising amateurs wanting to turn pro, took to the new exercise with enthusiasm and news of its value quickly spread through the golfing world. The ‘tyre drill’ certainly developed strength and flexibility but I also wanted to achieve greater speed through the impact area. So, using a steel golf shaft without a head, but with a grip, I devised a set of exercises involving a fast to-and-fro whipping action inside the tyre. As the headless club could be moved to and fro so much faster than a real club, overall speed of action was improved, but perhaps more important, the pupil could concentrate on taking the full shock of impact on the hands, while maintaining a tight grip on the club, but without slowing down the speed of the club head.

Many players seem to relax the hands at impact because if they grip too tightly they slow the action. But if they hold the club loosely it tends to slip. It is all a question of finding the optimum grip required to keep the club head moving fast while retaining strength enough to avoid mis-hitting if you do fail to make contact with the dead centre of the club face.

The tyre drill is now a ritual for me. A few blows at a time are enough and then it is a matter of recognizing any weak points and working on them – educating the hands to complement each other so that they work in
harmony. Some people will whack the tyre too often or for too long, not realizing how tired they are becoming – and then immediately go out to play a game only to find they are not striking the ball well. Muscles need hard exercise, but they also need a period of rest before being asked to perform at peak. Working out a practice routine to suit your individual game is one of the secrets of success.
Henry Cotton THANKS FOR THE GAME