

Wally Armstrong
P.O. Box 941911
Maitland, FL 32794
407-644-3398
www.oldprobooks.com
www.wallyarmstronggolf.com

Frank M. Martin
730 Popes Valley Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80919
719-598-7448
Fax 719-593-0040
www.frankmmartin.com

The Heart of a Golfer

Timeless Lessons and Truths on Faith, Life and Golf

Wally Armstrong
With Frank Martin

Word count: 61170

Represented by:

Greg Johnson
Alive Communications
7680 Goddard Street, #200
Colorado Springs, CO 80920
719-260-7080
Fax: 260-8223

Contents

Before You Begin

Part I - Fundamentals

1. Keep It Simple
2. Play To Your Strengths
3. Unlearning Old Habits
4. Keep Your Grips Dry
5. Imitate Your Mentor

Part II - The Practice Tee

6. Have A Practice Plan
7. Work On Your Grip
8. Develop A Pre-Shot Routine
9. Find A Good Teacher
10. Practice Good Swing Mechanics
11. Learn The Truths Behind The Principles
12. Trust Your Swing

Part III - Course Management

13. Play The Percentages
14. Stay In The Moment
15. Pick A Target, Then Play The Shot
16. Positive Club Selection
17. Expect Some Bad Shots
18. Strive For Progress, Not Perfection
19. Trust Your Skills, Not Your Instincts
20. Always Carry A Course Journal

Part IV - Mental Agility

21. Play Your Own Game
22. Dealing With Adversity
23. Work With What You Have
24. Play Within Yourself
25. Replay Good Shots In Your Mind
26. Put Bad Shots Behind You

Part V - The Spirit Of The Game

27. Trust Your Caddy
28. Be Courteous To Other Players

- 29. Develop An Attitude of Gratitude
- 30. Keep A Positive Outlook
- 31. Count Every Stroke
- 32. Don't Forget To Have Fun

Part VI - Giving Back To The Game

- 33. Develop A Love For The Game
- 34. Pass On Your Passion
- 35. Mentor Younger Players
- 36. Keep The Game In Perspective

Quotables

Before You Begin

The great golf writer P.G. Wodehouse once said, “Golf, like measles, should be caught young, for if postponed to riper years the results may be serious.” I’m thankful that my heart was infected with the golf germ many years ago.

In one form or another I’ve spent most of my life around the game of games. I started playing and caddying at the age of eight, eventually carrying Gary Player’s bags on tour. In 1968 I began playing and teaching golf professionally, and for twelve years I played on the PGA tour, competing against some of the best ball-strikers in the world, including Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson, and many more. Since then, much of my time has been spent teaching, speaking and writing about golf, as well as conducting training clinics and seminars.

“Those who strive to teach must never cease to learn.”
-- Bill Strausbaugh

You would think that by now a man my age would have grown out of this obsession with chasing a tiny white ball around the fairways, trying to knock it into a small cup, but the truth is, I have a heart for the game today as much as I did the first time I stepped onto a golf course. More, in fact. My appreciation for golf has only grown, and because of it, I’ve been blessed with a wealth of life-changing experiences and relationships through the years.

I think the main reason I’m so fascinated with the game is that I love to learn. And no other sport provides more of an opportunity for growing in knowledge and skill and understanding. I have a passion for learning about golf, and then sharing what I’ve learned with others, whether it’s about the history of the game, stories about the players or fundamentals about the golf swing. I’ve been that way for as long as I can remember, and I don’t suspect that will ever change. I have the heart of a learner and a teacher.

During my graduate work at the University of Florida, I studied under a man named Conrad Rehling, who was a deeply spiritual professor and a nationally acclaimed golf instructor. Under his guidance, I spent a year and a half researching the human mind and how people learn, trying to discover all I could about how the brain processes information. I was fascinated by the topic, and intent on finding new and creative ways to connect with people and help them understand basic concepts.

What I learned during that time is that the most effective way to teach someone, hands down, is through analogies and associations. Some people might call them “word pictures.” That’s why I use a lot of training aids and

Mental comparisons in my clinics, trying always to “show” instead of “tell.” If a student is struggling to produce a circular swing pattern, I’ll put a hula-hoop around their body to help them get the feel of a true circle. If they are having a problem shifting their weight forward during the swing, we’ll put the clubs away and spend some time throwing a football back and forth, helping them sense how the movement should feel. Whatever it takes to divert their attention away from what they’re doing wrong and onto what they need to be doing right.

I do this because it works. People tend to respond to mental images much more quickly than they would a simple word of instruction. And once our mind’s eye can conceive a particular swing thought or motion, the body is more likely to be able to achieve it.

Jesus used this same approach to impact the hearts of the people he taught—using parables and word pictures. He made his teachings simple to understand by relaying them through stories and mental images. And by doing so he gave us great insight into how to best reach people with gospel message and the truths of scripture. God is still reaching out and teaching us through everyday experiences. He often engineers the events and circumstances of our lives in order to shape our hearts and better help us grasp his will.

God understands that the lessons that really stick, the ones that truly shape our thoughts and values, are the ones learned through personal experience and example, trial and error. The hard-knocks school of learning. That’s certainly been the case in my life. Through the years God has used events and people in my career to impact my heart and instill within me some deep and lasting truths about life and faith and myself.

There are times when God taught me more during one afternoon on the golf course than I could have learned through a year of Sunday morning sermons. There’s something about the game that brings out the best and worst in all of us.

I’ve always thought of golf as an intensely spiritual sport—more so than any other on earth. It’s a game that is pure and uncomplicated, almost genius in its simplicity. Someone once said that 18 holes of golf is like a perfect microcosm of life on earth—a series of small decisions, each affecting the next. A few great shots and we feel invincible, on top of the world. Then one miss-hit later, we’re knee deep in the rough, wondering

“For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”

—2 Chronicles 16:9

how we're ever going to recover. It's not uncommon during a three-hour round of golf for a person to experience every imaginable human emotion.

Like life, golf is a game that can never be mastered. A perfect round remains always in sight, yet completely unreachable. And no matter how low we shoot, we can always strive to post 1 stroke lower.

I suppose that's another reason why I love the game so much. Day after day it brings me face to face with myself and my true character. I play to my strengths, but still have to deal with my weaknesses. I step up to a shot I've practiced a hundred thousand times on the range, yet still hit it left of the target. Some days I play well, and other days I completely stink up the course. Yet through it all, I keep coming back, keep stepping up to the tee, keep working on my swing, striving always to play better today than I did yesterday.

The book you hold is my attempt to pass on some of the many lessons I've learned, and that have strengthened my heart, both on and off the course. It's a collection of odds and ends, of stories and anecdotes from my years in golf, each used in some way by God to bring home a truth about life, faith, relationships and my walk with Christ in general. They are but a few of the things I've learned on God's lesson tee. I share them with you not because I have any special insight, or because I have mastered them, but because God has seen fit to share them with me, and now I feel compelled to try and pass them on, just as I would any other bit of wisdom I might learn through my time on the course.

So do me a favor. If you are one of those with a heart for golf, as well as a heart for God, then grab your glove and your clubs and join me on the practice range. Let's see what lessons the Master has in store for us. If we pay close attention, maybe we can both shave a few strokes off our game.

"Perhaps that's why I enjoy golf: it puts in eighteen holes what life puts in eighty years—ups and downs and a few good bounces."

-- Max Lucado

PART ONE
FUNDAMENTALS

*“The fundamental principles of golf break down into:
control, balance and timing. All other things are merely incidentals.”*

Earnest Jones

*“Confidence without ability is impossible to maintain. You can’t feel
confident very long if you don’t know how to hit the ball.”*

Doug Ford

“The most successful way to play golf is the easiest way.”

Harry Vardon

1

Keep It Simple

If there is one common problem I see among amateur golfers and high-handicappers it is that they tend to overanalyze the game. Every aspect of it. They've read books and watched videos describing the "perfect" swing, and they want desperately to achieve it. In their mind is a detailed mental checklist of every movement that has to happen in order to hit the ideal shot, and they go through that list before and during each swing. Without exception, it does little more than send them away confused and frustrated.

I see so many players approach the first tee with a sense of fear and anxiety. You can see it in their eyes. They look out over this vast array of green, lush grass in front of them, with traps and trees lining the fairway, and then their eyes focus on a tiny flag in the distance, barely visible to the naked eye. There are 350 yards between them and the hole, and they've got four shots to get it into the cup. The mere thought of it seems overwhelming to a frustrated golfer.

Almost without fail the first-hole jitters get to them. They swing too hard and slice it into the woods. Or they duff the club into the ground and send the ball trickling toward the cart path. Their second shot isn't much better, and once again they've set themselves up for another round of high scores and shattered expectations.

The truth is, golf doesn't have to be that complicated. At its core the game is really rather simple. You progress the ball forward with each shot until you get to the green, then softly stroke it into the hole. It takes years of work and practice to shoot par, and no one expects the average golfer to do so. Bogie golf is a fine target for most weekend players, and can easily be attained when we relax and keep it simple.

You begin with the swing. Forget trying to find the "perfect" swing and work instead on creating the simplest one. Swing with ease and freedom. Practice letting the club flow in a simple, circular pattern around your body. The goal is to swing the clubhead in a circular arch around the body, letting the ball get caught in its path along the way. Don't try—or expect—to hit the ball 300 yards down the middle on your drive. Just focus on a smooth and complete swing, sending the ball toward the green with

"I could harp on this subject for a long time, because I am thoroughly convinced that thousands of golfers today have had their game hopelessly ruined by neglecting simple first principles."

-- Andra Kirkaldy

each shot. And don't worry about carrying the green in regulation. Most golfers are doing well to be within 30 yards of the target after 2 strokes, and there's no reason even an average golfer shouldn't be able to get up and down in 3 from there.

After a lesson with a student, I always encourage them to take the principles we've been working on to the first tee and commit to them throughout the round. Most students find that if they'll just relax and take the game one shot at a time, what seemed complicated and overwhelming to them is actually not that difficult.

"Don't hit the ball. Swing at it. Develop a nice, graceful swing."

-- Babe Didrikson Zaharias

Creating a Simple Swing Pattern

Arnie Frankel once wrote the following while talking about the swing motion:

"The ideal golf swing is a very relaxed motion. If you can just be relaxed, letting the clubhead go back and forward, on a plane like a pendulum, you will have the best effective swing.

"When I am hitting the ball at my best I feel like I'm gripping the club about as loosely as I possibly can. The club almost falls out of my hands. In practicing remember to practice small swings until the feeling comes back. Small swings until you can feel the clubhead swinging. Little to big is the way to go."

Remember, when it comes to the golf swing, simple is always better.

Sharing Your Faith

Most of us have been given a project at work or school that seemed daunting. We wondered if and how we could ever get it accomplished. But as we began, taking it one step at a time, the task seemed to get easier by the day. We went from feeling overwhelmed to confident. And once finished we felt a sense of pride and accomplishment, ready to take on even a larger project.

That same principle holds true when trying to share our faith with others. To a new follower of Christ, or even an inexperienced veteran believer, the mere thought of it can cause our palms to sweat and our throat to constrict.

The first time I was asked to share my

"God wants to use you. He has a place for you, a part for you to play, a seed for you to sow, a call for you to answer... Leading people to Christ is the most joyful experience I know of next to having met him myself."

-- Greg Laurie

testimony about my relationship with Christ I was terrified. Conrad Rehling, my professor and golf coach from the University of Florida, was a godly man and committed follower of Christ. And when he discovered that I was a believer he asked me one day to go with him to a small country school outside of Gainesville, Florida, where he had been asked to speak. I had not been a follower of Christ for very long, and had little knowledge of the Bible, but Conrad somehow talked me into getting up and telling my story. “Simply open your mouth and God will give you the words to say,” he told me. Then he shared with me from the book of Exodus. Moses was being commissioned by God to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, and he was afraid he wouldn’t know what to say. God told him, *“I will help you speak and tell you what to say.”*

As I stood in front of those 200 kids, kindergarten through twelfth grade, I was petrified, but I did what Conrad suggested. I opened my mouth, and God took over. The words flowed. I simply told them how I had come to Christ and what He had done in my life. Ten minutes later I walked off the stage, not even remembering much of what I had said.

It was an invaluable experience for me, because it taught me that sharing your faith about Jesus doesn’t have to be that hard or complicated. The best and most effective approach is to keep it straight and simple, just like the golf swing.

When trying to lead people to Christ, telling your personal story is always the best place to start. It’s real and authentic, because it comes from the heart. And, most importantly, it’s something almost everyone can relate to. When someone doesn’t know Christ, they’re seldom interested in hearing about the “Godhead Trinity” or “end-times theology.” What they want to know is why someone like you would choose to follow Jesus, and make him Lord and Master of your life. They want to know what Jesus offered that you could find nowhere else on earth.

And when you feel overwhelmed, just remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:19-20: “do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

If you want to touch someone’s heart, keep it simple. Tell them your story. Tell them about Jesus. It’s not as frightening as you might think.

2

Play to Your Strengths

I learned early in my career that my strength in golf was my short game. I was a great putter, and could get it close to the pin from about anywhere. Guys on the tour used to say that I could get the ball up and down from a trashcan. I really struggled with my driver and long irons, and because of it I was consistently scrambling to get it close, but my short game always seemed to save me.

The main reason for this was my crazy swing. Ken Venturi, one of the television commentators, used to call me the “dancer.” I had a bad habit of sliding my right foot back behind my left heel during the downswing. At the top of the swing my club shaft was pointed fifty yards left of the hole, and to compensate I had to slide my hips forward during the downswing to get the club squarely on the ball. My swing was atrocious, and caused me to miss a lot of greens.

I remember playing against Tom Watson during the final round of the 77th Western Open in Chicago. Tom was as smooth as ever, but I was all over the place. I couldn’t hit a green if my life depended on it. I even sent one shot into the water and was forced to drop, but still I was able to get up and down for a par. I proved to be quite an escape artist that day. I finished 1 stroke behind Tom to take second in the tournament. It was a great feeling, but I went away wishing I could have done better—that my long game would cooperate.

“A good putter is a match for anyone. A bad putter is a match for no one.”

– Harvey Penick

A professional I admired came up to me some time later and said, “Wally, you’ve got a million dollar short game. If you could ever change your swing and hit more greens per round you’d be able to win a lot of tournaments.”

When I heard that comment it lit a fire in my heart, and I began putting all of my efforts into fixing my swing, breaking down my flaws and working to overcome them. I spent hours on the driving range hitting ball after ball, focusing on keeping my clubhead straight at the top, and planting my right foot firmly. After a while I could see a difference. My long irons started coming around, and I was hitting more fairways off the tee. So I continued working at it, month after month, teacher after teacher.

But in my exuberance to get better I had neglected my short game, and suddenly I couldn’t get it near the hole as often. My chipping and

putting began to suffer. I was hitting more greens in regulation, and my scores should have improved, but they didn't. I was only scoring worse. My game began to deteriorate and only got worse over the next few years until I eventually had lost my place on the tour.

In my efforts to improve my weaknesses, I had neglected my strengths. I had forgotten that it was my short game that got me onto the tour, and I should never have taken it for granted. A player should always strive to improve the weak parts of their game, but never at the expense of their strengths.

That was a hard-won lesson for me—one that I will never forget.

Chasing A Tiger

Tiger Woods once tied Davis Love III at the Las Vegas Invitational and the tournament went into a one-hole playoff. Love had the honors, and he nailed his drive 310 yards down the fairway—a great length for most players, but easily beatable for Tiger. He surprised everyone by choosing to hit with a 3-wood off the tee. Just a few minutes earlier he had played the same hole with a 2-iron, and his tee shot carried right down the center about 325 yards—an easy pitch into the hole.

He surveyed the shot, and then stroked it dead center, coming to rest just shy of Love's ball. This allowed Tiger to hit first, and he nailed a perfect 9-iron to within 18-feet of the cup. Love shot next, pulling an 8-iron into the back left bunker. Suddenly Tiger was in the A-position. Love made a good attempt out of the sand, giving himself a 6-foot putt for a par, but he missed and came away with a bogey. Tiger 2-putted for par and won the tournament.

When asked about his club selection later, he explained that he always likes to be hitting into the green first in match play, because if he gets a good shot it puts tremendous pressure on the other player. He not only knew how to play to his own strengths, but how to put the opponent into a position of weakness.

That's just one of the reasons why Tiger is the man to beat on tour.

Know Your Spiritual Strengths

Over the last twenty years I've developed a love for spending time alone with God, reading his word and writing out my thoughts, journaling my time in prayer and meditation.

I'm an early riser, usually waking up before 5:00 a.m., so I've made a habit of giving this first part of my

"Know your strengths and take advantage of them."

--Greg Norman

morning to the Lord. I read from Scripture, as well as a few devotional books I've run across. My favorite is *My Utmost For His Highest*, by Oswald Chambers. I'll read a short selection each day, meditate on his thoughts, and then spend some time writing out a few of my own. I've been through it five times, yet never fail to glean new insight and understanding from this amazing Christian classic.

Several times a week I run a few miles to stay in shape—physically and spiritually—and I often use that time for prayer as well.

I would be lost without this facet of my Christian walk. I consider quiet times alone with the Lord to be my spiritual strength. It has proven to be the most effective and enjoyable aspect of my walk with God, and by remaining true to that commitment—by playing to my spiritual strength—I've found that it strengthens other parts of my life as well.

My advice to other believers is to find their spiritual strength and build on it. Whatever gift God has given you, use it, perfect it, work on it regularly and consistently. Allow God to mold you in your purpose in his earthly Kingdom.

Don't Neglect Quiet Times

One last thought: Whatever your spiritual strength—whether it is teaching, evangelism, writing, giving, encouragement, leadership, prayer, or organization—don't forget to spend time alone with the Lord. Otherwise you'll feel as frustrated as a golfer who can consistently drive the ball 350 yards down the middle, yet ends up 3-putting every hole. Some parts of your game you just can't do without!

"There's no substitute for a daily and weekly walk with God."

-- Billy Graham

3

Unlearning Old Habits

When Dr. Tom came to me looking for help with his swing, he was as frustrated as any golfer I'd ever seen. He'd been to teachers all over the U.S., trying desperately to improve the quality of his game, yet he couldn't seem to get past the wall he'd hit in his scoring. Tom was a psychiatrist who had done numerous studies on the left and right hemispheres of the brain. His specialty was in analyzing how people learned, which made it that much more frustrating to him that he couldn't seem to figure out what he was doing wrong.

After our first lesson together, I could see Tom's dilemma. He had a hundred swing thoughts going through his mind every time he stood over the ball—keep your head down, left arm straight, eye on the ball, swing inside out, club on plane, pronate, supinate, take it back inside, shift your weight. It's a wonder he ever made contact. He was struggling with dozens of incorrect swing habits, each brought on by a preconceived notion about the proper swing pattern.

While visiting with Tom I had found out that he had played baseball as a boy, so the first thing I did was to put away his club and hand him a baseball bat. I had him hit a golf ball off of a makeshift T-ball stick on the driving range. I let him get the feel of how natural the swing can be when you don't think about it. It was amazing how long and straight he could hit a golf ball with a bat in his hand. Then I handed him back his club and had him swing it just like a bat. He continued this motion, slowly moving the club down further, first at waist level, then even with his knees, and eventually at ground level. We teed one up and had him hit it, and immediately he was able to see and feel the difference. For the first time he felt truly natural over the ball. He told me later that his game literally improved overnight.

"I am certain that there can be no freedom, and no natural swing in hitting the golf ball if the mind is occupied by instructing the body."

-- J.H. Taylor

The key to learning in golf is that you must first see and feel what you want the club to do, and then trust that motion in order for permanent change to occur.

Making Things Too Complicated

Like Tom, most golfers tend to make the swing much more complicated than it needs to be. We've heard and read so many tips on

improving our game that our brains are on overload every time we pick up a club. What I did for Tom was to help remove those thoughts and free him up to “feel” his way through the swing instead of “thinking” his way through it. I encouraged him start over, took him back to his days as a young boy, swinging the club for the very first time. Only then was he finally able to see the power and simplicity of a pure and uninhibited golf swing.

That’s one of the reasons that I enjoy working with kids so much. They come to the lesson tee with no pre-conceived ideas about how to play the game. There are no bad swing habits to break, no mental blocks to overcome, just a blank slate, willing and able to learn.

Jesus loved teaching children for the same reason. He saw their childhood innocence as a trait to be admired, as a building block for true, Christ-like character. In fact, he told his disciples, *“unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.”* In effect, He was telling them, “If you want to experience your true purpose for life, you have to start by unlearning old habits, by laying aside your misconceptions about God and trusting instead in His grace and forgiveness.”

Learning Like A Child

Nowhere in my life have I seen this concept more true than in the case of my father. Dad was a self made man who was strong, proud and boisterous—a typical alcoholic. He was a stern disciplinarian, and I longed to be close to him, but he continued to push me away.

When I gave my life to Christ, the chasm between Dad and I grew even deeper and wider. Shortly after my decision, Mom gave her heart to Christ, and Dad became even more defiant and angry than ever, calling us both weak and gullible. He couldn’t accept our newfound faith in God. Mom and I tried to share our faith with him, but he had no interest in listening.

Once, several years before Dad died, he was in the hospital preparing for serious surgery. The doctors said we had a 50/50 chance of losing him. The thought that I might never see him alive again weighed on my heart and spirit, and though I knew it was going to be tough, I had to talk to him about the

“For the adult pupil of sports, it is necessary to have an understanding of the child’s successful approach to learning, and then to allow himself to adapt this very same approach.”

-- Vivien Saunders

“Golf, like measles, should be caught young, for if postponed to riper years, the result may be serious.”

-- P.G. Wodehouse

Lord. I bent down beside his bed and for the first time in our lives we had a heart to heart talk. I tried to explain God's grace and forgiveness to him, to tell him what it means to be forgiven. And I shared the essence of Ephesians 2:8-9 with him: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast."* Still, he couldn't seem to comprehend it.

"Wally, I'm not a bad person." He told me. "I've always tried to do my best to take care of mom and the family." My heart sank. I knew that he still didn't understand. As always, Dad was trusting in his own performance instead of God's forgiveness. Just as Tom would stand over the ball, frustrated that he couldn't get his swing to work, Dad refused to let go of his preconceived ideas about God. Dad was convinced that if heaven did exist, the way to get there was to do the right things, to live a good life, to try to be honest, then maybe God would accept you. The kind of love and forgiveness that I was talking about seemed to be beyond Dad's comprehension.

Thankfully, God gave us several more years with Dad. Through his recovery, he was forced to stop drinking and chain smoking, and I could tell he was becoming more receptive. He began to read some of the Christian books I had given him, and for the first time in his life, he read from the Bible. Dad began to change, and I saw a new man starting to emerge. We knew he might not have long to live, and we prayed daily that he would accept Christ and His forgiveness before he died.

Then one night, just a few months before his death, he called me into his room to talk. He told me that Mom and he had attended a Billy Graham crusade. "Billy said that when Christ enters your life," Dad said humbly, "He takes the slate where he has been keeping a record of your sins and erases it. But not only that, he throws the slate away! Son, that's the kind of forgiveness I've needed."

I couldn't believe my ears. Dad had just explained the gospel to me! He went on to say that he took mother's hand and went forward that night, giving his life to Christ by making a public confession of his faith. "Son," he said, "you don't have to worry about me any more. I know where I'm going." It was one of the happiest days of my life.

Over the next few months, we watched Dad's health deteriorate, but his spirit soared. Every day brought a fresh discussion about his new faith. He was like a child again, learning and experiencing new and exciting things every day. The Bible tells us in II Corinthians 5:17, *"If anyone is in Christ, he is*

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

-- Proverbs 14:12

a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!” That’s exactly what I saw happening with my dad. He began treating mom and others with a kind of love and respect that I’d never before seen from him. He and I developed a closer relationship during his last few months than we had through my entire childhood. My only wish was that he could have lived longer, giving us more time to share in his newfound faith.

As Dad’s health worsened, the doctors were forced to admit him to the intensive care unit of the hospital. Even though he was weak, he continued to share Christ with every person he came into contact with, from the doctors to the nurses to the fellow patients on his ward. He never tired of talking about Jesus.

One evening, just a few weeks before dad went to be with the Lord, I could tell he was in a lot of pain, so I asked if he wanted me to pray for him. He shook his head and said, “I’d like to sing a song.” It took me back a bit, since I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard dad sing. Then in a small, almost childlike voice, he began,...

*“Jesus loves me this I know.
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak, but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
The Bible tells me so.”*

I wondered if this might be a song that Dad once sang as a little child in Sunday school. I’ll have to ask him the next time I see him.

4

Keep Your Grips Dry

As a professional golfer, there is no greater pressure than that of having to go through qualifying school to gain your credentials to play on tour. It has been this way for over thirty years. The school is held only once a year, and only a few select players make the cut.

My first attempt was in 1971, when I missed the cut by 3 strokes. I found myself back in 1972 at the Silverado Country Club in Napa, California, trying once again. If I earned my qualifying card, I'd be able to play on the PGA tour that year. If I failed, it meant another year of playing minor tours around the country.

During the final round of qualification, I found myself in great position. I'd posted some really good scores during the first three rounds, and all I needed was a decent finish to make the cut, somewhere around a 75 or a 76, I figured. I was sure I had it made.

Before the round I asked my caddie to wet the towel for me, assuming that he knew I meant just a corner of it. On the second tee box I discovered that he'd soaked the entire towel. Storm clouds were brewing, and it was too late to go back for a dry one, so I hoped against hope that the rains would pass us by. They didn't. By the eighth hole we were in a downpour, and I had no way to keep my grips dry. At Silverado, the tenth tee is almost a mile from the clubhouse, so there was no way to get a clean towel at the turn. After the ninth hole, I found myself in the shelter bathroom (outhouse, really) trying desperately to dry my grips with toilet paper. It wasn't one of my better ideas. I wouldn't advise that you try it. Trust me on this.

“Dry grips make for better golf. Heck, Ben Crenshaw lost a chance to win a Masters because his grip was wet and it slipped in his hands as he played a shot on the 72nd hole of the tournament.”

-- Davis Love III

My clubs were slipping and twisting every direction. With each shot I searched in vain for another dry corner of my shirt, trying desperately to keep my hands in place, but everything was soaked to the bone. It was all I could do to hang on to the clubs, and my score was losing ground quickly. It took all the skill I could muster to make it to the green. And once there, I would fight to keep my putter-face straight enough to get it into the cup. By the seventeenth hole, my grips were so slick that a 5-iron flew out of my hand and halfway down the fairway. It was one of the most frustrating rounds of my career.

Surprisingly, I was able to hang on well enough to post a 78 for the day, but that wasn't good enough. I missed the cut by 2 strokes, and had to face another year of mini tours before getting the chance to try again.

I learned a lesson that year that has stayed with me to this day. Never underestimate the importance of taking care of your equipment and being prepared for anything. The Boy Scouts have the right idea. Whether it's keeping your spikes clean, your gloves fresh and dry, your rain gear close at hand, your umbrella in your trunk, . . . or a dry towel on your bag. You can spend years developing your skills, honing your swing, working on your short game, perfecting your putting stroke, but if your equipment isn't working for you, your game will fall apart. If you can't hang on to your clubs, no matter how hard you've worked, your score is going to suffer.

"Most golfers prepare for disaster. A good golfer prepares for success."

-- Bob Toski

Prepared For God's Service

There are times when I've sensed the Lord feeling the same frustration with me that I felt that day on the course long ago. He takes hold of me by the grip, takes his stance, gets ready to make a shot, and suddenly I begin slipping out of His hands. Before the next shot he dries me off and makes another attempt, but once again I twist and turn and wriggle away, causing another duffed shot into the rough. Sometimes I even fly out of His hands entirely. In spite of His best attempts, my slippery grips continue to foil His plans for a solid shot. I can imagine His disappointment.

Thankfully, God is better at recovering than I am. In spite of my slick grips, He always seems to post the score He's after.

The apostle, Paul, encouraged Timothy to become, "*an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work*" (II Tim. 2:21). That same advice is good for you and me.

As a follower of Christ, it's my job to stay ready for anything, to keep myself in top condition. To remain yielded to His will, rather than pursuing my own agenda. I have a role in God's golf bag, and when He needs me, I should be ready, with a willing attitude, and clean, dry grips—in essence to stay in his grip.

"The best equipment in the world, used improperly, won't elevate our game an inch." -- John Freeman

In real terms, that means staying in His will, remaining disciplined, physically and spiritually. It means to stay in prayer and to continue seeking God's wisdom and vision for my life. I need to understand my purpose within His greater plan, what kind of club I am in God's divine golf bag, and then allow myself to be refined for that unique

and specific purpose. To stay sharp. To be prepared, and remain ready and willing. To stand with the Prophet Isaiah and say to the Lord, "*Here am I. Send me.*" (Isaiah 6:8)

To stay dry and usable, fit for service at all times.

Staying Clean and Sure

Since that frustrating day in 1972 I've learned a new ritual. Before teeing off the first green, I always check one last time to make sure I have a clean, dry towel handy. One missed cut was enough for me.

I also have another ritual. Every morning, before my feet hit the floor, I pray that God would guide me through the day. That He would check for any hidden flaws or blemishes that might hinder me from His true purpose for me. That He would help me stay pliable and ready for anything.

My goal as a believer is to always offer Him a clean heart and a sure, dry grip, to remain prepared for His use, whatever and whenever that might be. The last thing I want is to be left in the bag during one of God's exciting and important rounds!

A Dry-Grip Tip

Here's a simple but effective tip to help keep your grips dry on the course.

Often players will find themselves on a wet course with more than one club in their hands before shooting. I notice a lot of golfers choosing the club they want, and then dropping the others onto the wet ground. Instead of doing that, try taking a few seconds to stick a tee into the ground and then place the handle of the club across the top of it, keeping the grip propped up in the air. It's quick and easy, and will keep you from having to constantly dry off your clubs during play.

5

Imitate Your Mentor

In the 1940s, Glenda Colette was known as one of the greatest players of her day. She had a beautiful, effortless swing, almost perfect in its execution. She was longer off the tee than most women professionals, and could finesse the ball better than anyone. She won numerous tournaments in her career on the professional women's tour.

In her book to young people, she credits her swing to her instructor, a man named Alex Smith. Alex was a great player in his own right—a man who had won numerous tournaments—but he was mostly known for his near-perfect swing and his penchant for teaching others.

At an early age, Glenda would follow Alex around the course as he demonstrated the many shots she would need during a round. Instead of trying to break down her swing and analyze the flaws, Alex would simply make the shot a few times and then have her imitate his swing. She watched him make shots from every imaginable lie and distance, and then she would make the same shot, keeping the image of his shot in her mind as she swung. She carried those images in her mind and used them throughout her outstanding career. Still today her swing is considered one of the best in the history of the game.

During the same years that Glenda played on the women's circuit, there was another player on the men's tour getting a lot of press for his game. His name was McDonald Smith, and he was being discussed and written about as having the most perfect and complete swing the tour had ever seen. In fact, the great Harvey Penick once said, "The prettiest swing I ever saw belonged to McDonald Smith."

"Gentlemen, we all know that you can't build up a golf swing step by step. We play by feel."

--Bobby Jones

It's no surprise to learn that McDonald was Alex Smith's younger brother. Had Alex taught and mentored him the same way he did Colette—through example? It's a good assumption that he did.

Imitation is not only the highest form of flattery; it is the best road to improvement.

Visualize the Swing You Want

As a child in Indianapolis I never missed a chance to see the Indianapolis 500 Golf tournament when it came to town each year. Several of the holes on the course were in the infield of the racetrack, and often

during practice rounds the players could watch and hear the cars screaming around the track in preparation for a race. It was a strange experience, and an interesting place for a tournament.

I'd scurry through the crowds to follow Gary Player or Arnold Palmer or one of my other heroes. I'd find a place along the ropes as close as I could get, then watch their effortless swings. It was always the highlight of my year. I never tired of crouching in the grass and peering across the fairway as the best players in the world went head-to-head with each other. It was during these times that I developed a passion and desire to make a career in golf.

As I watched the professional players, I would study the smooth and natural rhythm of their golf swings. I was amazed at how simple they made it seem. I'd imagine myself making the same flowing motion.

Usually I'd be so pumped up after the tournament that I would rush over to my home course and play a quick 18 holes before dark. Without fail, I noticed that my game was suddenly better, my swing more fluent and confident. By watching and studying these near-perfect swings, I was able to visualize and imitate them, integrating them into my own game.

I took that same principle with me years later as I played on the tour alongside many of the same people I'd been watching as a young man. Whenever I had a particularly unusual shot to make, I would role-play, trying to imagine a tour star who could easily pull it off. Then I would visualize myself doing the same thing and emulate their swing.

If I needed to make a long cut-shot into the pin, I'd imagine watching Lee Trevino making the shot. I had played with him so many times that I could easily see him cutting across the ball, almost in a slice pattern, in my mind's eye. Then I would visualize myself doing the same thing.

If I needed to carry one a long way down the fairway, I would imagine Freddie Couples, as he brought the club way back past parallel, putting himself in a powerful wrist-set position in order to gain the greatest momentum and power. He was a master at this technique, and by imitating his rhythm and flow, I was usually able to pull it off myself, putting me in great position down the fairway.

The reason this works is that it helps us get past the technicalities of the swing and into the feel of it, the picture of it. Through visualizing the swing we want, we are better equipped to reproduce it.

Remember: If the mind can't conceive it, the body can't achieve it.

<p><i>"The simpler I keep things, the better I play."</i> --Nancy Lopez</p>

A Putting Insight

When I caddied for Gary Player as a college student, I was amazed by his accuracy with a putter. I used to stand back and watch him putt, and what I noticed was that he always kept his head perfectly still during his stroke. He told me once that on the short putts—anything inside of 6 feet—he made a habit of keeping his eyes fixed on the ground where the ball was sitting, even after he stroked it. Many players, he explained, let their eyes follow the ball to the hole, and this often creates a tendency to mis-hit. It causes us to move our head slightly before impact, wanting to see the results. Our focus is on watching the ball, not the line or the squaring of the clubface. Gary would keep his eyes straight down during the stroke, and then listen for the ball to go into the cup. This allowed him to not only keep his head straight, but to see the line and angle of his clubface throughout the putting stroke.

I took that same approach and implemented it into my game, and more than anything I had ever tried, it helped me lower my shots on the green.

Try it the next time you're on the practice green. Start by putting from about 2-feet, then work your way out to the 6-and 7-foot range, keeping your eyes downward and listening for the ball to hit the cup. It's not as easy as you might think—at least in the beginning. It's hard to trust your line and keep your eyes fixed. But if you stay at it, you'll soon see the difference in your scoring.

Imitators of Christ

Imagine what your golf game would look like if Gary Player or Arnold Palmer or Alex Smith or the legendary Ben Hogan could step inside of your body and play through you. What if they could flow their spirit through yours, pouring their skill and strength into your arms, legs and mind, reproducing their perfect swing within your body? Your game would be taken to heights that you never dreamed or imagined!

Now imagine what your life would be like if Jesus stepped into your body and mind, flowing his perfect love and compassion and goodness into you—from his Spirit to yours. Would it make a difference in the way you treated people, the way you responded to situations, the order and direction of your day? Would it affect the daily flow of your walk in Christ?

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

-- Ephesians 3:16-17

As believers, we don't have to imagine that possibility. Jesus made that offer to anyone willing to trust and believe in him. Before going to the cross he promised to send his Holy Spirit to direct and empower his followers toward faith.

In John 16:13-14, Jesus says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."

Jesus promised to impart a small piece of himself, a measure of his majesty and strength, into the hearts and lives of all who put their faith in him. Through his Spirit, we have access to the full measure of his wisdom and strength. The apostle Paul explained that through Jesus we are "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us..." (Ephesians 3:20).

Christ offers us salvation, but more than that, he offers an empowering and personal relationship. When we give ourselves over to him, trusting him as our Lord and Savior, he comes to dwell within us—to impart his perfect strength and will into our lives.

Like Paul, you and I can come to the course of life and say with full confidence, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil. 4:13).

How's that for a way to drop your handicap?

From Imitator to Example

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul said, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me." (I Cor. 4:16). He had developed enough confidence in his faith to implore other followers to watch and learn from him, to allow him to be their example of a Christ-like character.

St. Francis of Assisi understood this principle clearly when he said, "Share Christ at all times, when necessary use words."

That's a good attitude for each of us to develop—in both golf and life. When you see someone struggling with their game, show them a better swing. When someone is struggling in their faith, step in and mentor by example.

PART TWO
THE PRACTICE TEE

“You must work very hard to become a natural golfer.”

Gary Player

“Don’t be too anxious to see good results on the scoreboard until you’ve fully absorbed the principles of the golf swing on the practice tee.”

Louise Suggs

“The correct follow through and finish indicates that your swing has been one continuous motion back and through. In other words, you haven’t paused to hit the ball. Rather the ball is something you’ve ‘collected’ in route to your finish. Think of impact as nothing more than a collision between the ball and the club.”

Craig Shankland

“The more I practice the luckier I get.”

Ben Hogan

6

Have A Practice Plan

On any given day you can take a trip to any one of the thousands of driving ranges across the country and see weekend golfers whacking buckets of balls. Take a few minutes to stand back and watch, and you'll begin to see why so many players struggle with their game. About nine out of ten players will be setting up ball after ball—usually with a driver in their hand—and swinging out of their shoes as they try to see how far they can crush it. They'll go through over a hundred balls in about twenty minutes, then pack up and head for their car, usually feeling pretty good about their practice.

Most, however, will go to the course over the next few days and discover that their game is no better than it was. They'll struggle through the round, constantly chasing their ball into the woods and scrambling to get onto the green. Then they'll 3- or 4-putt. After 18 holes they go home more frustrated than ever, making plans to get back to the driving range and whack even more balls, desperate to figure out why they can't seem to find their game.

“Amateurs play two golf games: one in their mind and the other on the course.”

-- Gary McCord

The problem is not in the quantity of their practice, but the quality of it. Players like this usually have all the skill and determination they need; what they lack is a good balanced practice plan.

It's important to remember that the true purpose of a practice tee is to prepare you for the game. Of course there are times when repetitiously hitting ball after ball is important—namely when you're trying to groove your swing. But beyond that the range should be seen as a time to practice shots that we might need during a round.

When I go to a driving range to practice, I begin by visualizing the course I'm going to play. I see the holes in my mind's eye, then I play through them one at a time. If the first hole is a long par-4 with traps down the right side, I'll pick a spot on the left down the fairway and aim for it. After a few shots, I'll pick up the iron I'll need next then aim at a flag on the range positioned at the same distance. When I feel good about that hole, I'll move on to the next. During a practice time I'll often go through an entire eighteen-hole course in my mind, and when I find myself standing on the first tee I know exactly what I'm going to do, hole after hole. My practice plan has prepared me for the course.

The next time you're on the driving range, I encourage you to try this approach. Discipline yourself to take your time and practice one shot at a time. Don't rush through the shots, but instead practice with a purpose. In essence, learn to practice how you play. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at the results.

"Every time you go out to hit a bag of balls, it should be for a definite purpose."

-- Dow Finsterwald

A Round With Dirty Harry

I love playing in celebrity Pro-Ams, especially benefits, but they can often be nerve wracking. The crowds that come out to see celebrities play are usually bigger and louder than we PGA guys are used to (unless you're Jack or Arnie or Tiger).

Once I was playing at the Bing Crosby Pro-Am and I found that my playing partner was Clint Eastwood—old "Dirty Harry" himself. We were to play three rounds together, and the first round was scheduled for the treacherous Cypress Point Golf Course at Pebble Beach. I knew immediately that I needed to prepare myself for a lot of distractions. To make things worse, I had inadvertently left my golf clubs at the airport and was forced to play with borrowed clubs.

The sixteenth hole at Cypress is one of the most famous and difficult par-3s in the world. It's a tiny green positioned 220 yards out over the Pacific Ocean. The winds are constant and unpredictable, changing quickly with the tides. Often it's raining a bit on that corner of the course. The sea lions are barking, the otters are floating and whales are spouting water everywhere. The distractions are endless, even on the best of days. But add to that mix the mob of people that would be gathered around the tee box to see their favorite celebrity—especially "Dirty Harry"—and you have an idea of what I had to look forward to that day.

Knowing all of this, I went to the practice range before my round to prepare for my game—most specifically the sixteenth hole. I teed up and hit several dozen 3-woods toward a pin 220 yards down the range, visualizing the hole in my mind. I imagined different scenarios and wind conditions, went through my pre-shot routine before each swing, and then hit the ball accordingly, firming up in my mind exactly what I was going to do once I stood on the sixteenth tee.

The crowds that day were even bigger than I had expected, and I was really struggling with my game. I was posting a decent score, but the course and distractions were really wearing at my nerves. But when I teed it up on the sixteenth, the winds and conditions were just as I had imagined and

practiced for. Suddenly my confidence began to soar. I had prepared for this very moment. I went through my pre-shot routine, stepped up to the ball and hit one just as I had done in practice. The ball landed 1 foot from the hole—a tap in for birdie.

I won't embarrass Clint by telling you how his shot went.

Practice is intended to prepare us for the realities of the course, but only the right kind of practice will do so.

“The only way to build realistic confidence in yourself is through practice.”
-- Sam Snead

Don't Brag Too Quickly

That shot on the sixteenth green at Cypress Point was one of the best holes of my golfing career. I was pretty proud of it, and loved telling that story. But God used it to teach me a lesson about humility.

The very next year I was standing on that same green with Vic Damone, my celebrity partner for the day. We were talking with Alan Shepherd, the astronaut, Jim Walters & fellow PGA professional Jerry Pate. As we were waiting to tee off, I seized the opportunity to tell everyone about my glorious shot of the previous year, including the gallery. I told them the story of how I had practiced and planned the shot ahead of time, then nailed my tee shot for a tap-in birdie. They listened intently until I finished, then Jim Walters casually looked at Jerry Pate and said, “Didn't you have a hole-in-one here last year?”

Jerry nodded and nonchalantly said, “Yeah.”

Totally took the wind out of my sails. Especially when you consider that there had been only a handful of aces on that hole in the history of the old course.

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6).

Set Realistic Expectations

One common trait I see among a lot of average weekend golfers is unrealistic expectations of their game. They often have full-time jobs and families to take care of, yet they want to play like the pros. Many of them could if they were willing to make the sacrifice, but I would never be the one to encourage them to do so. Families and careers should never be sacrificed for a game—any game. Only when someone chooses to make a career in golf should they begin putting in the time it takes to play really well, but even then, they should carefully temper the time it takes away from their wife and children, not to mention their service to God.

I tell average golfers to take a close look in the mirror, asking themselves some tough questions about their game. *How much time do I really have to put into my game? Should I be spending the time practicing when I have other priorities in my life that are being neglected? And what are some realistic expectations of my scoring abilities based on the time I have to put into my game?*

Once a player has discerned the true potential of their game and honestly assessed the amount of time they should be putting into it, they are equipped to put together the best practice plan to help them reach that goal. The key is a balanced practice that takes all of these factors into consideration. When you understand your limitations of skill, abilities and time, you can better plan your practice, prioritizing your time on the driving range, and the chipping and putting green accordingly.

“If you’re serious about improving your play, be brutally honest with yourself.”
-- Greg Norman

Almost without exception, when weekend golfers do this, they decide to spend much of their time on the range practicing their short game and putting—chipping around the green and getting in close to the pin. Nothing helps average golfers lower their scores more quickly than learning how to get up and down from around the green.

As I’ve often said to my students, unbridled expectations ruin many a pleasant round.

A Spiritual Practice Plan

I often have the opportunity to talk to groups of men about their walk with the Lord. At every opportunity I encourage them to set aside the first part of their day for a time alone with God, praying, journaling and meditating on Scripture. So often they come up to me afterward and confess the trouble they have staying committed to this routine. They begin a daily quiet time with good intentions, but seldom follow through for more than a few weeks.

The problem, I think, is that so many men don’t understand the true purpose behind this regular time with the Lord. We’ve been told by pastors and other Christian leaders that it’s important, so we trudge forward out of a sense of guilt or obligation, and then wonder why it’s so hard to stay on course day after day. But we should always beware of any plans that are based on our strengths rather than our need for God.

*“I lift up my eyes to the hill--
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.”*
-- Psalm 121:1

It's much easier to stay committed to our quiet times when we understand their intent. We should see them as a time of preparation for the course—to ready us for situations that may arise during the daily routine of living. Something of a practice plan for life.

We all run across situations that catch us off guard. A boss asks us to do something unethical, a girl behind the counter throws us a flirtatious glance or phrase, a co-worker takes credit for our work, our kids come home with the wrong kinds of friends, our accountant gets a little too creative with the tax forms. Life doesn't always give us a perfect lie in the rough, and when it doesn't, we need to be ready for the shot we need. If we've prepared ourselves ahead of time, these obstacles don't seem so frightening. We know what needs to be done, because we've come to the course prepared for such a moment.

When we approach our daily quiet times the same way we come to the practice tee—with a specific and pre-determined practice plan—it gives us a sense of purpose and direction. We're focused and in sync, with a specific goal in mind. We work on both our strengths and weaknesses with a healthy balance.

If we often struggle with a certain temptation to sin, this daily communion with the Lord is the perfect time to prepare for that weakness, to envision different scenarios where we might run across this temptation, then determine ahead of time our reaction when it does.

In any situation, it's our role to plan ahead, to pray and study diligently, to ask God to give us the words and wisdom we need to tackle any circumstance or obstacle that life (or the enemy) may throw at us.

"I've always believed that success is achieved when proper preparation meets opportunity."

-- Tom Lehman

7

Work On Your Grip

Someone once said, “If you have a bad grip, you’ll have a bad swing.” That couldn’t be more true. No matter how hard you work on your golf swing, without the right grip you’ll never get the power or accuracy that you need.

The hands are the only connection the player has to the ball through the medium of the golf club. In order to make proper contact and have the clubface aligned at impact, it’s crucial that the hands be placed correctly on the grip. In effect, the hands must line up in perfect alliance with the clubface. This allows the hands and club to work together as one unit throughout the swing.

Many players grip the club as they would a baseball bat. This feels natural, but it doesn’t work, because the strike pattern of the two swings are so dissimilar. In baseball we grip the bat in our palms and swing at an object above waist level. But when we take that same grip to a golf club it opens the face at impact, sending the ball slicing off to the right. A player with this type of palm grip typically dips down to strike the ball, causing them to lose solid contact.

“The grip is the heartbeat of the golf swing.”

-- Ben Hogan

In golf, the grip needs to be placed and held in the fingers of both hands. It’s not a natural feel, but an important element to the proper grip. It allows the club to rotate just right under the centrifugal force of the downswing, giving it a much better chance of squaring at impact (assuming the proper swing plane, of course).

Poor hand placement usually starts in the beginning when a player places the clubhead on the ground then wraps his or her hands around the grip. This almost always moves the shaft into the palms, rather than the fingers.

The quickest remedy is to always remember to start your grip with the clubhead above the hands, about eye level, and then place the grip gently into your fingers. Use the markings on your grip to make sure you’ve got your hands properly placed. When it feels sure, firm your grip a bit and then take the club to the ground behind the ball. Sam Snead used to say that the correct grip pressure should feel like you’re holding a small bird in your hands—tight enough to keep him from flying away, but not so strong as to crush him.

If you'll make this ritual part of your pre-shot routine, I guarantee that your grip—and your game—will improve.

Palm Alignment

Another important grip fundamental to keep in mind is that the palms of each hand must be facing each other. If they aren't, then as the club is swung the hands will work against each other, twisting the face of the club and making solid contact with the ball virtually impossible. This unbalanced hand position keeps the wrists from making the correct setting motion on the way back and through the ball.

One good way to test the balance of your hands is to take a book and place it between your hands in mirror position with fingers spread apart slightly. Hold it toward the ground as if it were a golf club, and then swing your arms around as if swinging a club. Your thumbs should be pointing upward at waist high. Now complete your swing to the top, and then make a swing through an imaginary ball, watching your hands rotate on the downswing, squaring the book at impact, and then again bringing your thumbs to point upward in front of you and on through to the finish.

“The basic factor in all good golf is the grip. Get it right, and all other progress follows.”
-- Tommy Armour

Try this drill several times at home in order to get the feel of how the clubface rotation should work during a swing, and how the hands work together to make this happen.

Staying In God's Grip

In golf, a proper grip aligns our hands with the clubface in a way that allows for the greatest power and control over the ball. Without it there is no course on earth that we can master.

In life, it is prayer and communion with God that give us that same sense of authority and control and direction. It is the one thing we most need to master the course of our life.

Prayer is our connection to God. It is the median that allows him to align our lives with his will and purpose. It is the one true link between God's heart and ours. Through prayer we acknowledge our need for God's forgiveness and presence in our lives. By laying before him our deepest yearnings, longings, and sins, we are allowing him full access to our lives, surrendering ourselves and our desires to his perfect will and direction.

“Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.”
-- I Chr. 16:11

The natural inclination of most followers is to try and live *for* Christ, rather than to live *in* Christ. We want to be *doing* something, moving, working, accomplishing. But through times of quiet prayer and reflection we learn the importance of simply *being*, of lingering in his presence, of allowing him to be in control.

Oswald Chambers, one of my favorite writers, summed up this principle well when he wrote, “To be surrendered to God is of more value than our personal holiness... The issue is never of being of use, but of being of value to God himself.”

A golfer may know all the principles of the golf swing—backswing, downswing, hip turn—and he may read all kinds of books and articles about golf, but if his grip is not balanced and true, all of his efforts and knowledge about the game will be wasted.

In the same way, as followers of Christ, we may know the Bible backward and forward, and may be living to the best of our ability for God, but without the deep and personal communication of prayer, our lives will lack power and direction.

In golf our hands must be alive to the clubhead. In life our hearts should be alive to God’s hands.

8

Develop a Pre-Shot Routine

If there is one obvious characteristic that separates professional players from most amateurs, it is that pros, almost without exception, have a distinctive pre-shot routine that they go through before each shot. This is not an accident. Professionals have spent a lot of time carefully crafting these pre-shot rituals to match their specific game and personalities.

Golf is an extremely mental game. Just as the swing requires a lot of physical habit formation, so also the mind must form its own unique pattern and pace—sort of a mental groove.

When I was playing on tour I would often see players at a distance on another fairway. Though I was too far away to make out their faces, I could tell who they were by their pre-shot rituals.

*“You win major tournaments
with your mind.”*

-- Tiger Woods

Jack Nicklaus used to stand behind the ball and glance back and forth between the target and the ground in front of him. He was picking out a small spot in the fairway—perhaps a leaf or divot or a blemish in the grass—about 6 or 7 feet ahead of the ball that aligned perfectly between his ball and the target. This became his reference point, something to help him aim the club. After identifying one, he would stand for a few seconds staring straight ahead toward the target. When asked about this ritual, he said he was “going to the movies.” What he meant was, he was actually imagining in his mind’s eye that he was watching himself play the shot, as if he were on a screen. He would visualize the flight path of the ball exactly as he wanted it to go.

Once he knew what he needed to do, he would take a few quick practice swings, step up to the ball, square his clubface toward his reference point in the fairway and take the shot. More often than not he would nail his target with pinpoint accuracy.

They say that once during a tournament the television commentators had planted a microphone on Jack’s collar in order to pick up his comments as he played. On one hole he had just stepped up to the ball to take his shot when a jet plane roared overhead and distracted him. He wisely stepped away from the ball, and as he did the TV guys heard him say, somewhat under his breath, “That was a good one.”

In his mind, he had already played the shot.

The late Payne Stewart, a friend and fellow believer, worked diligently with a sports psychologist named Dick Coop to develop an effective pre-shot routine. Dick would actually follow Payne around the course during a tournament and grade him—not on how well he scored, but on how consistently he stayed true to this ritual they had developed. Dr. Coop said that when Payne won the tournament at Hazeltine in Minnesota, in 1991, he scored above 90% in consistency. Throughout the tournament, his pre-shot routine didn't vary more than a second or two from shot to shot. He would go through his routine, commit to the shot then execute it, and both Payne and Dick credit his success in that tournament to the confidence brought on by this steady pace and consistency.

“Through preparation and hard work, you can prepare yourself for a mental attitude—a ‘zone.’ When it happens, all you see is the ball and the hole.”
-- Payne Stewart

Another friend of mine, Dr. Joe Clark, a PGA master teacher, has done a lot of research and study on the topic, and for years he timed players during tournaments with a stopwatch to gauge their pre-shot patterns and rituals. Dr. Clark is from New Hampshire, and he spent many a snowy day watching tournaments on television with a stopwatch, keeping track of the players during their rounds. He had a fascination for the subject, and spent years analyzing and studying the dynamic.

He remembers timing Greg Norman during all four rounds of the 1996 Masters. During the first three days, he noticed that Greg had an amazing consistency to his rituals. From the time he took his club out of his bag to the second he struck the ball, twenty-six seconds would pass, varying no more than a second or two either way. Going into the final round Greg led the tournament by 7 strokes.

But something happened to his rhythm during Sunday's final round. Greg's pre-shot routines became longer and extremely sporadic, varying wildly in time and consistency. On one shot his ritual would last only ten seconds, and the next would take fifty, then twenty, then forty-five. With each hole his score continued to slip, and the worse he played the more sporadic his pre-shot rituals became. His pace—as well as his confidence—was shot. By the time Greg reached the eighteenth green, Nick Faldo had come from behind to overtake him and win the tournament.

Greg showed a lot of class that day, gracefully congratulating Nick on his win and biting his tongue before the cameras, but it must have been a grueling experience for him.

For the rest of us, it was a stark lesson on the importance of remaining calm and consistent throughout a round—to develop a good pre-shot routine and commit to it, no matter what.

Practice Your Ritual

The pre-shot ritual I've developed for my game is simple but effective.

I begin by assessing the shot, gauging the yardage, wind conditions, position of the pin and obstacles around the green. Then I select the club I need and take a few seconds to visualize the flight pattern of the ball. I take one or two practice swings and then step up to ball. I set the face, step into position—left foot first, then right—look at the target one last time, take a short waggle, then make the shot.

It doesn't sound like much, but it works well for me. And I've been playing long enough where I go through this ritual without even thinking about it. It's been mentally grooved into my game.

If you don't feel that you have a consistent or effective routine, I encourage you to develop one the next time you're on the range. Don't make it too complicated—less is more. The key is to find something that feels comfortable, and creates a sense of confidence within you. If you're a rather high-strung person by nature, a short routine would be best. If you like to take your time, then create a routine that allows you time to think and slow down the pace a bit.

“Golf, in my view, is the most rewarding of all games because it possesses a very definite value as a molder or developer of character. The golfer very soon is made to realize that his most immediate, and perhaps most potent adversary is himself.”
-- Bobby Jones

Whatever you choose, remain true to it before each and every shot you take, whether you're on the practice range hitting balls or on the course.

Confident In The Lord

Just as doubt can cripple the mind of a golfer, it can also creep into the life and faith of a believer, diminishing his effectiveness for Christ in the world. James 1:5-8 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

When we allow ourselves to question God's control and authority in our lives, it creates a sense of uncertainty and hesitation within us. We begin to doubt ourselves, as well as God's ability to work through us, in spite of our flaws and weaknesses. And when that happens, we become unstable and unproductive, often immobilized by fear.

But when we remain focused on God's strength and wisdom, it creates a sense of confidence within us, enabling us to pull off even the most difficult shots of life.

9

Find a Good Teacher

Someone once estimated that only about five percent of regular golfers have ever taken a golf lesson. To me, this explains why so many feel frustrated with their game and have so much trouble lowering their scores. Love of the game and good friends keeps bringing them back to the course, but much of their time there is spent in aggravation.

The problem with this is, we have no way of seeing our swing through the vantage point of others. We can't see the small swing flaws that cause slices and hooks and other mis-hits, and our attempts at correction create only greater flaws. Most of us start out with poor fundamentals, yet never take the time to learn the proper way to swing and play.

“Don't be too proud to take lessons. I'm not.”
-- Jack Nicklaus

Any accomplished golfer will tell you that lessons from a good instructor are an integral part of a good golfing program. No matter how well you play, you can always get a little better, and the most effective route to doing this is through the advice of someone who really understands the fundamentals of the golf swing—someone who can see your swing from an outside vantage point.

Tiger Woods may be the best player in the history of golf. It's been said that he has more talent and natural ability than anyone to ever play the game. Still, he regularly seeks the advice of Butch Harmon, his instructor. In 1997, after winning the Masters by an unbelievable 12 strokes, bringing Augusta to its knees and confirming once and for all that he was the best player in the world at the time, he went home and called Butch to help him with his game!

Even more amazing, he and Butch decided to change his swing pattern. Even though he could beat any player on the planet, Tiger knew that he still had some swing flaws that needed correcting, so he risked his career to make a change. It took him over eighteen months to groove new swing habits, and during that time many fans and sportscasters wondered about Tiger's "slump," but he stayed committed to the changes and has emerged today as an even better player.

Wherever you are in your game, if you don't have a competent professional that you go to regularly for help and advice, I encourage you to find one. Ask your friends and other players in your area for some referrals,

and then make the effort to select someone you feel good about—someone with a solid reputation for helping players get better.

In any endeavor, a wise person is one who is willing to seek and heed sound advice from others.

“What you might learn in six months of practice, your pro can tell you in five minutes.”

-- Jack Burke, Sr.

Find The Right Teacher

While looking for a good teacher, it's important to remember that not all golf instructors are the same. Though there are many competent teaching professionals at clubs around the country, methods and philosophies tend to vary pretty wildly. And just because a person works at a club and is a 1 handicapper, doesn't necessarily mean he's a good teacher.

So ask around, interview several, choose carefully, and don't sign any long-term agreements.

A Teaching Legend

I wish I had known Harvey Penick. More than any man I know of, he has made an eternal impact on the game of golf, not through his playing, but through his wise and gentle instruction, and his ability to pass on his simple but sound philosophies and lifelong love of the game to others.

Harvey spent his entire career on the same course—the Austin Country Club. He began as an eight-year-old caddy, and retired some sixty years later with the title of Head Professional Emeritus. But long after that, well into his late eighties, he would drive his golf cart to the course four or five times a week to simply sit beneath the veranda outside the clubhouse and watch players make the turn, surveying the beautiful rolling hills of Austin, and doling out sound advice to anyone who might happen by to solicit it.

Harvey coached players at every level of the game. Not only was he the primary instructor for a number of professionals on tour—Tom Kite, Ben Crenshaw, Mickey Wright, Betsy Rawls, Sandra Palmer, Terry Dill, and Don and Rik Massengale, just to name a few—but he also worked with kids, beginning adults and frustrated high-handicappers. No matter where someone was in their game, Harvey was there ready to help them lower their scores. And he always seemed to know just what they needed, both in their swing and their mental processing of the game.

“Harvey Penick is one of the great teachers in the history of golf. He has helped many people with their games, including me and the hundreds of students I sent him.”

-- Byron Nelson

Tom Kite once said that during Harvey's years there, the Austin Country Club had a greater number of low-handicappers than any club he'd seen. Harvey's sound advice and instruction had made an impact on nearly every person that played the course.

But even more important than helping people lower their scores, Harvey had a way of imparting joy and delight into those he taught, of passing on his love and passion for life, as well as golf. He was a deeply spiritual man who loved God and loved interacting with people.

"Some of my favorite memories," writes Tom Kite, "are the rainy winter days when no one was on the course and we could all gather around Harvey and try to get inside his mind... The one thing that we all have learned from Harvey is love. A love of a game that teaches us more about ourselves than we sometimes care to know. And a love of the people that we share this game with."¹

We should all strive to leave that kind of lasting legacy on the world.

The Only True Counselor

I play a lot of golf with amateurs and high-handicappers during the course of my travels, usually during speaking and teaching events, and often I run across people who like to give advice to fellow players. A person will see a perceived kink in their partner's swing and begin coaching them on ways to correct the problem. It always bothers me when that happens, because it does little more than add even more swing thoughts to an already overcrowded mind and usually messes up the rest of their game. The right time to fix a swing problem is on the practice range, not on the course. And one place you don't want to seek advice is at the hands of an unqualified amateur—especially one who may have as many flaws as you.

If you want help with your game, look to someone who understands the fundamentals and intricacies of the swing.

Much more disturbing, however, are the many "experts" dishing out advice on how to live—not to mention the number of people willing to listen. Today, more than ever, book shelves and air waves are filled with self-help gurus, each claiming to have the secret to a better life, a more productive and happy future, a more fulfilling existence. I'm sure that most of these people are sincere in their beliefs, but I often wonder where their life philosophies come from—especially since so many contradict each other. What is the root and foundation beneath their advice?

¹ Harvey Penick with Bud Shrake, *Harvey Penick's Little Red Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 11,13.

When it comes to living a happy, successful and rewarding life, why not look to the One who created it all—the One who understands us better than we could ever understand ourselves? It seems futile to spend our lives searching for meaning and significance among men, wondering who we are and what life is about, when the God who made us has given us all the answers we need.

God's Word is the only true foundation for life. It is our instruction manual, conceived and inspired by the Author of all life and faith and wisdom, given to us as a guide to help us through any trial or problem we may ever encounter.

"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed."

-- Proverbs 15:22

God also promised that if we put our trust and hope in him, he will never turn away, and will always be there to guide us, even through the most confusing and frustrating times. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'" (Isaiah 30:21).

We have at our fingertips the wisdom of the ages, the full measure of God's majesty, insight and understanding, just waiting to be tapped—a "counselor" to help us when we need advice and direction.

Why would we ever look elsewhere when navigating the great course of life?

10

Practice Good Swing Mechanics

The golf swing, when learned and performed correctly, is not a natural move. In order to groove an effective swing plane, a person has to learn to trust a concept that is foreign to the mind.

Logic would tell us that in order to get the ball on line we need to aim at the pin during the swing, scooping the ball and bringing the shaft straight up toward the flag after impact. You can see this misconception at work in the minds of most beginners and high handicappers as they try to muscle the ball forward.

But in order to get the most power and accuracy out of the swing, a player has to learn to trust the concept of allowing the club to orbit the body—letting the ball get in the way of the clubface as it circles the spine. When performed properly, the clubhead actually impacts the ball as the shaft moves from inside out, seemingly aimed somewhat right of the target at impact.

The player has to have faith that as the club meets the ball during this circular orbit, it will send it off in the right direction toward the hole. If you try to swing straight back and through the ball, pushing it toward the pin, it forces the clubface to either swipe across the ball, causing a slice, or close at impact, creating a hook or curve. This is why I believe over eighty percent of golfers slice the ball regularly. In essence the swing is something of a dichotomy. If a player tries to swing straight with the club, it actually causes the ball to curve. But if a player learns to swing in a circular, curved pattern, the ball will fly straight.

“The good player swings through the ball while the awkward player hits at it.”
-- Ken Venturi

When I teach this principle, I hold a hula-hoop around the student’s body so that he or she can clearly see how the hands must work in a circle in order to let the club orbit the body. I encourage students to visualize their arms swinging around their spine and body like a helicopter—their arms being the blades and the clubhead being the tip of the propeller. The focus is not on hitting the ball, but on creating the proper swing plane. Then as we carry this same swinging motion to the tee, the ball simply gets in the way as the club swings through its orbit.

I can never stress enough the importance of this simple principle. Before we can ever gain any power or accuracy in our game, we have to first allow this free-flowing, circular pattern to be grooved into our swing

mechanics. Otherwise we'll spend most of our time on the course frustrated and confused.

A Simple Swing Thought

The main reason I like using a hula-hoop to demonstrate this truth about the golf swing is that it boils down the mechanics of the swing to one basic thought process. There are many dynamics at work within the proper swing, and it would be easy to get bogged down in the small details involved—the many things that happen during and before impact to create a good shot. But the swing is over within a fraction of a second, and no one can handle more than one thought during the process. So I boil it down to a simple mental image for the player to focus on.

“Golf will always be a tangle for the average golfer because his swing is largely a matter of conscious thought or conscious effort, rather than the building of right habits which operate instinctively. The golf swing must first be learned, and then it must be forgotten, so that it can work in a mechanical way.”

-- Grantland Rice

The key is to practice this swing plane until it becomes ingrained within our body and mind, until it is second nature. Then we can take that swing to the course and trust what we have learned.

Beware of Gimmicks

I once played in a pro-am with a guy who had developed a popular training aid. I'd seen him all over television and in golf magazines pitching this new product he had designed and created. All the commercials claimed that this tool was guaranteed to help golfers develop better, longer and more consistent drives every time. The trouble is, during the round he only hit one out of eighteen fairways. He spent most of the round digging the ball out of the trees.

As long as there are golfers, there will be golf gimmicks. But the only sure way to a better swing is through patience and practice. Learn the fundamentals of a proper swing, and then work at it on the range—practicing those fundamentals and supporting them with the correct mental image.

Proper Pitch Shots

One of the most difficult shots in golf is the short, high pitch shot over a bunker or water hazard. Most players struggle with this shot because it calls for a lot of finesse and timing with the club. It's hard enough to gauge the distance, but we also have to think about the height and flight of the ball, given the angle of the wedge.

The tendency during this type of shot is to try and scoop the ball with the clubface. We stand over the ball and see the steep angle of the wedge, and we know we have to get it high, so we try to help the flight by hitting under the ball and trying to lift it into the air. This often creates a lot of wrist movement and mis-hits. It's a natural reaction on our part, but it kills the spin and execution of the shot.

To create a proper pitch shot, we need to learn to hit down on the ball and allow the club to do its work. In fact, the shot should actually feel as if we're trying to hit a low flyer with a steep angled club.

A good practice drill for this shot is to take two sticks and some string and create a makeshift line about three feet above the ground in front of you. Then stand about six feet behind the line and try to hit balls underneath the rope with a wedge. Of course, you probably won't be able to do it. The angle of the wedge will send the ball over the rope each time. But by trying to keep it low, you'll be forced to hit down on the ball, and you'll begin to feel the proper swing plane for a good pitch shot.

Once you get this feel, pick some spots out in the distance and practice hitting to them, using the proper stroke and motion. You should be able to feel the difference. And you'll find that it's also easier to gauge the distance.

The single greatest thing you can do to lower your score is to increase your skills inside of 100 yards. Work on your short game, and the rest will fall into place naturally.

The Mechanics of Scripture Study

When I was a young Christian, someone told me one day that I needed to begin reading through the entire Bible. I felt really convicted by that challenge, so I began reading several chapters a day. I was intent on making it through the entire Bible within a year. My life was really busy back then, and several times I missed a few days and had to work feverishly to try and catch up with my self-imposed schedule.

Then one day someone asked me, "What did you learn this week during your studies?"

I thought for a moment, and then answered, "I honestly don't remember."

"All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

-- 2 Timothy 3:16-17

That's when I decided that I was going about it the wrong way. My heart was in the right place, but my plan was ineffective. I determined that I was still going to commit the first part of each day to the Lord, but I would do it by taking a small passage of Scripture and really digest it. As I started to do that, the Bible began to come alive for me. Often I would find myself spending an entire week on one passage, going over it each day and praying for God to speak to me through this small piece of truth.

Through that process I began to learn the power of God's Word, and the many facets and dimensions behind each and every passage. As I read and meditated, it often felt as if I were trying to get a drink from a fire hydrant. The sheer depth and breath and volume of God's Word is far beyond what any of us can possibly comprehend.

Once, during the Kemper Open in Washington D.C., I attended a tour Bible study, and the day's speaker was Doug Coe, a good friend of mine who works as an evangelist with a Washington-based ministry called "The Fellowship." Doug is an incredible man of God who has reached thousands across the world for Christ with his ministry and friendship to others.

During his message, Doug made the statement, "It's not how much you get into the Bible, but how much of the Bible gets into you." Through this thought, Doug was re-iterating a truth that I had learned those many years ago about God's Word. The most effective way to study is to take a small truth from Scripture and chew on it, meditate on it, allow it to sink into your heart and mind and let God work on you through its message.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty." (Jer. 15:16).

A change in heart or character comes when we allow God's word to sink into us—when we let his Spirit transform us through the powerful truths of Scripture. That's how the Holy Spirit disciplines us—one step at a time.

Just as a golf club is designed to be swung in a circle around the body, you and I are designed to rotate around God for the purpose of fulfilling his perfect will.

Overcoming Swing Flaws

Many people approach their golf game the same way they approach scripture reading—by trying to absorb too much at once. I see golfers pouring over golf books and magazines, reading tip after tip after tip, trying to drink it all in so that they can improve their game. Or maybe they'll take a lesson and ask dozens of questions about what they need to do to play better. But they never take the time to absorb these principles, taking them

one at a time, and really working them into their swing. Instead of taking their swing flaws and trying to fix them properly, slowly, one at a time, they instead try to change everything at once. And in the end, all they've accomplished is even greater flaws and more confusion about their game.

A few years ago, Tom Lehman and I reprinted a classic 1946 golf book by E.M. Prain titled *Live Hands*. In one section of the book, Prain was describing a round he had played with some businessmen, and he wrote, "In the course of one swing they were trying to do six or seven different things, but all that they achieved was an exaggeration of certain actions of that swing which deprived the whole rhythm. Their minds were focused on these motions instead of the ball at their feet. They had forgotten the first principle in golf, which is to hit the ball. Their play was unduly slow and they made a business of pleasure, while their game, far from improving, took a sharp turn for the worse."

The problem is a timeless one. Most all of us have struggled with too many swing thoughts at one time or another. But it's much more practical and effective to take one good swing key and develop it, trust it and work on it. To allow it to become ingrained into your body and mind until it is second nature to you. When that swing key becomes part of your routine and habits, then it's time to move on to the next swing key.

That's how you groove an effective golf swing.

It's also a good approach to developing an effective life in Christ.

11

Learn The Truths Behind The Principles

A friend once told me of his experiences with a series of golf lessons at his local club. He was a fairly new golfer who had never learned the proper swing fundamentals, and his game had a lot of flaws and inconsistencies.

During his first lesson, the instructor had him take a few swings, then immediately set to work changing his grip, as well as his posture and stance. “Now hit a few more balls,” he told him. My friend awkwardly swung the club, missing the ball altogether on his first try. After two or three more swings, the instructor again stopped him and began coaching him on the proper hip turn. He took my friend’s club and demonstrated a few swings, then handed it back to him. “Now you try it,” he said. He did, again somewhat awkwardly, and once more the instructor stopped him, this time to show him how to make a clean take-away.

This pattern went on for the entire lesson. Each time my friend swung the club this instructor had another comment about some specific swing problem, most of which were unrelated to the previous one. “By the end of the lesson, I was more confused than ever,” my friend told me. “My confidence was shattered, and I still had no idea what to do to fix my swing.”

*“A centipede was happy quite, until a toad in fun,
Said ‘Pray which leg goes after which?’
This put his mind in such a fix,
He fell distracted in a ditch,
Considering how to run.”*

-- (anonymous golf jingle)

Sadly, this is not an uncommon experience for amateur golfers. Though there are many good golf instructors at clubs around the country, there are just as many who have no business teaching the game. They leave students frustrated and puzzled by their game, wondering why they can’t seem to improve.

As in any task, a good golf swing begins with an understanding of the basic principles behind the proper swing—understanding the “whys” as well as the “dos.” It’s not enough to know that we need to keep our head down, our right arm straight, our knees slightly bent, and so forth. We need to recognize why these things are important.

What are the underlying reasons behind these principles? Why does one grip work while another doesn’t? What happens when the hands don’t work

together to rotate the clubface at impact? Why is the angle of take-away so important to a good swing plane?

I often tell my students that one ounce of “why’s” is worth a hundred pounds of “do’s.” Because when we understand the reasons behind the things we need to do, their truths become a reality to us, and we become committed to them in real and definable terms. We see how everything works together to create a powerful swing, and how each minute detail is important to the overall success of our game.

All the great golf instructors understand the importance of this truth. In fact, they will tell you that a student who has learned all of the mechanics of a good swing without understanding the fundamental reasons behind them will almost always begin exaggerating the different components of the swing. They over-swing at the top, their hip turn too pronounced, their follow-through over extended. And before long, their exaggeration has completely thrown off the good and natural parts of the swing, causing even greater flaws and inconsistencies.

This process is gradual, almost undetectable, but it is very real. Once a student begins focusing on *what* he needs to do, without understanding *why* he needs to do it, he will continue doing and doing, until he inevitably ends up overdoing.

I encourage golfers to look for a good instructor to help with their game, but not to allow their coach to lead them down dark alleys. When they try to change an element of your swing or posture, stop and ask “Why?” When they relay a swing tip, or a practice drill, ask them, “What will this do for my game, and why does it work?”

“The beginner should never be allowed to form bad habits or get what I call ball-fright. If you put a ball down to him at first, he will think only about hitting it instead of thinking of how he should hit it... Ball-fright has taken hold of him, and you can find golfers of twenty years’ experience still afraid of the ball. They never know what a shot is going to be like till they see it, and too often it is not worth seeing.”

-- Andra Kirkaldy

A natural and effective swing begins with an intimate understanding of the underlying principles that make it work. Otherwise, we’ll always be caught up blindly following the mechanics of the game with no real comprehension of the purpose behind them.

Reasons, Not Tips

“The golfer is off his game—someone suggests that he try such and such a thing. It works like a charm, and the conclusion is that the tip

effected a cure. In general terms this may be true, but not from the reason the golfer suspects. The tip may have given the golfer confidence, or it may have made him concentrate more, which is largely the same thing. The cure may have been what we loosely term a mental one, and although it works for a while, the old fault usually returns with a greater demoralizing effect. The last position is worse than the first, unless the golfer says, ‘Away with your tips, and show me your reasons.’”

Excerpted from *Common Sense Golf*, by W.J. Thompson, 1923

Practice Spiritual Discernment

When looking at our faith and understanding of Scripture, we should apply this same practice of understanding the truths behind the principles. Before integrating a belief or command into our spiritual lives, we should ask ourselves, “Is this really a truth from scripture, or just an interpretation? And if it is a mandate, what is the underlying reason behind it?”

Many Christians today are in the habit of blindly following the advice of their friends or pastors when it comes to understanding their faith. They accept the things they are being taught without ever questioning, without ever searching the Scriptures to test the validity of the messages they are receiving. They often assume that the guidance they are receiving is accurate and true, and blindly work to integrate those principles into their Christian walk.

But God expects more than that from his followers. The gospel writer Luke commended the Bereans for being of “noble character,” because they “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11). Even though Paul was known throughout the land as a great apostle of Jesus, the Berean Christians still recognized their responsibility to check out his words to see if they were scriptural and accurate.

But more than that, they wanted to understand the “spirit” of the message, as well as the “letter” of it. They knew that in order to truly drink and digest the truths of God, they needed to have an intimate knowledge of the reasons behind the principles. They didn’t settle for simply knowing *what* God wanted from them, they longed to understand *why* he wanted it.

That’s the approach you and I should take. Instead of settling for knowledge about God and his word, let’s desire to understand his intent and purpose behind them—his perfect and unchanging will.

To put a new twist to an old phrase, you might say that “one ounce of being is worth a hundred pounds of doing.”

12 Trust Your Swing

If you had a chance to watch Vijah Singh during the final day of the 2000 Masters Tournament, you saw a touching exchange between Vijah and his young son on the eighteenth green, as he nailed his last put to win the green jacket. His boy had been following him around the course during the entire round, and the television cameras picked up the excitement in his eyes as he jumped into his father's arms to congratulate him. It was hard to keep a dry eye.

Announcers had noticed that throughout the round, Vijah's boy had been moving in close to whisper something to his father on just about every tee box. People began speculating on what he might be saying. Until one official on the back nine overheard the young man say to his father, "Trust your swing, dad." When asked about it at the press conference, Vijah said that he had been working to correct a specific swing flaw, and that his son was reminding him not to get bogged down by negative swing thoughts as he played. At every opportunity his son told him simply to "trust his swing."

One of the worst things you can do in golf is to lose confidence in your game during a round. And it happens more often than you might think—not only to amateurs, but to seasoned players and professionals. I'm convinced that lack of trust is the single biggest cause behind poorly executed shots with players at all levels of the game. When we stand over the ball and allow doubts to creep in—doubts about our abilities, our swing mechanics, the club we've selected, etc.—our swing becomes forced and hesitant, almost always leading to some form of mis-hit. I've seen it time and again, in other players and myself.

One common mistake I've witnessed as an instructor is that players will come to me one day to help them with their game, we'll make some minor changes to their swing and the next day they'll be out on the course playing 18 holes. Almost without exception this does more harm than good. Nothing frustrates golfers more than trying work out a swing flaw in the middle of a round. It will mess up your mind, and your score.

The key is to learn to compartmentalize. When we're on the driving range, we can focus on the mechanics of the swing. That's the time to think about what we need to do to overcome a swing flaw, to work on changing

"Instead of trying to maneuver the ball with your body, arms, and hands, trust your swing and the club you select for the shot."

-- Ben Hogan

the dynamics of our takeaway or our downswing. And that's the proper place to spend hours working on these changes. But when we get to the course, it's time to put away these thoughts and play by feel. We need to trust what we've learned on the practice tee, and let our swing flow freely—to let our minds be engaged in the shot making, not in the mechanics of the game. Too often players fall into the trap of playing what pros call, “driving-range golf.”

The fact is, a player has a better chance of scoring well with a poor swing and a lot of confidence, than with the greatest mechanics in the world, but a mind riddled with doubt.

Focus on the Target

The most common mental problem among amateur golfers is to focus on the ball instead of the target. I call this “ball fright.” They stand over the ball and stare at it, with a thousand thoughts in their mind, each one letting even more doubts creep in. Often times they seem mesmerized by this tiny white enemy on the ground before them. Instead of trusting their instincts and what they have practiced, they freeze over the ball. This usually causes them to swing *at* the ball, instead of *through* it.

One of the key habits to overcoming this problem is to focus on the target—on what we want the ball to do, and where we want it to go—then to trust our swing to come through for us. To move through the ball with a free-flowing swing. In effect, we have to simply relax and let go, and allow our instincts—what we know to be true—to take over. Our swing has worked for us before, and we should trust that it will again.

A lot of people have a similar problem in life. When trials come our way, the temptation is to turn our attention to the problem at hand instead of trusting God to work things out. When we focus on a specific event or obstacle, it keeps us from seeing the bigger picture. We allow ourselves to freeze and tighten up, and we lose perspective. We get caught up agonizing over the crisis and lose sight of the target, and the longer we do this, the more doubts begin to creep in and shatter our confidence.

“It requires heroic courage to trust in the love of God no matter what happens to us.”
-- Brennon Manning

The key is to focus on the bigger picture, on allowing God to work through the problem to get us to a better place—closer to where we need to be. If we can simply take our minds off of the specific trial or obstacle, and instead look to the greater goal—the desired result—it frees our minds to relax and trust what we know to be true: that God has always been faithful, and he will continue to be so.

God is greater than any trial that may come our way. It's our job to simply swing through the difficult times that come our way and trust him with the outcome.

Expect Some Trouble

It's important to note that life, like golf, is a game of imperfection. We will never go through a round without finding ourselves in some sort of peril, without mis-hitting shots, without finding ourselves in trouble. Christ never promised us a worry-free round, but if we put our faith in him, he does guarantee a solid outcome in the end. When we trust Christ with our future we know that in spite of our imperfections, he will guide us closer to the target with each swing. Our triumph comes from knowing that we have played the course in faith and obedience, focusing on the goal with each shot, instead of our own flaws and inconsistencies.

"You can talk strategy all you want, but what really matters is resiliency."
-- Hale Irwin

PART THREE
COURSE MANAGEMENT

“Success depends almost entirely on how effectively you learn to manage the game’s two ultimate adversaries: the course and yourself.”

-- Jack Nicklaus

“Golf is a thinking man’s game. You can have all the shots in the bag, but if you don’t know what to do with them, you’ve got troubles.”

-- Chi Chi Rodriguez

“Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny.”

-- Kin Hubbard (American Humorist)

13 Play The Percentages

I'll never forget the time that I was playing in a tournament at Augusta and found out that I was scheduled to tee off between Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. It was in 1978, during the heyday of these two golfing legends.

On the practice tee before the round I was hitting balls with Nicklaus to my left and Palmer to my right. I glanced up at the stands and it looked like the parting of the red sea. Half the people were on one side, watching Jack, and the other half were watching Arnie, with no one in the middle. Talk about feeling out of place!

The first tee at Augusta is the most frightening shot a golfer can imagine—a huge, elevated tee box hovering high above a long, tiny fairway in the distance. Arnie was waiting to tee off, and I walked over to Jack and asked, “Do you have any advice for a rookie?”

He said, “You mean this is the first time you’ve played here? I thought you’d been here a number of times.”

I was flattered to think that he saw me as a viable contender. Right away it put me in a positive state of mind. But I assured him that I was new to the tour and had never played at Augusta. Then he went on to give me this piece of advice:

“In order to play Augusta, you really have to play to your strengths. You have to realize that there are a lot of birdies to be had out here. The par-5’s are difficult, but you can usually get on in 2 if you don’t waste your shots. But the most important thing to remember is this: don’t try shots unless you have a better than 50-50 chance of pulling them off. Otherwise the course will eat you alive.”

It didn’t take long into the round to see what he was talking about. Augusta is a hard course, to be sure, but if you relax and play it one shot at a time, you can pull off a decent score. The key is to plan your shots well and not take unnecessary chances—to focus on your course management and only play the percentage shots. Jack’s advice paid off for well for me. I played a good round.

One hole did blindside me, though. During my practice rounds I had checked the course out pretty well, and I noticed that on the thirteenth hole there was a dry creek bed running in front of the green. On the last day

*“Focus not on the commotion
around you, but on the
opportunity ahead of you.”*
-- Arnold Palmer

of practice I went for the green on that hole and came up short, landing in that dry creek bed. When I got to the ball I saw that it was sitting up pretty nicely in the high grass, and I was able to get a club on it and get in close to the pin. Before moving on, I took some time to throw a number of balls into the creek bed and practice hitting them. I discovered that more often than not I was able to make good contact with the club, so I made a note to myself in my course journal: “Don’t be afraid to go for the green.” I knew that if I didn’t make it I had an 8 out of 10 chance of having a decent enough lie to get up and down from the bottom of the dry creek bed. My strength has always been my short game, and I’d rather be in high grass 10 feet off the green than in the fairway for a 60-yard pitch shot—which is usually my weakest short shot.

During the first round of the tournament I hit a pretty good tee shot on the thirteenth hole and had a long 2-iron into the green, so I went for it. I made decent contact, but it didn’t quite get the distance I needed. The ball caught a bad bounce just in front of the fringe and went backward into the creek bed. I was a little disappointed, but I wasn’t terribly worried, since I had suspected that might happen.

When I reached the green, however, my heart sank. It appeared that someone had put up some boards and stakes the night before, creating a small dam along the creek. Through the night it had filled with water, and my ball sank into the middle of it.

In spite of that incident I stayed committed to Nicklaus’ advice and ended up finishing 5th in the tournament. At 8 under par, I came in only 3 strokes behind the winner, Gary Player, and tied with Nicklaus.

The advice Jack gave that day is good for all of us to remember. If you don’t have a better than average chance of pulling off a shot, don’t try it. Someday, if you keep practicing and playing, the shots that seem out of your comfort zone today will be routine iron-plays. But until that time, be patient and play it smart.

Courageous Timidity

The great Bobby Jones gave some good advice to golfers on playing the smart shot instead of taking unnecessary chances in his book, *Bobby Jones on Golf*. It’s interesting to note that Bobby Jones was the one who designed the infamous course at Augusta. He wrote:

“J.H. Taylor made the statement that all the great golfers he had known had possessed a quality he chose to call ‘courageous timidity.’ That happy phrase expresses exactly the qualities a golfer, expert or not, must have in order to get the most from whatever mechanical ability he may have.

He must have courage to keep trying in the face of ill luck or disappointment, and timidity to appreciate and appraise the dangers of each stroke, and to curb the desire to take chances beyond reasonable hope of success.”

Take The Smart Shot

In real terms, playing the percentages means knowing when it’s time to lay up instead of letting it rip, or going for the pin. There’s not a golfer alive who hasn’t struggled with the temptation to try and crush a 2-iron over the water to carry the green. We see the hole and we know that if we connect just perfectly, and the wind doesn’t blow, we might just make it. But more often than not, it leads only to greater frustration as we pull another ball out of the bag and drop it along the water’s edge.

Experienced players know that taking such a risk isn’t worth the potential of a lost stroke, especially during a heated tournament.

Just yesterday I was watching Tiger Woods during the final round of the Williams Open. He came from behind to overtake Vijah Singh to win the tournament. Once again, Tiger showed why he is the number one ranked player in the world.

On one of the final holes, Tiger was faced with a long, tight par-4 and decided to lay up in the fairway, leaving himself a second shot of 188-yards. With his length off the tee, he could have chosen to take a driver or a 3-wood and try to crush it to within 80 or 90 yards of the green, but he didn’t. The fairway was narrow, and he knew that all he needed was par to stay in the lead, so he didn’t take any chances. He stayed calm and played the smart shot, and today he’s got yet another win under his belt.

“Hogan was the master at course management— using one shot to set up for the next... the ultimate chess player on the golf course... He played one shot at a time. The hole he was on was just 1/18th of a round.”

-- Ken Venturi

Flee From Temptation

As much as possible, I try to apply that same principle to my life and faith. I see no reason to take unnecessary chances where temptation is concerned. I know my weaknesses, just as you know yours, and I take every precaution to keep myself free from being tempted to sin in those areas.

The enemy makes it his business to know our strengths and our vulnerabilities, and he preys on those areas that might cause us to fall. When we allow ourselves to be put into positions where he can play on our soft spots, we are doing nothing more than adding undo stress and

complication to our walk with Christ. Even more importantly, we are letting Satan divert our attention away from God's greater will and onto our own struggles and imperfections. Satan is a master at creating dams of temptation within our lives to keep us away from God's greater will.

As an example, I know that there are many men who have a problem with lust and sexual impurity, yet they continue to travel alone on business trips, knowing full well of the temptations they will face in an empty hotel room far from home. These men are often committed followers of Christ who want to remain pure, yet the temptations of the road often prove greater than they can handle, so they fall to sin, and struggle with pain and guilt over their indiscretions. This is sad, since there are simple and concrete things that they could do to by-pass these temptations.

For some men, that might be as simple as calling the hotel in advance of their trip and asking that the cable or in-room movies be blocked in their room. Others may need to not allow themselves to travel alone, perhaps always taking a co-worker or friend (of the same sex, obviously), or even their spouse with them. Whenever possible, they should try to stay in the home of friends or associates when they travel. The key is to know your weaknesses, and then do whatever it takes to give yourself the greatest chance of overcoming them.

“So what is the solution when temptation rages? If we are weak and have not taken precautions, if we have not applied preventive medicine, we have already failed. The only answer is to plan, to anticipate danger, to plot the way of escape.”

-- Jerry B. Jenkins

When I traveled on tour, I made a regular habit of staying in the homes of Christian families along the road whenever possible. Sometimes they were friends, and other times they were people who had heard of me through mutual acquaintances and offered to put me up. Some of my best experiences on tour came out of the many great times of fun and fellowship I shared with these wonderful followers. Not only did I make a lot of new friends along the way, but I was also able to strengthen my existing relationships as well.

Through this simple practice, I was able to turn moments of potential temptation into times of great strength and edification.

If someone has a problem with alcohol, it only makes sense that he or she should stay away from bars and parties where liquor is being served. If a married person struggles with an attraction to a fellow co-worker, a waitress at their favorite restaurant, or a person at their health club, it is their responsibility before God to steer clear of this temptation. This may mean

finding another health club, discovering a new diner, changing positions at work, or even finding a new job altogether.

The point is, you and I know our weaknesses and our greatest points of temptation, and it is up to us to do whatever it takes to remain faithful to God in spite of them. We need to be able to plan our lives in the same way that a successful golfer plans each hole—as just one shot among many in a round, each intended to get him to his ultimate goal.

Proverbs 16:9 says, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” When we allow God to be our guide, he will help us avoid the pitfalls and temptations that surround us on every side.

Whether in golf or life, we should always put ourselves into the greatest position to do well. And that means to play the percentages. If you don't think you have a better than average chance of succeeding, don't make the attempt.

14 Stay In The Moment

My first attempt at playing on the Senior tour came in 1995, at the Egypt Valley Country Club in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My game was really on at the time, and I shot an opening round of 67, to put me one stroke off of the lead.

The seventeenth hole was a long par-5, and my second shot came up short—about 30 yards off the green. I was setting up for a good pitch shot, hoping to get in close enough for a birdie. But before I hit the shot, my son, Scott, who was caddying for me, said “Knock it in, Dad!” Scott and I had been spending a lot of time practicing short pitch shots like this one during the weeks prior to the tournament, and he knew that I could nail it if I got the right line.

I looked over at Scott and gave him a quick smile and a nod. He knew what that meant. I stood over the ball with one thought in my mind: “aim for the hole—dead center.”

I hit a perfect chip that landed softly and rolled right into the cup for an eagle. After that I went to the eighteenth hole pumped and confident, and came away from that one with a birdie.

On Saturday I was paired with Jimmy Powell, the leader of the tournament. For much of the round we were trading strokes back and forth. I’d take the lead, then he’d shoot a couple of birdies and pass me by. It was neck and neck. But somewhere around the ninth hole I began to lose my concentration. In my effort to pull ahead I strayed from my game plan and started to take unnecessary chances. I’d hit a poor shot, then walk up to the ball angry at myself, wondering why I couldn’t relax and stay focused. I found myself standing over the ball with doubts creeping into my mind about my club selection, or the angle at which I was coming into the green. I kept focusing on the trouble ahead, instead of relaxing and trusting my swing. Hard as I tried, I couldn’t seem to stay in the moment.

“When I think about three things during my swing I’m playing poorly; when I think about two things, I have a chance to shoot par; when I think of only one thing I could win the tournament.”

-- Bobby Jones

I walked off the eighteenth green with a decent score for the day. On Sunday I shot a couple over par, but it was too little too late. Jimmy Powell, my playing partner on Saturday, went on to win the tournament, and I

finished tied for 23rd place—a respectable showing for someone new to the Senior tour, but not as well as I was capable of shooting.

Distractions will undo a golfer quicker than anything else on the course. When we allow our mind to wander, or to get ahead of us, our game is destined to suffer. Many a good round has been ruined by players who let their thoughts stray toward the next shot or the next hole, or a looming bunker in the fairway ahead.

Successful golf demands to be played one shot at a time. In golf, each stroke must be taken as if it's the most important shot of our round. Whether we have a simple lay-up into the fairway or a 10-foot putt for birdie, it's crucial that we take great pains to analyze and plan the shot, and then bring our entire focus into executing it well. Because the success of the shot at hand will directly affect the lie and position of our next stroke.

When discussing course management, Arnold Palmer once said, "The key is playing the ball to the best position from which to play the next shot." No matter how hard we try to make it, the essence of good golf can be boiled down to a basic strategy of planning each shot well, and then executing the shot to the best of our ability, one stroke at a time. But in order to do that, we have to keep our minds free of distractions and negative thoughts. We have to stay in the moment.

Stay In Control

One of my favorite aspects of golf is that after every hole you get to start fresh. When you're standing on the tee box, you have the ball in your hand. No matter how poorly you shot the previous hole, at the moment you are in complete control. You can tee the ball up wherever you like behind the markers. You can choose how high or low you want your ball to sit up, and from which angle you want to come into the fairway. Every round of golf gives you eighteen different opportunities to take total control over your circumstances. It's a tremendous advantage in a game where course debris and unlucky lies can so easily add strokes to your game.

One of the most important strategies to good golf is to stand on each tee box and carefully plan how you're going to play the hole. Once you've hit your tee shot, the rest of the hole is governed by circumstances that are often out of your control. That's why it's so important to take advantage of your tee shot, while you are still in a position of strength and command.

Before teeing up, survey the course well. Plan exactly where you want to be hitting your second and third shot from, then decide which angle and club will put you in the best position to carry out that plan. Once you've purposed what you're going to do, put all other thoughts and doubts aside

and commit to your plan. Play it just as you saw it in your mind's eye, one shot at a time.

Focus On Today

When Bobby Jones was a young golfer in his teens he had an opportunity to win a major tournament. Coming into the thirteenth, he was four holes ahead with five holes to play. He was so sure he was going to win that he started to let his mind drift, and began thinking about what he was going to say during his acceptance speech when they presented him with the trophy. He made several crucial mistakes and ended up losing the tournament by 1 stroke. He later told a friend what he had learned through the ordeal. "Never shake hands with yourself until you have shaken hands with your opponent," he said.

"A spiritual legacy is passing down to the next generation what matters most. Your faith in Jesus Christ and the core values of His eternal kingdom."

-- Steven Lawson

In golf, and in life, it's never a good idea to get ahead of ourselves. The prize will come in due time to each of us, but today we need to focus on the task at hand—on staying in the moment.

Live Each Day For Christ

In Psalm 103:15-18, King David wrote:

"As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts."

So often we spend our days in pursuit of fame or fortune or power, dreaming of the future and the glory that our efforts will bring us in the eyes of others. We long to be looked on with envy by our friends and peers, and attempt to control our future through hard work and effort. But what the Lord wants is for us to focus on the here and now, on the task at hand, on making an impact on the world wherever we happen to be at the moment.

I remember a time toward the end of my PGA career when I was really frustrated with my game. I was hitting the ball well, but I couldn't seem to post the kind of scores I needed to stay in contention. Round after round I tried to make something happen, but I couldn't seem to pull it together.

Then one day I picked up a copy of a book titled *Burnout*. The book caught my eye because I really felt at the time that I was starting to

“burnout” in my career. I don’t remember much about the book, or even who wrote it, but I do recall the author’s definition of life. He said, “Life is what happens to you while you’re planning your future.” That phrase hit close to home for me, because I felt I was stuck in that mode—always looking ahead and planning, trying to direct my life and career the way that I wanted it to go.

That simple lesson made a big impact on me, and proved to be something of a turning point in my career. I began learning to take one day at a time, and to trust God more with my future.

St. Augustine once said, “We must care for our bodies as if we’re going to live forever, but we must care for our souls as if we’re going to die tomorrow.”

Another insightful writer had that same truth in mind when he wrote, “This life will soon be passed, only those things done through Christ will last.” The only important and lasting impact of our lives will be what we have sowed into God’s kingdom—our love of the Lord and our willingness to keep his covenants and commands.

That’s the only legacy that matters.

The charge for you and I is to stay in the moment, both in golf and in life.

15

Pick A Target, Then Play The Shot

At the north course of the Los Angeles Golf Club there is a hole on the back nine that is a long par-4. You can't see the fairway from the tee box, but in the distance, almost 480-yards away, are three stately palm trees. They are no more than six-feet apart from each other, and sit directly behind the green.

I stood on that tee box once during a tournament and asked my caddy where I should aim. He said "Aim right at those three trees in the distance and it should put you right in the middle of the fairway." That was good reference point for me. I took the shot and had a pretty good lie, right where he said I'd be.

But before leaving the tee box, my caddy told me a story he had heard about the late Ben Hogan. Hogan had stood on that same tee box years earlier and asked his caddy the same question. "Where should I aim?" He got the same answer that everyone gets—"Aim at the three trees in the distance." Hogan then turned to his caddy and asked, "Which one?" Now that's a man who knew how to focus!

That's why Ben Hogan has always been one of my favorite golfers. I had the privilege of watching him practice once at Shady Oaks Country Club, and his precision with a club never ceased to amaze me. Even in his later years he practiced every day, hitting shot after shot, striking his target each time with pinpoint accuracy. It was an awesome thing to witness.

I heard that Hogan was once asked about his favorite hole of all the courses on tour, and he named the eleventh hole at the Pinehurst number two course. His statement surprised a lot of people, because this particular hole doesn't seem very spectacular when you first come to it. I've played it a number of times and it never struck me as a hole worth remembering. There are hundreds of holes on tour that do make quite an impression on you, but this is not one of them.

From the tee the fairway appears to have very little definition. It's a long, flat hole that doglegs to the right, with small mounds and tufts of high grass on the horizon. It's like playing in an open hayfield somewhere in Nebraska. Yet as you walk the hole from tee to green you find that many traps and troubles abound along the way. All over the fairway are small bumps and swells and dips—things you can't possibly see from the tee box.

"I've always believed that success is achieved when proper preparation meets opportunity."

-- Tom Lehman

And the green sits down low in a small hollow in the distance, totally hidden from view. You can only see half the flagstick from your approach shot, and you have no idea about where the cup might be located on the green.

To add even greater risk, at the time that Hogan played, the course didn't come with precise yardage markers on every corner. Today's professionals have the advantage of knowing exactly where everything is on a course. Golf courses come complete with markers sprinkled throughout the fairway, giving exact distances to and from every trap and obstacle on the course. But Hogan had to play by feel, trusting his skill and instincts to gauge the right distances.

Most players grieve at the thought of having to play holes like this one. They see the risks of getting into trouble and fear losing a stroke or two. But that's exactly why Hogan liked it so much. He knew that if he needed to gain a stroke on another player during the heat of a tournament, this was his opportunity to do so. He was so good at landing a shot exactly where he was aiming that he was able to stay out of problem areas.

Skillful players welcome adversity. They see it as an opportunity to put into practice the talents they have honed through years of hard work and determination. And they look at challenges not as a foe, but as an opportunity for growth.

Hogan's skill with a club gave him the confidence to face any obstacle head-on. He had spent so much time on the practice range learning how to stick a shot exactly where he was aiming, that when potential trouble arose on the course, he had the faith to approach it with conviction and trust. That's why he is known as one of the greatest players in the history of the game.

Always Have a Target

I've noticed an interesting dynamic among golfers of all skill levels and handicaps. I'll be playing with a foursome and we'll come to a short hole with a very narrow fairway feeding toward the green. Most players will take an iron or a wood they feel confident with and land the ball pretty safely in the narrow pocket.

Then a few holes later we'll come to a long par-5 with water on the right and a wide, expansive fairway in front of us. Everyone grabs a driver and lets it rip. Almost without exception the balls will scatter all over the place, and usually at least one will end up in the water. We have a huge, forgiving fairway to work with, yet most of the shots will end up in some kind of trouble.

<p><i>"Take dead aim."</i> -- Harvey Penick</p>

This happens because our focus is diminished. Our target is so big and wide that we let our guards down. We assume that we can stay out of trouble pretty easily, so we take more club than we need and swing harder than usual, and by doing so, we've set ourselves up for another costly stroke.

Playing any shot or hole without a specific target in mind is a formula for trouble. Whether it is our tee shot, a lay up in the fairway, or an iron into the green, it's important that we always pin down exactly where we want the ball to land, then aim for that spot.

I tell students on the driving range to work with each club to learn the exact distance they can strike it, and then to practice hitting a specific flag or mound in the range. And I have them work at that shot until they can hit it 8 out of 10 times. Then I stress the importance of doing the same thing during a round. Before each shot, pick a spot in the fairway or on the green and then take all other thoughts out of your mind. Bring your entire focus on that spot, as if it were the flagstick. Gauge the distance carefully, pick the club you need, and then take the shot.

More often than not, this practice will put you in great position to score well on every hole.

Make Sure You Have The Right Target

Back when I was a rookie on tour there was a fellow rookie player who was also working to qualify for his tour card. On one occasion we came to Palm Springs after having been rained out in Hawaii. We got to California late Monday night and the tournament was to start on Wednesday. We had one day to learn all four of the qualifying courses at Palm Springs. We couldn't possibly play all of the holes, and many of our caddies were kids from the area who didn't know the courses any better than we did.

During the first day of the tournament, this fellow rookie came to the third hole on a course which he had not had time to survey beforehand. It was a long par-5 with water running down the right side of the fairway. In order to have a good shot at the green, he decided to hit a 3-wood just short of the water. He hit a great shot, but it rolled further than he expected and went right into the lake. It was a frustrating bit of bad luck, but the guy took it in stride. He figured he could drop and still get on with a solid shot, and maybe even land it close enough for a birdie. He hit a perfect 3-wood over the water and landed it safely on the green. It looked like he still had a chance to make birdie.

But as he was making his way to the hole, he noticed another group walking up onto the green. He stopped and surveyed the landscape for a few seconds, then realized that he had been aiming at the wrong green all along.

It seems funny now, but at the time that mistake cost this poor fellow some needed strokes. He hit some of the best shots of his career, only to find out in the end that he was aiming at the wrong target.

A lot of people make that same mistake with their lives. They spend their days working and planning and executing their game well. They try to the best of their ability to do everything right. They set goals for their family and their future, and they stay true to that vision. They even stop to re-evaluate their purpose and direction from time to time. But when they reach the end they look back to discover that they had been playing toward the wrong target all along.

Christ is the one true goal that can bring meaning and purpose to your life. If your aim is not centered directly on his will and vision for your future, you are missing the only target that matters.

“That’s what playing professional golf is all about, to work hard enough to get yourself in the position where you must pull off the great shots in order to win.”

-- Tom Kite

16 Positive Club Selection

Over the years I've played in hundreds of pro-ams, and I've noticed that most amateurs consistently come up short with their irons. Very seldom does an amateur player hit his approach shot to the pin. They either come up short of the green altogether or they leave themselves a long putt to the hole.

In fact, the question I get most often from amateur players in pro-ams is, "How do you always end up at the pin?" The answer I give them is that I always take enough club. I know my yardages and I play to them. And if I have a question about which club to use, I almost always take the longer one.

I'm convinced that most players struggle with their approach shots simply because they are under-clubbing. They are using the iron that they believe to have the right distance, but more often than not it leaves them short of the target. The reason for this is that most players don't make solid contact with the ball. The club they are using would be the perfect distance with the right swing and connection, but even a slight mis-hit will cause it to lose power and come up short. In my clinics I explain that a ball struck squarely with a clubhead going 80-miles per hour will go further than one struck slightly off-center at 120-miles per hour. Timing and control in the swing is more important than speed.

"When your shot has to carry over a water hazard, you can either hit one more club or two more balls."

-- Henry Beard

On the practice range players usually hit balls farther than they do on the course. They are more relaxed and at ease, and their swings tend to be fluent and smooth. They tend to get spoiled, because each shot is hit from a perfect lie, and the range has no trees or lakes or bunkers to get them into trouble. As a result, they swing easier and hit the sweet spot more often. But when they get on the course their bodies tense and their swings become slightly more tight and rigid. This causes them to have less flexibility, which in turn slows down their clubhead speed. And the result is, their irons lose the distance they need.

I encourage players who struggle with this problem to simply take more club than they need with each approach shot. Eventually, as they begin hitting the target more often, their game will grow in confidence and their bodies will begin to relax and help them gain accuracy. When this happens, they will find themselves carrying over the pin on occasion. This is because they are more consistently hitting the sweet spot. With time they

will need to start clubbing back down. But until that time, they should continue to use more club than they think they need.

In the words of Abe Mitchel, one of the greatest players and teachers from the early 1900s, “Never under-club is a good motto; or perhaps I should say, ‘When in doubt, over-club.’ The more you learn to play within yourself the better will your game be.”

Aim High

Another good tip I give to amateurs who have pretty good aim but always seem to come up short of the pin during their approach shots is to aim at the top of the flagstick. Most players aim just shy of the hole when they pitch in from around 100 yards, hoping the ball will land on the green and roll toward the hole. They’re often afraid of overshooting the pin, so their muscles tense and they come up short. Also, most players have a tendency to look at the cup when hitting toward it, and normally we tend to aim where our eyes are focused.

If they will aim at the top of the flagstick, they have a much better chance of landing one close, since most shots have a tendency to come up short.

Three years ago I was playing in the British Senior Player’s Championship in London, and I found myself consistently coming up short when pitching from 60 to 70 yards out. I was really getting frustrated with myself. Then on the fifteenth hole, which is a long par-5, I hit a poor second shot and ended up 70 yards from the pin. As I stood assessing the shot, I decided that I was not going to leave it short. I thought of the advice that I had given so often to my students through the years—to aim for the top of the flagstick—and realized that I had not even been heeding my own counsel. I thought it was time I took some of my own medicine, so I aimed for the top of the flagstick. The ball flew right into the hole for an eagle!

It’s easy to give advice. The hard part is learning to take it ourselves.

Know Your Game

We’ve all been standing on a tee box of a long par-3 and heard one player ask another, “What club are you using?” His friend will say, “I’m using a 7-iron.” Then the one who asked the question will go to his bag, put away the club he has and grab a 7.

This is almost always a bad idea. Club choice in golf should be a very intentional and confident part of our game. Each player has his or her own

“If you don’t know the distances you hit your clubs—and most golfers don’t—then you’re giving away a lot of shots on the course.”

-- Gary Wiren

unique swing speed and power, and we need to have enough consistency to know what club we should use for any given shot. To use a club that fits someone else's game is not only a mistake, but a show of insecurity in ourselves and our abilities. It is the golfing equivalent to peer pressure.

The reason practice ranges come equipped with flags of varying lengths, each marked clearly, is so that players can work with their clubs to learn how far each one carries the ball. Any good practice session will consist of a focused attempt to zero in and strengthen those distances, until we have an intimate feel for our abilities with each club in our bag. Then we take that knowledge to the course in order to hit more greens and lower our scores.

My advice to players at all levels of the game is to know your clubs and yardages well enough to be able to choose and swing with confidence from anywhere on the course.

What Kind Of Club Are You?

Here's a question you probably haven't considered: If you were a golf club in God's divine bag, what kind of club would you be?

Would you be a driver—a club used to move the ball a long way down the fairway toward his goal? Would you be a pitching wedge—an iron intended for accuracy around the green? Or maybe a putter—a closing club used to put the finishing touch on a specific hole or target?

When God has a task he needs to accomplish, he searches his bag for the right club for the job. He knows which irons he can depend on in a given situation. He knows which wedge will get him in close to the pin. He knows the strengths and abilities of each and every club in his bag, and he'll use whatever he needs to accomplish his will.

He also knows which clubs have a history of letting him down, and they spend a lot of lonely hours in the bag—at least until they come around and begin to prove useful to him.

You and I have a unique and specific purpose in God's greater plan, and it's up to us to discover what that gift is, and then allow him to use us at every opportunity. If I am a 3-wood, I want to be the most accurate 3-wood

he's ever hit. If I am a pitching wedge, I want to slide effortlessly under the ball in order to help him hit it in as close as possible. If I am a putter, it's my responsibility to stay sure and true, holding the line tightly each time he takes a stroke.

"But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

-- Exodus 9:16

Whatever club God has created us to be, we should hope to be it with all our might and ability, so that he can always depend on us to come through for him in a clutch.

It's also important to be content with whatever purpose he chooses to use us for. We are each designed with a specific intention in mind, and it isn't our job to question that role. I may wish I were a powerful 1-iron that can blast the ball 240 yards to the green, but if that isn't what I was made for, I would never be effective in that position.

Part of being a useful tool for Christ, is knowing our purpose, and then responding whenever and however we are needed.

17

Expect Some Bad Shots

During college I remember playing a match once and watching one of the players in the group ahead of us. On the first hole he 3-putted, then looked up into the sky with disgust. I wondered if he wasn't blaming God for his misses.

On the next hole he 3-putted again, and then proceeded to drop his club and put his hands on his hips in a fit of anger. Once more he raised his eyes upward toward the heavens. This time I could hear him shouting all the way from the tee box. He said three times in a row, "Get off my back!" That's when I realized that he really was attributing his poor playing to some form of punishment from God. It was actually quite hilarious.

Though most players don't blame God when something goes wrong during a round, they do tend to expect too much from themselves, given the obstacles that abound throughout the course and the difficulty of the game.

At its core, golf is really a game of misses. The perfect round doesn't exist. The key isn't to play perfectly, but to minimize the effects of your misses. The fewer mistakes you make, and the more good breaks you get, the lower your score. In the words of the great Gene Littlaur, "Golf is not a game of great shots, it is a game of the most accurate misses. The people who win make the smallest mistakes."

"The more I practice the luckier I get."

-- Ben Hogan

Even the legendary Ben Hogan used to say that if he hit 3 or 4 really good shots exactly as he planned during a round he was happy with his performance. It's interesting that so many golfers tend to complain if every shot doesn't come out the way we hoped.

Years ago I heard someone say that as a rule the average player will have five good breaks and five bad breaks during an 18-hole round of golf. It's known as the "5 and 5 rule." I'm not sure who came up with it, but in my experience as a player and an instructor, I've witnessed its accuracy firsthand. At almost all levels of the game, players have experienced this principle. You get about as many good breaks as you do bad ones. It doesn't mean that you will always have five of each. Some days you may have seven or nine bad breaks, other days you may have only two. And your score usually reflects the round's dynamics. But on average, they tend to even out—five and five.

I tell players to take heart if they self-destruct on the first hole and come in with a double bogey. "Now you've got that out of the way, and

you've got some good breaks coming," I say. Though they don't always see it that way.

The key is to put the bad breaks behind you and to focus on the future. Continue trying to put yourself in the best position to score, and your persistence will pay off in the end. The longer you play, and the more accurate and confident your game becomes, the fewer mistakes you are likely to make. But even then, expect some bad shots during each and every round. Prepare for them. Even plan what you will do when they come. But above all, don't let them get you down or shatter your confidence.

"The test of a great golfer is his ability to recover from a bad start."

-- P.G. Wodehouse

What separates the great players from the average ones is usually their ability to deal with difficulties as they come and move through them to get in an even better position to succeed.

Tender Mercies

In 1978 I found myself tied for the lead during the last day of the Western Open at Butler National in Chicago. I was in the last pairing with Tom Watson, who had dominated the tour that season. Coming into the fifteenth hole, we were dead even. The fifteenth is a long par-5 with blind tee shot that feeds into a monstrous dogleg to the right. It was considered the hardest par-5 on tour at the time. On the left side of the fairway is an OB (out of bounds) fence, and the right side sloped into nothing but trouble. The area had been in a serious drought and much of the fairway was grassless hard-pan. I knew that if I hit it down right side, my ball would feed into a large thicket of rough. The only place to hit was on the left side of the fairway just a few feet from the OB markers—a tight shot even for the best of players.

I hit a perfect drive, right where I was aiming, but halfway through its flight a gust of wind caught the ball and drifted it right. I knew I was in trouble, and dreaded the walk down the fairway to see where I had ended up. But as I came to the ball I noticed it resting on the right side of the fairway on a severe slope, as if it were defying gravity. I couldn't imagine what was holding it up. For all practical purposes I should have been down deep into the bushes, but I wasn't.

Looking down at the ball I couldn't believe my eyes. It had come to rest against a small chunk of melting ice laying in the fairway. The ground was hard and dry and the heat was hovering above ninety-five degrees. I had no idea where it had come from.

I was smart enough to realize that I had better shoot quickly, before it had time to melt, but I still had to wait for Watson and Dave Eichelberger to hit. I quickly grabbed my club and positioned my shadow over the ball to keep the ice alive. I could literally see the ice melting as I waited. As soon as it was my turn I cocked my club and took my shot, landing safely in the fairway just shy of the green. I think it was probably the fastest swing ever recorded on tour.

“I commit to a shot 100 percent and I don’t worry about the result. What the ball does after it leaves the clubface is beyond my control, so I accept the outcome.”

-- Annika Sorenstam

I looked up to the sky and said aloud, “Thank you, Lord. I needed that.”

I didn’t come away with a win that day—once again I came in second for the tournament—but I did learn a valuable lesson. Life and golf both come complete with enough bad luck and trouble to keep us all on our toes. Often it seems as though we never get a break. But that’s because we usually spend more time worrying about the problems we have than we do thanking God for the blessings he gives us each day. It’s easy to dwell on the bad breaks, but let’s not forget to remember the good ones—those small mercies that come our way when we least expect it, saving us from the fate we really deserve.

Dealing With Tragedy

I’ll never forget the fateful day that my wife, Debbie, and I were traveling between Hilton Head and Greensboro for the next tournament. The kids were fast asleep in the back of the car as we moved through the long winding roads of the Carolina back country. There was a lull in our conversation, so Debbie reached over and turned on the radio. The first thing we heard was a news bulletin about a plane crash in Europe. Two jumbo jets had collided on the runway in the Canary Islands.

Debbie looked at me in horror and said, “That’s my parents’ flight.” Though I tried to assure her that the chances were slim that they would be involved, she seemed to sense otherwise. Something deep inside her heart told her that her parents were on one of these two planes.

Her mother had recently been diagnosed with Leukemia, and they didn’t expect her to live much longer. Her father had booked a flight and a cruise for them both, expecting it to be their last vacation together.

Debbie and I had no idea what to do next. In our confusion we had lost all sense of order and direction. We had recently bought a

condominium in our hometown of Orlando, and we considered heading back home until we could piece together more information about the accident. But then we thought of our good friends on the tour who would be waiting for us in Greensboro—friends like the Massengales, the Zarleys and the Nelsons—the players and wives from our PGA tour chapel group. These friends had become like family to us through the years, and we knew that they would be expecting us at the tournament. We also knew that if our worst fears were confirmed, we would rather hear about it among people we loved and cared for. We decided to go on to Greensboro.

For the better part of the day, our friends sat with us as we waited and watched for news about the plane crashes. Finally, Debbie got a call from a family member, confirming that her parents had in fact been killed. It was one of the saddest moments of our lives.

Debbie and I will never forget the comfort we felt in the arms these wonderful Christian friends. They cried with us, prayed with us, encouraged and strengthened us. God used them to help us get through this terrible tragedy in a very real way, and in the end, we emerged stronger and closer than before.

The Psalmist wrote to the Lord, “May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant. Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.” (Psalm 119:76-77).

In times of trouble, it’s comforting to know that we can turn to the Father of all compassion for help and guidance. We know that when we weep, God weeps with us. He engulfs us with his love and tenderness. And he works through those who are closest to us to wrap his caring arms around our pain, and brush away our tears, during times of sorrow and grief.

“What I learned through my battle with cancer is more valuable than what I understood about life before I was hit with adversity. I do not say this lightly or boastfully—I say this as one who has been humbled by pain and uncertainty—I would not be the man I am today if I had not been forced to fight cancer.”

-- Dave Dravecky

This side of heaven, life will always be riddled with trouble and strife. As long as there is evil and sin in the world, there will be hardship. But for those who follow Christ, the pain is fleeting and temporal. We know that if we just move through them and press on, we will soon be in a better place.

A Simple Prayer

After the accident, while Debbie and I were going through her parent’s things, we found a small diary that her father had started just a week

before their death. In it he had written about how much he was grieving over the thought of losing his wife to cancer, and how sad it was that this upcoming trip would probably be their last vacation together. He even wrote out a pray expressing his grief over the thought of losing her, telling God that if she had to go, he wished that there were some way he could go with her.

Somehow, finding that diary gave Debbie and I a great deal of peace and comfort. In a sense, we felt God had answered her father's prayer. Though we still missed them dearly, we knew that they were still together, and in a much better place.

Trust In God

The sovereignty of God,
count on it.

The hand of God,
grab hold of it.

The peace of God,
rest in it.

The grace of God,
bask in it.

The purpose of God,
seek to see it.

The patience of God,
believe in it.

The love of God,
experience it.

The forgiveness of God,
trust in it.

-- Wally Armstrong

18**Strive For Progress, Not Perfection**

The late Ben Hogan used to tell of a reoccurring dream he had throughout his career in golf. In his dream he was at the end of a perfect round after making birdies hole after hole, hitting each shot with pinpoint precision. He would walk off of the seventeenth green having birdied every hole, elated at the possibility before him. But on the eighteenth green, in each and every dream, he would miss a 2-foot putt for birdie, blowing his chance for a perfect round. Every dream ended the same way—with Hogan walking off the green in anger and complete frustration.

During his day, Hogan spent his entire career in pursuit of the perfect round. Those who knew him said that it was his obsession, his one and only goal. Though he was unmatched as a golfer, he never achieved that ambition.

The truth is, he never played the perfect round because it can't be done. I'm convinced that even if Hogan had finished a game with a birdie on every hole, he would still go away unsatisfied. He would simply set his sights on finishing with an eagle on every hole. Who's to say that isn't the standard of perfection?

“Ben Hogan refused to be satisfied with his game. There was no such thing as good enough in his language. He never could believe that. There was always something else that he needed to do.”

-- Valerie Hogan

There's nothing inherently wrong with someone setting their sights so high that they are destined to be disappointed. Hogan did, and it made him the greatest player of his day. But in doing so, we are in serious danger of losing perspective on the game and our lives. Striving to be the best you can be is a worthy goal, as long as you don't forget what's truly important.

The healthiest approach to golf is to strive for progress, but not to expect perfection. Each time we walk up to a tee box, we should feel as if we know a little bit more about the game than we did on the previous hole. We should have a slightly better understanding of how to control the ball, how to trust our swing, how to keep our mind in the moment, how to ultimately lower our score. We need to seek the thrill of the process, rather than agonizing over perfection.

Golf can never be mastered, but it can be played well. And that should be our primary goal.

The Joy Of Imperfection

The late author, A.A. Milne, in his book, *Not That It Matters*, wrote:

“Oh there are other reasons why golf is the best game in the world for the bad player, and sometimes I am tempted to go farther and say that it is a better game for the bad player than the good. The joy of driving a ball straight after a week of slicing. The joy of putting a mashie shot dead, the joy of even a moderate stroke of the brassie; best of all the joy of the perfect cleek shot—these things the good player will never know. Every stroke we bad players make, we make in hope. It is never so bad that it might have been worse; it is never so bad that we are confident of doing better the next time. And if the next stroke is good, what happiness fills our soul. How eagerly we tell ourselves that in a little while all of our strokes will be as good.”

We should all have such a great outlook and attitude toward our game.

Pressing On

The healthiest approach to the Christian faith is to realize the futility of trying to live a perfect life—to come to grips with our humanity, and our sinful nature—and to lay our struggles at the feet of Jesus. We are a fallen people, with flaws and imperfections that run throughout our character. We will never be able to overcome our sinful nature on our own. Until we come to grips with that fact and accept the unconditional love and forgiveness of our Savior, we will spend our time in hopeless pursuit of perfection. And we will always come up short, no matter how close we come.

“If you could eliminate the occasional bad shot you would be the first person to do so.”
-- John Jacobs

Jeremiah 9:23-24 says, “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight, declares the Lord.”

True peace before God comes when we accept our failings and realize that God doesn't expect us to be perfect. He accepts us just as we are. He knows that we will never be sinless, but as we trust him, we will sin less.

A few years ago I was invited to teach and play golf in China with some businessmen from the United States. We found ourselves traveling together on a bus to the Shanghai Country Club. We rode for nearly two hours through the backroads outside of Shanghai to get to the course. My

traveling partner was a man named Jim Hiskey, a good friend that I had known for many years, and with whom I had a close, accountable relationship.

Because of my past I'd always had a bad habit of looking down on myself and feeling that I wasn't good enough. I kept asking, "Why is it taking me so long to get better?" I always thought I should be trying harder. Jim had noticed this tendency, and used this opportunity to confront me about it. He said, "Wally, you're never going to be perfect, but God doesn't expect you to be. He's more interested in the process of you drawing closer to him each day. That's all you should worry about. Do you know him a little bit better today than you did yesterday?"

His words really got my attention. I had spent so much of my life being performance based, trying to win the Lord's approval that I struggled constantly to understand and accept the unconditional love of God. Yet I knew in my heart that the only way I would ever be able to break free from the feelings of shame and inadequacy would be to simply let go and embrace God's forgiveness and love.

Like golf, the goal in life is not perfection but progress. God understands our flaws and imperfections, and he accepts us in spite of them. The beauty of the gospel is that we are not expected to live a sin-free life. Jesus has done that for us, and through the miracle of the Cross, he opened a doorway to God's kingdom for all who are willing to accept his forgiveness, and his free gift of eternal life.

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:12-14).

The key to an effective walk with Christ is to put away our unrealistic expectations and our need to prove our worthiness, and simply give ourselves over to his love and acceptance. When we do it frees us to relax and live a life of joy and contentment, knowing that our eternal fate rests securely in the arms of Jesus.

Our goal before God should be to wake up each morning feeling a little bit closer to Jesus than we did the day before. To feel that we understand his will today slightly better than we did yesterday. To have a deeper love for his word, a stronger commitment to his purpose, a greater appreciation for his sacrifice.

When we truly understand the magnitude of God's grace and forgiveness, it releases us to embrace his love, and to enjoy our place before him.

I'm thankful that I had a friend like Jim who loved me enough to confront me when he saw my self-destructive habits and tendencies. God used him to bring me face-to-face with my serious lack of trust and faith. And through that experience I've been able to open up and let God love me just as I am.

I hope you have friends like Jim in your life.

And I encourage you to be that kind of friend to others.

19

Trust Your Skills, Not Your Instincts

Some of my favorite memories from my days on the tour came from the hundreds of practice rounds I got to play with Gary Player. As a young golfer I had the privilege of caddying for Gary, and then after earning my card to play, our friendship continued to grow. Only now I was competing against him, instead of with him.

Whenever possible, he and I would hook up to play practice rounds together before a tournament. Looking back, I think I learned more about the game during those rounds than at any other time in my career.

Often we would take three or four hours to play 9 holes. We'd hit several balls off of the tee, then walk around the greens dropping balls all over the place, practicing every imaginable shot. We'd practice hitting out of the sand, off of the hard-pan, out of the thick rough, under low-hanging limbs, over trees and obstacles. We would even drop behind trees to see if we could figure out the best way to recover. Gary and I would compete to see who could pull off the best shot from different situations. Often our caddies would find a shady spot along the green and sit watching as the balls would come soaring in.

"There are no born golfers. Some have more natural ability than others, but they've all been made."

-- Ben Hogan

When we were on the green, Gary used to challenge his faithful caddy, Rabbit, to try and stump him. And Rabbit loved every minute of it. "Give me a shot I can't pull off," Gary would say. Rabbit would find a spot around the green and bury the ball deep in the high grass or on the high lip of a deep bunker, but inevitably Gary would be able to get it up and down. Nothing gave him more thrill than pulling off a seemingly impossible shot.

One of the reasons Gary was such a powerful player, is that he knew how to practice. He never wanted to come to a shot during a game that he hadn't hit before. He practiced every conceivable shot and hazard that he might run into during a tournament. And because of it, he was able to play with greater confidence than any player I have ever known. I've never once seen Gary come to a shot that he didn't know how to hit. No matter how bad the lie or trouble, he always seemed to know what to do, and he knew he could do it! With Gary, there was never any guesswork. He had every imaginable shot in his bag.

Because of Gary's influence, I caught his spirit and integrated that same habit into my own game. One of my greatest strengths as a player has

always been that I can get up and down from about anywhere on the course, and I attribute that reputation to my many practice rounds with Gary. I learned from him how to sharpen my skills as a player, and it created a confidence in my game and abilities that I could have never otherwise attained.

That's something I could have never developed on the driving range. Though there are times when it's important to work on a specific problem or flaw on the range, real growth comes through on-the-job training—through learning how to manage the real-life obstacles that are bound to come during each and every round.

The tendencies for most golfers is to think that if they hit enough balls on the range, usually from perfect lies, that their instincts will get them through the problems on the course. Sometimes they do. But more often than not, it is skill and confidence that come through for us in a pinch—knowing that we can pull off a shot because we've done it before.

Growth Through Hardship

Several times during one of my many practice rounds with Gary Player I would come to a difficult lie and ask him, “Show me how you would make this shot.” Often he would give me pointers, and then demonstrate how he would do it. But then he would say to me, “You really need to experiment and learn what works best for you. I'll give you advice when I can, but if you want to really learn how to play, learn to play your own game.”

Gary knew that what works for one person won't necessarily work for another. In effect he was teaching me that the road to real growth is through trial and error, through working with your swing and figuring out what you can and can't depend on to come through for you. It's good to draw on the knowledge of others, but real-life skills are developed through experience—through doing, not just hearing.

I took that advice to heart, and began strengthening my skills through hard work and effort. Often I'd find myself with a lie or angle that really had me baffled, and I'd hit it over and over again, trying to figure out the best way to overcome it. At one time during my career I actually went to a lake on the side of a course and dropped balls along the edge at varying depths and lies. I'd place them one and two and three inches deep in the water, and then practice blasting them out onto the green. The drill paid off for me. Shortly afterward, during the

“You build a golf game like you build a wall, one brick at a time.

-- Tony Lema

Memorial tournament at Dublin, Ohio, I had three different water explosion shots on the front 9 alone. Because I had practiced those shots, I was able to get two of them up and down and the third one on the green.

I began carrying a little black book with me on the course, and in it I would keep a log of my shots. When I pulled off a difficult shot, I'd make a note in my book about how I did it—cataloging the best approaches to getting out of specific problems or obstacles.

I'd also make a note when I would come to a shot that I couldn't seem to get past. There were times when I tried over and over to get out of trouble on the course, but couldn't seem to make it work. I'd make a note of my difficulty, then later take my problem to people I trusted and ask their advice. I could always count on Gary for help. I'd take my little book to him and say, "I'm really stumped about this situation. What kind of shot would you use to pull it off?" He'd always be thrilled to give me a tip, or a drill I could try, and the next time I made it to the course I'd practice it again, until I knew I had found the solution. And then when a similar shot appeared I had the knowledge and technique to do what I needed to do.

Through this process I was able to sharpen my skill on the course and increase my confidence when difficult times arose. As the old sage, Abe Mitchel, once said, "Practice will make you wise."

In golf, and in life, we need to see trying situations as building blocks for the future. Each time we come to a hazard or complication, we should use it to our advantage—as a way of increasing our skills and abilities to overcome. Each time we play a course, we are bound to find trouble. If we depend on our instincts to get us through, we will likely only end up in more rough. But if we draw on experience—what has worked in the past, for us and for others—we will have a much better chance of pulling it off.

Paul wrote, "...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:3-5).

Effective and real growth comes through embracing the bad times as well as the good. When we understand that hazards will inevitably come our way, we are more likely to prepare for them, to practice what we will do and say when they arise, to teach ourselves the best approach to overcoming the many obstacles that life and Satan will put before us. And through those experiences we develop confidence—not in ourselves, but in the one who has given us the strength and skill to move past our present situation, and onto a better place.

Like Paul, we should see times of suffering as a building block to true Christian character.

20

Always Carry A Course Journal

Years ago, while playing on the tour, I learned the importance of carrying a course journal. At first I would keep track of my overall performance on the course—how many putts I made per hole, which clubs I used off the tee and in play, how many fairways I hit, etc. I wanted to get a feel for my strengths and weaknesses.

But as time went by, I began to see the amazing benefits of this practice, so my journaling became more specific. I started logging every aspect of the game that I thought might help me improve. I wrote down the particulars of each shot, noting facts about the lie and distance to the pin, the potential obstacles I had to work around, which club I used and how the shot turned out. I began cataloging these course journals and using them as an indication of my overall success.

After ten or fifteen rounds, I would compile the data I'd gathered and use it to produce my own statistics sheets. By doing so, I was able to see at a glance my strengths and weaknesses as a player. I could see how many putts I was averaging per hole, and it would tell me how that part of my game was working for me. I'd know which long irons needed the most work, and which ones were playing well.

This practice proved to be invaluable to the overall success and improvement of my game. Not only did I have a clean snapshot of my strengths and weaknesses, but I was able to have an objective way to gauge my progress as time went on. I could refer back to my course journal to see how my game had improved, and in which areas I had seen the least improvement.

“More than sixty years ago, I began writing notes and observations in what I came to call my Little Red Book.”

-- Harvey Penick

When I became an instructor, I took those experiences and created and published a journal for students to carry with them to the course. I developed a detailed log that works for any course. I encourage my students to fill in the specifics of each hole, and then log his or her performance on each shot. After ten rounds, they take these journals and compile and average their statistics onto a master sheet. This practice gives them all the information they need to improve their game and track their progress. It works for my students as well as it worked for me.

There are two good reasons why every player should keep a course journal. The first is that we need an objective way to gain information about

our game so that we will know what we need to practice on. And the second is that it helps us remember the shots we've pulled off, so that we can be better prepared to repeat them in the future.

No business can survive without a business plan. Any successful entrepreneur can tell you the importance of having specific long- and short-range goals, then regular checks and balances to gauge how well the company is staying on track. It is the only proven method to know where you are going, and how to get there.

A course journal is nothing more than a golfer's business plan. It is a way of setting goals, and then tracking your progress as you work to achieve them. And it is an important and integral part of any good golf program.

Keeping a Spiritual Journal

I have another journal that I keep off the course, and I consider it far more crucial and important to the success of my life than anything I've ever done in golf.

For as long as I can remember, I've made a habit of keeping spiritual journals. Each morning, during my time alone with the Lord, I try to spend some time writing out my thoughts and experiences. In fact, the books I've had the privilege of writing, including this one, have come out of the thoughts I've penned during these times of personal devotion and communion with the Lord. I journal my strengths and weaknesses as a follower of Christ. I write about specific struggles I happen to be going through, and how these problems are affecting my walk of faith. I log my victories, and the things I'm grateful for. I write down my prayers and the desires of my heart, expressing my innermost needs and ambitions. And I share my doubts and insecurities as a husband, father and believer.

There's nothing too secret or sacred for my spiritual journal. Whatever I am going through in my life, I log it in this special and personal ledger. And each day I lift up those thoughts to God. I lay everything at his feet—my cares, worries, failures and successes—and I trust him to use those experiences to make me stronger.

There's something inherently effective and practical about keeping a daily spiritual journal. In doing so, it allows us to track our strong and weak points as followers, and gives us a clear barometer of our daily walk. When we're consistent in the task, we are able to visibly gauge how we are doing, what we need to work on, and how we need to go about strengthening our

"The journal is a place to record insights and thoughts that apply to each day and to our life in general. It's also a wonderful record of our life."

-- Jim Sheard

relationship to God and others. We can see reoccurring problem areas, and better know how to target those weaknesses. We can track our percentages, and see which areas of our lives are not working well for us. And we can see those areas that have grown stronger and more confident through time.

But perhaps the greatest reward of keeping a daily ledger is being able to look back through time and see how God has used our transparency and faithfulness to help us grow and develop in character. We can see how he has taken our fears and walked us through them. We can track the many prayers that we've lifted up—often during times of total confusion and helplessness—and see how he helped us move through those times and brought us out the other end stronger and tougher than before.

We can also see those areas that have seen much too little growth on our part. And it gives us a clear indication of those things we are holding back from God—those hidden sins and transgressions that we have yet to deal with effectively. We see how those things have affected other areas of our life, keeping us from living up to our full potential as believers.

If you are serious about your walk with the Lord, let me strongly encourage you to begin today keeping a spiritual journal. Allow God to grow you as a Christian, to mold you in strength and character, to shine a bold light on the weaknesses and failures of your game. Let him reveal his will for your life through this simple but effective tool.

In my opinion, a spiritual journal is a critical and invaluable ingredient to any follower's walk with God. I've seen how it's worked in my life, and I know it can do the same for you.

PART FOUR
MENTAL AGILITY

“This should be the motto of every golfer. ‘If one man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men,’ says the Dhammapada, with oriental extravagance, ‘and if another conquer himself, he is the greatest of conquerors’—a text which is brought home to one in every round. ‘Greater,’ said Solomon, ‘is he that ruleth himself than he that taketh a city.’ In golf the ruler of himself will take many a hole.”

Arnold Haultain

“We create success or failure on the course primarily by our thoughts.”

Gary Player

“Golf is a curious game in being easy to comprehend, yet long in its realization.”

Percy Boomer

“In golf you have to concentrate. My father and my friends call it zoning. If you mis-hit a shot, you have to get your focus back. You have got to start thinking ahead. Don’t look back.”

Tiger Woods

21

Play Your Own Game

Back in the 70s a young player made his way onto the PGA tour that wanted desperately to be the next Ben Hogan. He had idolized Hogan since he was a child, and decided that the best way to play like him would be to simply imitate him in every way possible. He practiced like Hogan, walked like Hogan, even dressed like Hogan, wearing the characteristic white cap that Hogan was known so well for. When he hit a shot his reactions and antics seemed to come right out of a Ben Hogan newsreel.

The problem was, this kid was not Hogan, and his game reflected that fact. He didn't have the same skill or finesse with a club, so he didn't last long on the tour. Quite honestly, he was becoming a bit annoying, so most of us didn't mind seeing him go.

The fact is, the guy had great potential as a player, he just hadn't worked to find his own game and identity. He spent so much time comparing himself to Ben Hogan, that he was never able to develop his own particular style and strength on the course. As a result, he ended up as just another flash in the pan on tour.

By its nature, golf is an intensely individual sport. To play well it's important to see it as such, and to work to find your own specific personality and bent on the course. I'd love to have John Daly's length off the tee, but I don't have his strength or flexibility—not to mention his large, powerful frame. It would be great to have Vijah Singh's amazing accuracy with a long iron, or Phil Mickelson's finesse with a 60 degree wedge, or Tiger's unbelievable skill with a putter, but I wasn't blessed with any of those things. What I do have, though, is a strong sense of my own strengths and weaknesses, and an ability to play my own game, in spite of what others around me are doing.

It would be easy to get caught up in jealousy over those who have more wins or greater skills than I do. To be honest, at times I have struggled with it. But I've found that the best approach is to simply be happy for the skills I do have and not focus on the ones I don't. I've learned to play my own game and let others play theirs. Taking any other attitude to the course only leads to resentment and frustration.

“Do your best, one shot at a time and then move on. Remember that golf is just a game.”

-- Nancy Lopez

Using Our Spiritual Gifts

Tony Campolo, a well-known writer and speaker, once told of the time he was asked to speak at a small country church in Indiana. He arrived early at the building to make some last minute preparations for his sermon and noticed an elderly gentleman buzzing about the auditorium. The man carefully checked each thermostat and then opened the windows of the sanctuary slightly to let some air in. Then he went up and down each aisle to make sure that all the hymnals and Bibles were neat and in order. As he walked by, Campolo said to him, "You must be the custodian."

"No," the man answered, "I'm just exercising a special gift of the Spirit."

Campolo was intrigued by his answer, so he asked him exactly which gift of the Spirit he believed God had given him.

"The gift of helps," the man answered proudly. "Check it out in I Corinthians 12:28. You'll find it there. Paul talks about the gift of helps."

Campolo opened his Bible and looked up the passage, and saw that the man was right. "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then works of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues."

The man went on to say, "You know we get a whole parade of preachers coming through here on their way to bigger and better things. Each of them stays for a few years and then moves on. Each of them thinks that he's the best thing that this church has ever seen, and each of them thinks he's going to put this church on the map. Well, after they're gone for a few years we have a hard time even remembering their names."

Then, pointing to himself, he continued with a wide grin, "One of these days ole Harry's goin' to die, and the people of this church won't know what hit them. They'll come to church the next Sunday and find that nobody turned up the heat. They'll find out the hard way who shoveled the snow on all those winter days. And they'll take forever to figure out where half the stuff they need to run this church is stored away."²

It seems that Harry had a pretty good sense of his role in the church body. And he didn't shy away from telling people about it.

We've all been given unique and special talents to be used in God's service. Scripture speaks clearly about the importance of learning our spiritual gifts and employing them within the body of Christ in order that

² Tony Campolo, *How To Be Pentecostal Without Speaking In Tongues* (Dallas: Word, 1991), pp 34-35.

God may be glorified. Paul wrote again about it in his letter to the Ephesian church:

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up,…” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

When each of us works to use our specific gifts within the body, the whole church is edified. It brings a healthy balance to Christ’s kingdom on earth, and allows us to reach a level of effectiveness and unity that otherwise might never be accomplished. We were created with different talents and roles for a good reason.

But just as important as knowing and utilizing our gifts, is learning to be content with whatever role God has given us. Regardless of our task within God’s plan, we are invaluable to helping accomplish that greater goal.

“If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

-- 2 Timothy 2:21

At times I may wish I had the speaking ability of Charles Swindol, or Billy Graham, or the mind of R.C. Sproul, or the writing skills of Max Lucado, but I probably never will have. Maybe you won’t either. But the gifts that you and I do have are just as crucial. Where would a church be without ushers, song leaders, nursery workers, Sunday school teachers and custodians? For the whole to be effective, each part must function properly.

Paul addressed this issue to the church at Corinth. “Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body... But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” (I Corinthians 12:14-15, 18-20).

The key to a successful church is for each of us to learn our specific roles and to carry them out to the best of our ability—to use the gifts we do have and not worry about the ones that we don’t have. Any other approach only leads to jealousy and frustration.

Find Your Own Faith

I don’t believe there is another sport on earth that has generated the amount of instructional material as golf has. Everywhere you look you find golfing videos, books, tapes and magazines, each guaranteed to help reduce

your score and fix your swing. This is not surprising, given that golf is such a popular and difficult game. I'm not bothered by this phenomenon—in fact, I've created a lot of instructional material myself. I just hope people keep this material in the right perspective.

First of all, the only thing that can guarantee you a better game is hard work and practice. When asked once about the key to playing better golf, Ben Hogan said, "The secret's in the dirt. Dig it out like I did." There is no quick short cut to lower scores.

And secondly, it's important to remember that no two golfers have the same game. What works for one person may completely throw off another. We have different body types, personalities and mental agility, and our games should reflect that fact. Instructional material is not intended to define within us a perfect swing, but to give us a foundation upon which to build our skills. The temptation for a lot of golfers is to try and manipulate our mind and bodies to fit into the mold of whatever instructor we are reading or listening to at the time. In effect, we are trying to play their game, instead of finding our own. The problem with this is that most golf instructors are tall, young and lanky, with the flexibility of Gumby. Most of us are not built that way, and will never be able to match their swing.

That's the main reason I rely so much on mental images in my teaching—both on the lesson tee and in my books and videos. I want students to feel their way through the swing, not to do it the way I do. This helps them find and create their own unique swing pattern, and frees them to relax and focus on the results, instead of the mechanics.

My advice is to not shy away from instruction, but to take the advice you get and try to integrate it into your game as it applies—to use the wisdom of others to help hone your own unique set of skills and abilities.

That same advice applies when reading or listening to Christian teachers and authors. The marketplace is overrun with material for believers, each promising to help us grow deeper and stronger in our faith. This is a good and positive dynamic, because it shows that people are serious about their walk with the Lord. But it's important to use this material the way that it is intended—as tools to help us grow in our personal relationship with God.

"A holy life isn't the automatic consequence of reading the right books, listening to the right tapes, or attending the right meetings. It's the result of a living, loving union with Jesus Christ and a life marked by godly discipline."

-- Warren Wiersbe

Healthy growth doesn't come through blindly following the opinions and positions of someone we respect, but through taking their counsel and

integrating it into our own Christian walk as it applies. We should use their material to strengthen our faith and character, not to define them.

22

Dealing With Adversity

Years ago I heard the story of a rookie player who had worked his way up to the lead in a tournament going into the final round. He was playing some of the best golf of his life, and it looked like he might win. Coming to the seventeenth tee box he led the rest of the pack by several strokes.

Then on the seventeenth, he hit an errant drive that ended up in the woods, right at the base of a tree. He didn't want to take a drop and lose a stroke, so he opted to try and hit it and get it back into play. His club grounded on the tree trunk and knocked the ball sideways into another tree. He tried again and hit yet a third tree, but this time the ball bounced backward, almost knocking him in the head. Finally, he got the ball back on the fairway and was able to come away from the hole with an 8. It knocked him out of contention, and back to third or fourth place.

In the locker room after the tournament, the young rookie was changing next to a bunch of old pros, and he couldn't stop complaining about his poor luck on the course. He went up and down the room, whining about the events of the seventeenth hole, telling the story over and over to anyone who would listen. "If only I had taken a drop on that first shot," he grumbled, "I might have been able to come away with a bogey. I can't believe I didn't do that. Or maybe I should have used another club to pitch it out of the tree."

"Don't let the bad shots get to you. Don't let yourself become angry. The true scramblers are thick-skinned. And they always beat the whiners."
-- Paul Runyan

For thirty minutes he bemoaned his loss to the old veterans as they sat around the bar trying to relax, and having a few beers. Finally, one of the old pros got tired of the boy's ranting and said to him, "Let me tell you something, kid. We're not really interested in hearing about your bad luck. Half of the guys in here don't really care about your 8 on the seventeenth hole, and the other half wish you had made a 9."

The rookie got the message and quietly got changed. After that he no doubt learned to keep his problems to himself.

Years ago I was sitting around the clubhouse with a few guys when one of them handed me his business card. His name was Frank, and he told me that whenever someone would complain about their game, he would hand them one of his cards. On the back it read, "Your story has touched

my heart. Never before have I heard of such appalling misfortune on the golf course. Please accept this expression of my sincere sympathy.”

I almost fell out my chair from laughing. I’ve kept that card for over twenty years, and it still makes me smile. And it reminds me to keep my troubles to myself when I’ve had a bad round.

That’s a good lesson for all of us. When we’re struggling on the course, or going through an unlucky streak, it doesn’t do any good to complain. Most people really don’t care about how poorly we play. On the course it’s a good idea to keep your failures—and your successes—to yourself. Play your own game, and leave others alone to play theirs.

“Every shot makes somebody happy: the man who makes it if it is good, and the man he is playing if it is bad.”

-- Ike Handy

Don’t Dwell On Adversity

That’s a good thought to keep in our personal life, as well. We’ve all been around people who can’t seem to keep their problems to themselves. They moan and complain constantly about the poor hand that life has dealt them—the sicknesses and ailments that plague them daily, the setbacks in their career, the persecution they suffer at the hands of others. Each new dilemma is another round of ammunition in their arsenal of unfairness.

If you attend church regularly, you’ve probably run across a number of these types of people. They corner you in the hallway, and the minute you ask them how they are they begin to unload a fury of grievances. “Fred still hasn’t found work, and the insurance is about to run out. My back is still acting up, but how can we afford a chiropractor with no money coming in? The kids are too busy with their own lives to care, so we don’t bother them anymore.” Within a few minutes you are more depressed than ever.

“But don’t worry about me,” they continue. “I’ll make it through this. I always do. I don’t know how we’ll get by, but we’ll make it somehow.”

The biggest problem I have with people who tend to have this type of persecution complex is that it shows a tremendous lack of faith in God. If we really believe that God is in control, then we don’t spend our days fretting over the troubles that come our way. We instead focus on what he might want to accomplish through the trials, either in our lives, or the lives of others. No one is edified by our consistent grumblings.

“Pride is the deification of self, and this today in some of us is not of the order of the Pharisee, but of the publican. To say ‘Oh, I’m no saint,’ is acceptable to human pride, but it is unconscious blasphemy against God.”

-- Oswald Chambers

The truth is, complaining, at its core, is really a form of pride—the worst form, in fact. It is a way of drawing attention to ourselves. Most of us think of a prideful person as one who puffs his chest and brags about himself and his accomplishments. And that certainly is true. But the most common form of pride is self-degradation. When we constantly fret over the cares and afflictions that come our way, we are really trying to keep the focus on our own personal problems, instead of God’s ability to work through them. It is little more than a backhanded way of staying in the center of attention.

In fact, the pastor of our church, Joel Hunter, has often said that anxiety is actually a form of atheism. It indicates how little we trust God’s authority and control in our lives.

The best approach to dealing with problems is to keep them to ourselves and let God work through them. True faith is being able to lay all of our cares and worries at the feet of Jesus, and focus instead on the many blessings he has given us.

Of course, we all need to have a few people in our lives that we can confide in and trust to pray for us during trying times. But beyond that we should let our speech and attitude be positive and uplifting.

Joe Kirkwood’s Credo

The late Joe Kirkwood, a famous trick-shot artist from the early 1940s and 50s, used to have a business card that he would pass out, and on the back was printed this poem:

“Tell your story of hard luck shots,
Of each shot straight and true,
But when you are done, remember, son,
Nobody cares but you.”

Before his death, he also had that inscription chiseled into his tombstone.

Find Internal Significance

I was once asked to speak at a Christian men’s luncheon, and while waiting to give my talk, watched a number of men take to the podium to give their personal testimonies. Most were businessmen in the area, and they had wonderful stories about how God had blessed them financially and spiritually. One by one they got up to tell how God had opened the floodgates on their lives and careers—stories of new contracts, better jobs, bigger bonuses, more fruitful investments.

It was a great group of guys, and I loved hearing about the things God was doing for them, but somehow it felt a bit strange. I wondered about what was going through the minds of some of the men who had no stories to tell and sat silently as others shared of God's great blessings. What about the man in the audience who just lost his job, or watched his portfolio collapse? What about the guy who just found out that his wife had cancer, or that his business was on the verge of bankruptcy? How do these men feel when they hear stories of how God is raining his blessings on others?

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."
-- Jesus (Matt.5:3)

The truth is, God's blessing can't always be measured in material gain. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained that God, "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matt. 5:45). Sometimes he blesses us through trials and tribulations. God doesn't measure worth and significance the way that we usually do, so he will often bring tough situations into our lives in order to strengthen us, and draw us closer to him. When we feel the strain of trouble in our lives, maybe God is using it to teach us trust and dependence. When it seems that we are at the end of our rope, maybe God is extending his hand, waiting for us to grab hold and let him pull us through.

It's easy to get into the trap of believing that when things are going well in our lives, it is because God is shining his grace on us, and when things are going bad, God is somehow unhappy. Too often we associate blessing with financial and physical success. But God's ways are not that simple. He is not interested in how much we own, but in how much he owns within us.

On the golf course, people tend to wrap up their significance in how well they play, when a better measure would be how much they are growing and getting out of the game.

The same holds true in life. It's not how easily we get through each day, but how much we learn and grow spiritually in the process.

Don't Worry About Things You Can't Control

During the early 80s my game was really struggling. I'd had a number of pretty successful finishes through the years, but for some reason my game started deteriorating, and I found myself in something of a slump. The season had not gone well for me, and toward the Fall I realized that I was in danger of losing my PGA card. There were only two tournaments left for the year, and I had to make a good amount of money during those

rounds in order to gain a spot for the next season. Otherwise I'd have to go back to Qualifying school and try to get back on the tour. It was not a great feeling.

My chances came down to the last day of the season at Pensacola. I knew that I needed to shoot at least a 69 for the day to put me far enough up on the money list to keep my card. By the eighth hole I was already 2 over par. It didn't look promising.

Walking toward the ninth tee box I found myself completely exasperated. I began thinking to myself, *What am I going to do now?* I was convinced that there was no way I could recover before the end of the round, so I began to go over my options. *I don't want to face another year of Qualifying school, I thought. Maybe I should just get a job at a club somewhere. Or maybe I need to go into another line of work. I'm obviously not cut out for the PGA tour.* I was at the end of my rope, and emotionally beaten to the ground.

"You tend to get impatient with less-than-perfect shots, but you have to remember that less-than-perfect shots win Opens."

-- Curtis Strange

Then while standing on the ninth tee box a strange thing happened. For some reason a clear and distinct thought popped into my mind: *What's the difference between a birdie and a bogey a hundred years from now?* It seemed to come out of nowhere, but it really got my attention.

I told my caddy, Buzz, about it, and he said, "That's a good way to look at it. Just do your best. A hundred years from now no one will care what you shot."

I knew I had ten holes to go, and I committed that moment to stop worrying about what happens and just play my best. I stood on the ninth tee box before my shot and said aloud, "What's the difference between a birdie and a bogey a hundred years from now?" Then I took my shot—a beautiful drive right down the middle. My next shot was a 9-iron, and as I stood over the ball, I said the phrase again, this time a little under my breath. "What's the difference between a birdie and a bogey a hundred years from now?" Then I took my swing and the ball sailed right into the hole for an eagle!

I was playing with two great guys that day, Larry Rinker and Gary Hallberg, and they were thrilled for me. We high-fived each other on the green and then made our way to the tenth hole. For the rest of the day, I made a habit of repeating that statement before each shot. My game completely turned around. Larry and Gary had already earned their cards for the following year, and they spent much of the round rooting for me. Their encouragement, along with my fresh outlook and perspective, allowed me to

relax and play the way that I knew I was capable of doing. I ended up shooting a 67 for the day, and that was all I needed to regain my spot on the tour.

In golf, as in life, it's easy to get caught up wallowing in self-pity when things don't go our way. We spend a lot of time fretting over things that are not that important in the grand scheme of life—usually things that we have little control over anyway. And every now and then we need to be reminded that regardless of what happens, God is in control. He is right beside us, whispering in our ear, “You're right where you're supposed to be. Just trust me and it will work out.”

“Remember—you have to be comfortable. Golf is not a life or death situation. It's just a game and should be treated as such.”
-- Chi Chi Rodriguez

Beside, what's the difference between a birdie and a bogey a hundred years from now anyway?

23

Work With What You Have

I cut my teeth in golf on a small 9-hole course in my hometown of Oaklandon, Indiana. The course only had a couple of sand traps, and they were filled with hard, mid-west dirt. To get out you had to either chip it softly, or roll the ball out with a putter. Neither was a great alternative, so we avoided those two traps like the plague.

As a result, when I went on to play golf in college I had almost no experience playing out of sand traps. It was obvious to me and everyone else that this created a serious deficiency in my game, so I began practicing sand shots at every opportunity, but I never quite learned to be comfortable hitting out of the sand. I knew that if I ever had hopes of playing on tour, I would need to overcome this problem.

After a brief stint in the military, I went to southern Florida to take on the grueling, six-round, PGA qualifying school. As I looked out over the first course, I couldn't believe all the sand. In places it felt as if I were looking out over a desert. The course was beautifully landscaped, and lined with trees down every fairway, and I couldn't wait to play it. But every hole abounded with huge, gapping bunkers. I can't remember the last time I had felt so intimidated by a course.

In spite of my best efforts to steer clear of the sand, early in the round I found myself in a large, deep bunker around the green. As I stood surveying the shot, I considered my options. At first I was just trying to figure out the best approach to blasting it out of the sand and getting it to stick on the green. The walls were high and looming, and I knew I'd need to make solid contact. But then I noticed a low place in the lip ahead of me. The sand was pretty firm, and I thought if I could just get good contact and aim well, I could putt it right over that lip and onto the green. I decided to give it a try. My gamble paid off. I hit a perfect putt that rolled the ball up over the lip, through the rough and onto the green, ending about 4 feet from the pin.

"Hit the shot you know you can hit, not the one you think you should."

-- Bob Rotella

My playing partner couldn't believe his eyes. In the clubhouse later that day, he couldn't stop telling people about my up-and-down from the sand with a putter.

I always knew that someday I would need to learn how to play a proper sand shot. In fact, I wanted to be really good at it, and I was willing

to put in the hours of practice it would take to do so. But until that time, I had to make due with the skills I had.

Growing up playing on a poorly designed course didn't allow me to learn all I needed to know about tour-level golf, but what I lacked in ability I made up for in ingenuity. I learned to be creative on the course, and to work through trying situations the best I could. Instead of worrying about the skills I didn't have, I depended on the ones I did have. In the end it proved to only add to my strength as a player.

After gaining my card three years later, one of the first tournaments I played was at Pebble Beach. While there I ran across my old friend and ex-employer, Gary Player. Gary was the best sand player I'd ever seen, and I longed to have his skills out of the traps. I looked in his bag to see what kind of sand wedge he was using, and noticed that he had an old 1953 Wilson Staff club, so I went out and found one just like it. In fact, I found two and acquired them both. (It wasn't long afterward that I got a tap on my shoulder from Tom Watson, asking if he could have one of them. I wondered if perhaps he had been looking in Gary's bag as well, and had been trying to locate the same wedge. Could that have been the wedge he used to chip in at Pebble Beach to win the US Open?)

Over the months and years to come I worked tirelessly to learn how to hit all kinds of shots out of the sand. I was committed to being the best sand player I could possibly be. Through time my skills began to improve, and I was making a lot of progress. Often Gary and I would hook up before a tournament and play practice rounds. We'd spend hours dropping and burying balls in the traps and hitting them out, each time trying to enhance our skills a bit better.

Today, I am not only a good sand player, but it is one of the strengths of my game. Throughout my career, I've made many a good save because of my skills and ingenuity in and around the bunkers. What started out as a serious deficiency in my game eventually turned out to become one of my greatest assets as a player.

We all have strengths and weaknesses. Some golfers have an amazing long game, and can putt it in from anywhere on the green, but their short irons always give them problems. In spite of this weakness, they are able to keep up with other players, because they've learned to capitalize on the skills they do have and to work around the ones they don't.

I've always been good around the greens, and I've saved many a hole by chipping in close from very difficult lies and positions. Through hard

"No bunker shot has ever scared me, and none ever will. The key to this bravado is practice."

-- Gary Player

work and practice, I was able to turn my greatest weakness into one of my strengths. In fact, later in my career I often found myself looking forward to difficult lies in the sand because it gave me an opportunity to utilize the skills I had developed.

What I learned is that when you have a great short game it improves all of your shots. When you know you can get up and down from around the green, you have the confidence to attempt shots with your woods and long irons that you might not otherwise try.

In golf there is no one way to play. The goal is to get the ball into the cup in as few strokes as possible, and whatever works toward that end is a valid strategy. Even if it means taking a Texas wedge out of the sand.

A Creative Shot

There's a great story told about Ben Hogan when he was once playing in a tournament at Pebble Beach. The infamous seventh hole on that course is a short par-3 playing toward the ocean. It's a tiny green about 100 yards down hill, with a bunker along the front edge. The wind at Pebble Beach would often blow so hard off of the ocean that it was hard to stand up on the tee box. Players had been known to take a 2-iron off the tee and hit into the wind, just to get it to the green.

As Hogan stood on that tee box assessing the shot, the wind was blowing so hard that no one could imagine how he was going to pull off his shot. He surprised the gallery by taking out his putter, then aiming for the trap in front of the green. He putted the ball all the way down the fairway and into the bunker for a safe second shot toward the pin.

When in doubt, use your mind and get creative.

24

Play Within Yourself

One of the most difficult things a player has to do on the golf course is to stay involved in his own game, and not get caught up in watching someone else play. The tendency a lot of players have is to compare their game with their playing partners'. Most golfers are competitive by nature, so this is a natural trap to fall into, but it can easily throw off your round—especially if your partner is better than you, and maybe getting a lot of good breaks on the course.

It's hard to stay involved in your own game plan when the guy next to you is out-driving you by fifty yards, and getting more distance out of every iron in his bag. The temptation to keep up with them is more than most golfers can handle, so they over-wind the club and swing out of their shoes in an effort to match them. More often than not it only leads to disaster.

This is highly understandable since golfers tend to put so much emphasis on long drives off the tee. By nature golfers are fascinated by people who can crush the ball 300 yards down the fairway, like Tiger Woods and John Daly. But those guys would be the first to tell you that games are won and lost by what happens around the greens, not by long tee shots. As Harvey Penick once said, "The woods are full of long drivers."

The key is to fight the urge to keep up with others and to simply play your own game—to know your personal skills and abilities and play

"My strategy? Playing safe and within myself."

-- Billy Casper

within those perimeters. That's why it's so important to come to the course with a game plan laid out in your mind. It gives you a concrete plan of action to follow, and keeps guesswork out of the equation. But it won't work for you unless you can ignore what's going on around you and stick to it.

Lower scores happen when players learn to put distractions and obstacles completely out of their mind and focus on the task or shot at hand. And that means knowing what you can and can't do with a particular club at a given point and time. You weigh your skills and abilities against the options before you, and then make a decision based on the play that will give you the best chance of being in a good position to score. In golf, your most important rival is the course and the scorecard. Your goal is not to beat other players, but to beat the course better than other players are able to do on a given day.

Play within yourself and your abilities, and you'll have the best shot at doing just that.

Even Pros Get Distracted

High-handicappers aren't the only ones who fall into the trap of trying to keep up with their playing partners. I've seen it happen with players at all levels of the game.

I remember watching a tournament several years ago during Tiger Wood's first season on the PGA tour. During the third round he was paired with John Daly. The crowd that gathered to follow them around the course was almost unbelievable. Everyone, it seems, wanted to get a view of the two longest drivers on tour playing against each other.

One of the holes on the front nine was a long par-5 that doglegged sharply to the left. The fairway was wide for the first 250 yards, and then narrowed into a small gap between a mass of trees towering on either side. The fairway turned left just beyond the trees. Players had two options—they could either lay up with a long iron and pitch over the trees on their second shot, giving them a wedge into the green, or they could try to land a perfect tee shot right into the pocket of the narrow fairway between the trees, giving them a chance to carry the green in two. The latter option was extremely risky. If you missed the pocket, you'd be hitting out of the woods.

Daly was the first up, and few were surprised to see him with a driver in his hands.

Daly is known well for his go-for-broke attitude—which is both his strength and his weakness. To the delight of the crowd, he hit an unbelievable drive right down the middle that fed perfectly into the center of the pocket. The gallery went nuts with excitement.

As the camera panned over to Tiger, he was standing with a long iron in his hands. He was several strokes in the lead and was planning to lay up. After seeing what Daly had done, the crowd began taunting Tiger to match his shot. Several in the back started chanting, "Go for it! Go for it! Go for it!" Daly grinned and walked over to Tiger's bag. He took out Tiger's driver and handed it to him as a mock challenge.

Everyone wondered what Tiger was going to do. At first it seemed as though he would stick to his game plan and lay up, but the pressure from the crowd got to him, and he grabbed his driver and walked to the tee. After a little polite exchange between the two, he teed one up and let it rip. It didn't work out as he had hoped. He hit a great shot, but it was slightly to the right, sending the ball deep into the trees. Thankfully he was able to recover and

*"Smart golf is winning golf.
Cut down on the element of
chance."*

-- Walter Hagen

come away with a par, but it was a tough up and down. He knew that in spite of the pressure from the crowd, he should have stuck to his original game plan. Daly's second shot came up short, and he made a par as well, showing that even the best drives don't always pay out like they promise.

Know What's Important

When Scott Simpson won the 1987 US Open at the Olympic Club he was a thirty-one-year-old journeyman who had never won a major championship. Though he was respected as a player, no one expected him to be at the top of the leader board on Sunday, trading shots with Tom Watson down the home stretch. The pressure of being in the lead is more than most young players can handle, which is why so many new pros get themselves into contention and then fall apart at the turn on the final day of a tournament.

But Scott handled it beautifully.

Coming into the sixteenth hole Simpson was 1 stroke ahead of Watson, who was making his way to the tee box on 15. Simpson pushed his drive into the woods and found himself in trouble. Most expected him to pitch out into the fairway and get the ball back into play, but he surprised everyone by going for the green. The ball barely carried two bunkers and bounced softly on the apron to roll within 15 feet of the cup—a brilliant shot, especially under immense pressure. On the ABC broadcast, Jack Nicklaus could be heard laughing in amazement, saying, “I never thought of playing it that way.” Nicklaus went on to talk about what an impact this win would have on Simpson's career, and commented to the other announcers that this must be the greatest thing Simpson had ever done.

Simpson birdied the shot to go 3 under. Watson birdied the fifteenth to stay 1 stroke behind him. And then both men pared the rest of the holes coming in and Simpson won the tournament by 1 stroke.

Of all the comments made about the game that day, the one that came up most often was that Simpson seemed amazingly calm and collected throughout the round—which is no small task in any tournament, but especially difficult when you've got the great Tom Watson on your tail.

One of the first questions asked of him in the press tent was, “Scott, this has to be the most important thing you have ever done.” Without hesitation, Simpson replied, “No, accepting Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord was the most important thing I've ever done.”

“I've had the privilege of speaking at the PGA Tour Bible studies numerous times, and it has been a thrill to see so many players stand up and share the excitement of their relationship with Jesus Christ.”

-- Billy Graham

Throughout the interview he continued to give credit for his win to his ability to keep his game in perspective and trust God for any success or failure he might have.

It was later discovered that before the round Simpson had written a scripture on the top of the scorecard that he carried with him. Between each hole he read and reflected on the passage from Colossians 3:23-24.

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

This was Scott’s way of reminding himself that all he could really do is play to the best of his ability and trust that the final outcome will be as God intends. He knew that winning was not that important in the grand scheme of things, and that staying focused on his position before Christ was all that really mattered. And that knowledge freed him to relax and simply play his game one shot at a time.

If someone were to ask you, “What’s the greatest thing you’ve ever done?” would you be able to share with them about your relationship with God? Ultimately, what we do in our lives pales in comparison with how we stand before our Lord and Savior. It’s the one decision in all of our lives that truly makes a difference.

25

Replay Good Shots In Your Mind

When I caddied for Gary Player on the tour the thing that stuck with me the most was his incredibly positive attitude. Every shot he came to, no matter how bad the lie or how many obstacles were in the way, he knew he could pull it off. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the difficult shots even more than the clean ones. He'd stand over the ball gazing at the target with anticipation. You could see in his eyes that he knew exactly what he needed to do, and had no doubt that he could do it.

Gary never took a negative thought to the course, and he expected those around him to have that same attitude. He was not an easy man to caddy for. He had very specific expectations for those who carried his bag—you had to stand a certain way, place the bag down in a specific manner on each hole, and remain a perfect distance behind him during each shot. He saw his caddy's actions as an extension of his pre-shot routine, and it had to be just right. But the most important thing he expected of his caddy was a positive attitude. He refused to hear any negative words or thoughts in his presence.

I learned early that when Gary was discussing club selection he wasn't really looking for advice, but for positive confirmation of the club he had chosen. He might say to me on a particular shot, "Looks like about a 6-iron, what do you think?" I might question his choice in my mind, but I would never dream of saying, "I think it's a 5." My job was to say, "Looks like a perfect 6 to me too!" Putting even a hint of doubt into the air was considered a huge breach of protocol, and might even have gotten me thrown off his bag.

Gary also had a tremendous memory for shots he had hit in the past. Whenever he made a great save he would log it deep in his memory bank for future reference, and when he would come to a difficult lie or shot he would let his mind take him back to a similar one that he had made some time earlier—even years beforehand. Then he would reflect on that instance, remembering the angle and projection of the ball and the swing he used to carry it out. He would visualize himself hitting that same shot, and then he'd take a club and repeated it. More often than not he pulled it off beautifully, giving him even another great shot to remember.

"You need a fantastic memory to remember the great shots and a very short memory to forget the bad ones."

-- Mac O'Grady

This practice worked wonderfully to help build confidence and creating positive thoughts in the midst of trouble. And when I went on tour I started integrating this habit into my own game.

Anything that can help you create a sense of confidence on the course is worth trying. The next time you find yourself struggling with doubt over a shot, try replaying your greatest saves in your mind, and then visualizing yourself repeating those same strokes. Remembering that you've pulled off difficult shots before is a great way to help you do it again.

A Lasting Friendship

I'll never forget the day I met Dr. Everett Johnson. It was in the early 70s and I had attended a Fellowship of Christian Athlete's breakfast during the Citrus Open in Orlando. Larry Nelson was the guest speaker that day. He was new to the PGA circuit at the time and had yet to win a tournament. Larry had recently given his life to Christ, and he did a wonderful job sharing his testimony and challenging those who had not accepted Jesus as their Savior to do so.

I was called on to help with the follow-up work, and within a few days after the breakfast I received a commitment card filled out by Ev Johnson. He indicated on the card that he and his wife, Elsa, had attended the breakfast that morning, and had prayed along with Larry to receive Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. I had the privilege of calling Ev and Elsa to follow up on that commitment and ask if they had any questions.

Ev was in his mid-sixties at the time, and recently retired from his dental practice in Madison, Wisconsin. He and Elsa had a winter condo in Winter Park, Florida, where Ev was a member at Bay Hill Country Club.

Ev and I became great friends over the months and years to come. Though there was a big difference in our ages, we got together regularly for lunch and other outings, and we would while away the hours telling golf and fishing stories. Often we would lose complete track of time as we talked and laughed together. Every chance I got I would take Ev to one of our ministry luncheons or golf tournaments. Once a month we would hook up to play together in the golf fellowship scrambles in Orlando.

As his age increased, Ev's health began to deteriorate. He developed Alzheimer's, so he wasn't able to play a round of golf like he used to. Still I took him with me to the tournaments each month. He would ride around the course with me in the cart, and became my designated putter.

Eventually, as his disease worsened, he and Elsa thought it best to move back to Wisconsin to be near family. Though I hated to see him go, I

knew I'd be able to see him often during my travels. At every opportunity I made my way over to Wisconsin to see Ev and Elsa.

On one occasion I flew into Madison and picked Ev up and the two of us drove to an FCA Junior Golf camp just 60 miles north of his home. I had been asked to give a clinic at the camp and to share my testimony and experiences on tour with the kids. After my talk, several of the campers shared their thoughts and testimonies, and it really touched Ev's heart.

Late that evening we all made our way to the bunkhouse to turn in for the night. I'll never forget seeing Ev slip on his pajamas and climb into the lower bunk beneath me. He looked just like a little kid, so sweet and innocent. Ev had an amazing heart for kids, and they all loved having him around.

“Approach life like a voyage on a schooner. Enjoy the view. Explore the vessel. Make friends with the captain. Fish a little. And then get off when you get home.”

-- Max Lucado

While at the camp, Ev and I slipped down to the lake and spent several hours talking about life and faith and friendships. We sat on the shore and had a beautiful time of prayer and reflection. Ev shared with me that day that he really struggled to feel that he was good enough to be accepted by God. He felt that he had not done enough for the Lord in his life. Like a lot of men who come to Christ late in life, Ev had a hard time understanding that salvation is not dependent on anything we do, but only on our acceptance of God's grace and forgiveness. I spent time reassuring Ev that God accepted him exactly as he was, then we prayed again as Ev re-committed his life and heart to Jesus. Then I thanked God for the many years we had spent getting to know each other. A year later the Lord took him home.

God brings people like Ev into our lives for a reason. He created each of us with a deep need for binding and long-lasting relationships. Without them life would be a long and lonely road to travel, and few of us would find much joy in the journey.

It's so easy to get caught up in the grind of everyday life, working and saving and acquiring possession after possession, seldom taking time to reflect on the good friends that God has placed in our lives. Too many of us spend more time mowing our yards and decorating our houses than we do laughing and enjoying the company of others. But we should never forget that when all else is said and done, it is the relationships in our lives that make us who we are and define our legacy—our relationship with God, our family, our friends and everyone else we meet.

Take time today to ask God to bring people into your life that will make a lasting impact on your faith and future. And then thank him for the people he has already led you to—those who bring joy and love into your life. Reflect on the times of fun and fellowship you've shared with them, and the many ways they've blessed your life.

When you and I are gone, no one will remember what kind of car we drove, what tournaments we won, how low we were able to shoot, or how large a portfolio we built. But they will remember our times together—what kind of father, husband, friend and believer we were during our days on earth.

In the end, that's all that really matters.

26

Put Bad Shots Behind You

During my second year on the PGA tour I found myself tied for the lead with Gary McCord during the third round of the prestigious Doral Tournament in Miami, Florida. It was my first time to lead a tournament. When I got the pairing sheet for Saturday's round I saw that I was paired with Jack Nicklaus and Lee Trevino, two of the greatest players of the day, in the last grouping. I knew that the crowd would be huge, and that the television cameras would be on us for the final holes. My mom and dad were there to watch me, and they had called all of my friends and relatives to tell them to tune in. It was an enormous amount of pressure for a young player.

Early Saturday morning, as I prepared myself for the round, I lifted my game up to the Lord and asked him to calm my nerves and help me get through it. I understood that I was still young and early in my career, and that I should look at this opportunity as a chance to grow my skills for the future. Looking back, I should have had more confidence in my game, but at the time I honestly didn't know if I could win. I just saw it mostly as a chance to get some good experience playing under pressure. My prayer that morning was that God would use the round to teach me something valuable that I could use in the future.

I spent most of the day throwing shots away. I couldn't seem to get my game together. With each hole I seemed to fall further behind the pack, while my playing partners continued to move ahead and fight for the lead. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to pull it together, and about halfway through the round I began getting angry. Here I was in the leading group of a tournament, in front of the biggest crowd of my career, with more television cameras around than I had ever seen, and all I could do was stink up the course. It was more than frustrating; it was downright embarrassing.

On the sixteenth hole I hit a good approach shot that gave me an opportunity for a birdie. Walking up to the green I was determined to make it count. In my mind I was cursing myself for the way I had been playing, and decided that I was at least going to make a good showing on the last few holes—to prove that I really did belong there.

"I don't dwell on bad shots, bad rounds, or bad tournaments. I don't play in the past. I play in the present."

-- Raymond Floyd

I had a putt on the same line of Nicklaus' only a bit closer, with a slight break toward the left. I watched as Nicklaus missed his putt just to the right, and it gave me a great line. *This is one putt I should be able to make*, I thought to myself. I lined it up, carefully stroked it down the line, and it missed—slightly to the right, the same as Nicklaus' ball had done.

I was furious with myself, and everyone else could see it. I stomped over to the next tee and stood with my arms folded across my chest. *How could I be so stupid?* I thought. *What am I doing to myself?* As I stepped up to the tee I still didn't have my anger under control. I pulled the club back and really laid into it, trying to crush it down the fairway, but instead I managed to push it right, deep into the rough.

I give up, I thought to myself. At this point all I wanted to do was finish the round and go back to my room. But as I was walking down the fairway toward my ball, I suddenly felt an arm around my neck. I glanced over to see Lee Trevino staring me right in the face. He looked me in the eyes and said, "Hey son, forget about that. It's history, and you can't change it." I forced a smile and he patted me on the back, and then gave me a few more words of encouragement before heading toward his ball (which was nestled safely in the fairway).

At that moment I suddenly remembered my prayer early that morning. I prayed that God would use this day to teach me a lesson. I realized that he was doing just that. I just hadn't expected the lesson to be such a hard-won one. Walking toward my ball, a scripture came into my mind—one very similar to the words Trevino had just given me.

"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14)

I finally understood what God was trying to teach me. I was so busy worrying about impressing the crowds, the cameras and my fellow players with my golfing ability that I had completely forgotten why God allowed me to make it onto the tour in the first place. It wasn't so that I could fill my shelves with trophies and make a name for myself, or even that I could become the greatest golfer of my time. He put me there to have an influence on the tour for Christ. I was there to set a good example, to reach out to fans and other players and to allow Christ's love to shine through me.

The goal that God wanted me to *press on toward* was not a string of birdies or a tournament win, but a faithful showing of his love and glory in spite of my apparent poor luck on the course.

I finished the round that day thoroughly convicted by the lesson God had taught me. I thanked Trevino for his kindness and made my way to the

scoring tent with a renewed understanding of my purpose in golf. I committed that day to keep my game and life in perspective.

I told God that in the future, no matter how bad I played or how poor my luck, whether on or off the course, I would always work to put it behind me and press forward. God is the one who gave me the skills and talents to make it on tour, and he is the one who controls the future of my career. My job is to simply take it one round at a time and to be a light of example to those who may be watching.

I made a commitment that day that I would no longer take poor shots with me to the next hole, no matter how poorly I played, or how bad my luck. From that time on, whenever I would have a bad experience on a specific hole, I would make a point of standing on the edge of the green and putting it out of my mind before stepping up to the next tee box. No matter what happened, I would leave it right there on the fringe and start fresh.

That simple practice made a greater difference in my mental game than anything I had ever done. During that season, I only made about thirty percent of the two-day cuts, but the following season I made over eighty-percent of them.

Whether in golf or life, that principle is a solid and important one. In every circumstance, we need to put our bad shots behind us and look instead to the future.

Don't Let Your Past Define Your Future

Shortly after I left the tour I found myself struggling to find an identity away from the professional golf circuit. I had a hard time adjusting to my new life and career. Much of my self-worth had been tied to the successes I'd had in golf, and now I no longer had that in my life. As a result, a lot of deeply rooted issues of insecurity were beginning to come to the surface, and I finally felt that I needed to deal with them.

I sought the help of a competent Christian counselor in our area. Though it was difficult to swallow my pride and seek the advice of a professional, I had nowhere else to turn.

As I sat one day staring out the window at the leaves hanging from the gutter, he turned to me and asked, "Wally, if your father were here right now, what would you say to him? And what would you want to hear him say to you?"

Almost instantly I began to fall apart. My father had died just a few years earlier, and I had never

"Many times when fear starts to get me, my best chance of overcoming it lies in facing it squarely and examining it rationally."

-- Jack Nicklaus

come to terms with our strained relationship. A flood of tears started rolling down my cheeks and onto the front of my shirt. I couldn't seem to gain control over my emotions. It was a completely unexpected experience on my part. Though I tried to answer his questions, my tears wouldn't stop coming. I cried through the rest of the session and into the evening hours.

The very next day, I was in the car traveling to Cocoa Beach for a golfing seminar. While winding down the small two-lane highway I began fiddling with the radio knob to find some music to listen to. I happened upon the voice of Dr. James Dobson conducting one of his Focus on the Family radio programs—a program I love listening to, but seldom get the chance to catch.

Within a few minutes I realized that he was interviewing the child of an alcoholic father, and it immediately got my attention, so I turned the volume up a bit. Out of the blue, Dr. Dobson asked the man, “If your father were here right now, what would you want to say to him? And what would you want him to say to you?”

The same question the counselor had asked of me the day before.

Once again, my emotions began to well out of control. I didn't even hear the answer his guest gave, I was so caught up in my own reaction. *Why was I so deeply affected by this question?* I struggled to come to grips with my emotions. I had to pull over to the side of the road to keep from causing an accident. There I sat and cried until the tears would no longer come.

You see, my father was an alcoholic, and for most of his life, an unbeliever. During my childhood I never seemed to be able to please him. He was a hard and cold man who constantly drove my family and me away from him. Most of my days as a boy were spent trying to impress my father, trying to earn his love and affection. I worked tirelessly to gain even a hint of approval, but no matter how well I did in school or sports it never seemed to be enough.

So many nights I remember lying awake in bed, listening to my father argue with my mother. In his anger he'd begin attacking me verbally, calling me a bum, a lazy, worthless kid. Often he would scream at me and send me to my room. He accused me of not taking my golf seriously, of not practicing enough, and then when I started spending more time on the course he'd be angry with me for not pulling my load at home, or not getting a job. No matter what I did, or

“When you're from an alcoholic family, feelings are the first things to go. You learn to stuff them away, out of reach. And virtually out of sight. But they're always there, lurking. Like your shadow, they remind you that you're never alone.”

-- Louie Anderson

how hard I tried, he was never pleased.

At that moment, as I sat in my car on the side of the road, crying uncontrollably, I finally understood. For the first time I had the answer to the counselor's question. The words I so longed to hear from my father were, "Wally, you tried."

It was such a simple thing, and so little to ask for, but it's all I ever wanted. I was so starved for his affection and so damaged by his coldness toward me, that I didn't even expect words of love and affirmation, just a simple acknowledgement that I did my best. That I tried.

How I longed for just a few words of confirmation from my father. I yearned to hear him say just once, "Good try, Wally." But those words never came.

Looking back I can see why I was so driven as a golfer. I was constantly pushing myself to be better, to shoot lower, to drive longer, to gain more respect from others. I had a deep need to prove my worth—both to myself, and my father. Yet in spite of my accomplishments, I was lost and miserable inside.

I understand now why a simple question would expel such powerful emotions from within me. I longed for something I could never gain—my father's approval. And that hunger stayed with me long into adulthood. Even today, though I have long since worked through my anger and forgiven my father for the emotional abuse he inflicted on my brothers and me, I still struggle with feelings of inadequacy.

But through the years I've learned that only God can meet my deepest longings for love and significance. Only he can heal the wounds and fill the emptiness in my heart. And through his grace and gentle words of affirmation, he has not only helped me to overcome my past, but to redesign my future.

He can do the same for you. Whatever scars you are carrying, whatever pain you bear from the people and words of your past, let God reach in and heal them. Allow him to move you through those experiences onto greater and higher things.

Your past may affect you, but it doesn't have to define you. Let God be the source of your self-worth and inner-strength. He's the Father that loves us in spite of our flaws and failures.

PART FIVE
THE SPIRIT OF THE GAME

“The only way of really finding out a man’s true character is to play golf with him. In no other walk of life does the cloven hoof so quickly display itself... The man who can go into a patch of rough alone, with the knowledge that only God is watching him, and play his ball where it lies, is the man who will serve you faithfully and well.”

P.G. Wodehouse

“I enjoyed the game because it is so similar to the game of life, with its many obstacles, struggles, victories, conflicts, and blessings. If you’re not modest about your abilities when you start playing the game, it won’t take long for you to assume a role of humility—that’s the nature of the game.”

Billy Graham

“Golf is a game of integrity.”

Raymond Floyd

27

Trust Your Caddy

Golfers have always had an affection for the old courses, especially the ones in Scotland. Courses used to be built with a hint of intrigue and a lot of creativity, with blind tee shots and hidden greens nestled throughout. If you don't stay on your toes you can easily find yourself buried in a patch of thicket hiding behind a bunker or over a mound. And when you do find trouble, it's seldom easy to recover. The Scottish designers love to trip you up—almost as much as they love golf.

A few of the old American courses have that same element of danger. The Pine Valley course, located just across the river from Philadelphia, is one such example. It's been named as one of the top courses in the country by a number of different surveys. Many of the holes have totally blind shots over trees and ridges, and the course abounds with dips and mounds and other obstacles.

The first time I played Pine Valley it was raining so hard that I was sure they would cancel the day's rounds. During breakfast we were all waiting for the announcement of delay due to heavy rains, but it never came. Then someone came in to say that we were on the first tee in about an hour.

My caddy that morning was a man named Bob. He was a local player, wearing a huge, floppy hat and full rain gear down to his toes. His oversized galoshes flopped and squished as he walked with me toward the first hole.

As we started our round the rains began to pick up. Visibility was low, and as we walked up to one of the early tee boxes—second or third, I believe—I looked out over the large, wet course and suddenly realized that I had no idea where to aim. All I could see was a wide fairway feeding into a high ridge in the distance. The green was nowhere in sight. I asked my caddy if he knew the course well enough to show me where to aim. He smiled and told me, "I'll go stand in the fairway on top of the hill and you hit it right over my head."

"In tournament play, (my caddy) always had a knack for knowing the right thing to say, even when that meant saying nothing at all. And he understood the nuances of competition as well as anyone I'd ever met."

-- Nick Price

He made his way down the course and stood on the mound in the distance, waving me on when he got into position. I could barely see him in the thick morning mist. I dried off the grip with a towel, wiped the rain from

my forehead took dead aim directly over Bob's head, and then made my swing. Bob watched the ball as it sailed over his head and settled into the middle of the fairway beyond him. I was in perfect position for my approach shot.

Sitting safely on the green in 2, Bob stood behind me as I lined my putt up. He told me exactly how the putt would break and how far, giving me a perfect line to the hole before stepping aside. I trusted his advice and took the stroke exactly as he had suggested. The ball fed perfectly into the cup for a birdie.

A few holes later we came to another blind shot over a hill, so Bob again made his way down the fairway to stand on top of the mound, giving me a target to aim at. Once more, I found myself in perfect position for my approach shot.

Throughout the round Bob continued to guide me through the course. I soon discovered that he had been playing Pine Valley for most of his life and knew the course like the back of his hand. He could read the greens with pinpoint precision, and knew every dip and mound and trap on the fairways. So often after hitting a blind shot over his head I would make my way down the fairway to where he was standing. As I looked at my ball nestled safely in the middle of the short grass, I couldn't believe the potential trouble lining the course to the right and left of it—trouble that I was able to avoid, thanks to my insightful caddy.

In spite of the terrible weather and the impending obstacles, I came away with a 69 for the day. Bob had guided me through to one of the best rounds I've ever shot, putting me well into contention for the tournament.

There's no way to overstate the importance of a good caddy during a round, especially if you're playing a course that is unfamiliar to you and filled with possibilities for trouble. A caddy often serves as your eyes and ears, watching for things you don't see and guiding you through to safety. If he is wise and insightful, you can gain a lot of knowledge by heeding his advice. And good caddies always have your best interest in mind on the course.

So pick a good caddy, and then trust him.

Let Him Help

The very next day, during my second round at Pine Valley, the weather was perfect. The sun was shining, the course was dry, and the fairways were much more visible. It was a great day for scoring, and I was sure I knew where everything was, so I felt confident that I could handle things without Bob's help. I thought I knew where all the blind trouble

spots were located, and started trying to steer my ball away from them on my own. It didn't work as I had planned, and I came away that day with an 81.

Having the best caddy on the course won't help much if you don't utilize his services and ask for help.

Life's Most Faithful Caddy

The course of life can often get more treacherous and uncertain than most of us are able to handle on our own. When the heavy storms loom overhead and our visibility get clouded, and we're staring down the barrel of a fairway that is dangerous and unfamiliar, we need someone there beside us who will smile and say, "Let me show you the way. I'll go ahead of you and stand in the fairway, and you just aim in my direction. I'll see that you stay safe and on the course."

That's what the Hebrews writer meant when he wrote, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith," (12:2). Jesus knows this course we play like the back of his hand. He's been through it, and he knows the fear we feel and the dangers we face along the way. Wherever we go, he is standing in the fairway in the distance beckoning us on, saying to us, "Just aim in this direction, and you'll be fine." And we know we can trust him—not just because he knows the course, but because he always has our best interest in mind.

"For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."

-- 2 Chronicles 16:9

I remember a speech that Larry Nelson gave during one of our tour Bible studies years ago. He was talking about how to get through tough times, and he read the passage from James 4:2. "You do not have, because you do not ask God." He explained that many times the reason we don't feel God's hand in our lives is because we simply forget to ask for his help. He is there to guide us through any circumstance we might run across, even though we so often try to make it on our own.

In any situation, just aim at Jesus and you'll come out fine.

In Good And Bad Times

It's also important to remember that Jesus is there for us even when the weather is clear and sunny. Often when things seem to be going in our favor, we tend to think that we can make it on our own. We convince ourselves that we'll be able to steer clear of danger and get through the round fine without him. We begin to rely on our own strengths and abilities,

and don't bother to ask for his guidance. We place our confidence in our own knowledge of the course, instead of his wisdom and insight.

When that happens we are often setting ourselves up for failure. Trouble comes most often when our guards are down and we think we can't get into trouble—when we begin to depend on our instincts instead of the sound advice of a wise and trustworthy caddy.

Even in good times and clear weather, we need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

28

Be Courteous To Other Players

One of my best friends on the PGA tour was Bob Unger, a fellow golfing professional that I was able to lead to the Lord in 1973, just a few days before we both qualified for the tour. When Bob gave his life to the Lord, he became on fire for Jesus, sharing with everyone he came into contact with. He was an inspiration to me, and many others. Just playing a practice round with him was an amazing blessing.

Bob had a custom on tour that really impressed me. When playing in a tournament, he would take every opportunity to shake the hands of the volunteers and marshals working the course and thank them for their efforts. When he would see a marshal on the side of the fairway, he'd go over and say, "I really appreciate your taking the time to volunteer out here. Thank you for your help." He'd do the same with those driving the cars or working the tents, even the kids selling drinks at the concession stands. Bob loved blessing others with kind words. He told me once how he first came to develop this habit.

It happened during a tournament at White Marsh in Philadelphia. On the first hole, a long par-3, Bob pushed his drive into the high, thick rough just right of the green. This is not where you want to be at White Marsh. The grass is so course that it's like hitting out of barbed wire. When Bob got to his ball a marshal was standing over it, about 3 feet away. The ball was buried deep in the rough, and Bob was already frustrated with his lie, but for some reason the marshal wouldn't move. He stood his ground, hovering right next to Bob during his practice swings.

Before hitting, Bob looked at the man and said, "Would you mind moving back a little?" The marshal glared at him, then moved back about two inches. Bob wasn't sure what the man's problem was, but he asked him again, as nicely as he could. "Would you mind moving back a little more?" The man again backed up about two inches, and then planted himself firmly.

"A buoyant, positive approach to the game is as basic as a sound swing."
-- Tony Lema

He's trying to throw me off, Bob thought to himself, though he didn't understand why. He decided to try his best to ignore the marshal and take the shot, but the distraction got to him. He duffed his chip and 2-putted for a bogey.

Walking to the second hole, Bob struggled to keep his anger and his focus intact. But the incident was still weighing on his mind, so he again

pulled his tee shot, this time into the trees. Now he was really angry. But as he began the long walk down the fairway, he suddenly gained his composure and started talking to the Lord. “I know I’ve got to get over this anger,” he prayed. “Please help me calm down and play.” His frustration began to subside.

But as he approached his ball, he noticed that another marshal standing right beside it, again about 3 feet away. *Not again*, he thought to himself. *Why is this happening to me?*

His initial reaction was one of anger, but he quickly caught himself and began to pray. “Dear Lord, I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m not going to let it get to me. I’m sorry for my anger. I know I’ve just been selfish. I’m going to give this round to you. Show me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it.”

As he came to his ball the marshal said to him, “It doesn’t look too good. The ball is buried in some pretty thick stuff.”

Bob surveyed his shot, and it looked nearly impossible. The rough was deep, and a tree limb hung down low in front of him, right in way of his flight path. It was one of the most difficult shots he’d ever seen.

Bob looked at the man and said, “That’s okay, I can hit it out.”

He took out a club, then before hitting, turned to the marshal again and said, “I want you to know how much I appreciate your being out here, sacrificing your time to help with this tournament. It really means a lot to me, and the rest of the players.”

The man looked stunned. Bob continued.

“By the way, would you mind moving back just a few feet? I really get nervous when people are standing too close.”

“You bet I will,” said the marshal. “I’ll stand on my head if you want me to. Honestly, I’ve been doing this for years, and that’s the first time anyone’s ever said ‘thanks’ to me.”

The man’s statement really made an impact on Bob. He suddenly understood how much he and the other players had been taking the volunteers for granted. It was an eye-opening revelation.

As the marshal stepped a good distance away from the ball, Bob thanked him then again surveyed his shot. His only option was a low duck-hook beneath the tree, so he took a 6-iron and made his best attempt. The ball miraculously rolled up onto the green and stopped a foot shy of the pin—a tap-in for birdie.

At that moment, the Lord spoke to Bob’s spirit, saying, “That’s the way I want you to act on the course. Not because it will make your game

better, but because I want you to demonstrate my love and kindness to others.”

From that day forward, Bob committed to doing just that. And he always did.

A Simple Note

As a young man in high school and college, I had a friend and playing partner named Lee Evans. He and I traveled and played tournaments together.

Lee had a custom that really impressed me. Whenever he would go to an event or stay in the home of a friend, he always made a habit of writing thank you notes afterward. He carried stationary

with him wherever he went, and often took time to sit down and write notes to people he had met during the day, or friends who had helped him in some way. God later impressed on my heart the importance of this simple act of kindness, and I began doing the same thing.

During my years on the PGA tour I started writing thank you notes to people I stayed with, as well as to the directors of the tournaments, the volunteers, and anyone else I could think of that might be touched by a word of appreciation. For a time I made a commitment to write at least one letter a day to a friend or loved one, just to let them know I was thinking about them, and praying for them. It was a wonderful experience, and I know people were touched by it, because many would write me back to let me know how much my letter meant to them, and how timely my words of encouragement were in their lives. I didn't write in order to get letters back; I just felt the need to let people know how much I appreciated their friendship. And it was humbling to see how God used those letters to touch my friend's lives.

Though I've not maintained this practice as a daily habit, I still make a point of sending short notes and letters to people often. It not only helps me keep in touch with friends, but serves to brighten their day, as well. And I've found that people often enjoy returning the favor, and in turn it makes them want to spend more time keeping in touch with their friends, as well.

But when I write notes to people, I consciously try to focus on them and not myself. The temptation is usually to write and tell people about what's going on in my life, what book I'm working on, or how many golf clinics I have lined up, but I fight that urge and instead write words of encouragement and affirmation, letting them know what a blessing they are

“Being able to help people and give back—that’s what golf is all about.”

-- Tiger Woods

to me and my family. I've learned that because of my earlier struggles with low self-esteem and insecurity, I often find myself craving the praise of others. For years I looked to my wife and children and friends for the affirmation that I never got from my earthly father, and at times that hunger caused me to want to boast of my accomplishments. I wanted to make sure that these letters to others didn't turn into just another way to feed my ego, so I made a commitment early on to not let that happen. And it has proven to be a great tool for not only touching the lives of others, but to help me focus outward instead of inward.

I hope you'll give this simple practice a try. You'll be surprised by how God will use your efforts to touch the lives of those you care for.

Harvey Penick's Prayer

Before each and every one of his teaching seminars, the late Harvey Penick would always begin by reciting this short and humble prayer:

“Dear God,

“We come to Thee with a prayer that the Holy Spirit will be with us for this meeting. Help us to remember that very few professions have as much influence on people as the golf pro. Guide us and direct us in Thy way of life, that this will be a better world because we have lived in it.

“Amen.”³

The simplest acts of kindness can often be the most effective.

³ Harvey Penick with Bud Shrake, *And If You Play Golf, You're My Friend* (Simon & Schuster: New York), 168.

29

Develop An Attitude Of Gratitude

Over the last few years I've had the privilege of playing in a lot of 40+ tournaments. It's a competitive golf circuit that helps a number of players prepare for the Senior tour. One of the players I met on the circuit is a man named David Smith—a man of deep faith and a great golfer who has written a wonderful book on the disciplines of the game.

I was once playing a round with David at the Heathrow Country Club in Orlando, and we came to the sixteenth hole, which is a long par-5. The wind was to our backs that day, so we knew we had a chance to reach the green in 2 if we could push our drives far enough down the fairway. We both hit great tee shots that traveled over 300 yards toward the hole. Surveying our second shots, we both had about 250 yards to the pin. The wind was still to our backs but the fairways sloped steeply toward the green. A lake loomed across the fairway directly in our flight path.

In order to make the shots, we would need to connect perfectly with our 3-woods from a severe downhill lie and somehow get our balls to hit the green and stick—a near impossible shot.

We were sitting in the cart discussing this difficult task and the bad hand we'd been dealt, and I said to David, "It just doesn't seem fair to hit a ball so far and straight, right down the middle of the fairway, and still have such a hard shot into the

"Even if you aren't having an extra good day, always count your blessings. Be thankful you are able to be out on a beautiful course. Most people in the world don't have that opportunity."

-- Fred Couples

green." David agreed with me, and then stepped up to hit his shot. Then standing over his ball he took a long pause, and then looked back at me and said, "You know, I'll bet there are a lot of people fighting for their lives in Bosnia who would love to have this lie."

Suddenly our game took on a new perspective. After that our conversation began to shift in tone. Instead of complaining about our difficult shots, we began looking for reasons to be grateful.

David and I cashed pretty good checks for the tournament that day, and we went away thanking God for the many blessing we have. We both went home to well-fed families and comfortable beds, and neither of us had to worry about where our next meal would be coming from. And we wouldn't be dodging bullets and mortar the next day!

I once heard it said, “The smallest package in the world is a man wrapped up in himself.” It’s much too easy to remain focused on the small inconveniences that come our way—to become like spoiled and ungrateful children—but we should never forget the magnitude of blessings that God has put into our lives. Blessings that many in the world know nothing about. So the next time you find yourself or someone else complaining on the course, stop for a moment and try to put things in perspective.

Another Shot of Perspective

I was once playing in another tournament at the Colonial Country Club, and on the par-3, sixteenth hole I pushed my tee shot into the bunker behind the green. As I was stomping off the tee box and toward the hole, muttering under my breath about my bad luck, a shimmering glint of light to one side caught my eye. It was coming from the gallery. I looked over and noticed that it was the sun shining off of a wheelchair. A paraplegic man sat alone watching the tournament from behind the ropes, giving me a big welcome smile as I started down the fairway.

Suddenly my shot didn’t seem so bad. A giant tear started forming in my eye as I walked by him.

How sad that we so easily slipped into an attitude of selfishness and ingratitude, seldom stopping to look at how much we’ve been given.

Embracing God’s Love

Like many children of alcoholic fathers, I really struggled with a lot of feelings of inadequacy during my days on tour. I constantly pushed myself to be better—often setting up unrealistic expectations for my life and my game. The pressure I put on myself was enormous, and often drove me toward self-destruction and fits of anger on the course. It’s such a common curse for people who were never able to come to grips with their own worth due to distant and unloving fathers.

In my life, this pattern came to an all-time high during one particular tournament in Memphis, during the 1980

“Sometimes the biggest problem is in your head.”

-- Jack Nicklaus

season. During one round I was really struggling with my putter. I was hitting every green in regulation, and had several good chances for birdies, but I couldn’t seem to get it into the cup. No matter how hard I tried to keep the ball on line I continued to misread the greens or push it right or left. Coming into the eleventh hole I found myself sitting at 3 over par, even though I had been putting for birdie on every hole on the course. The frustration I felt was off the scale.

A man named Jack Tobias was following me around in the gallery that day. Jack was a friend and missionary from the Memphis area who always came to see me play when I was in town. He was wonderful man who had given up a lucrative career in order to work with people in the inner-city. I had tremendous respect for Jack, and I was consciously aware of his presence as I made my way around the course, trying desperately to hold my temper—though I was honestly on the verge of exploding.

My approach shot on 11 was brilliant 9-iron that landed the ball within 3-feet of the cup—an easy putt, straight uphill. *Surely I can make this*, I thought to myself. I lined it up and took my stroke, and once again missed the cup slightly to the right. I was furious. It was all I could do to keep from burying my club into the nearest tree. I gritted my teeth and stormed over toward the next hole. The rage in my face was easily apparent to the gallery and the other players, and everyone steered clear of me.

Suddenly I caught a glimpse of a figure standing behind a tree on the far side of the green. It was Jack. He was motioning with his forefinger for me to come over and talk to him. The last thing I wanted to do was see Jack in my state of mind, but he persisted, so I walked over to where he was standing.

“What’s wrong with you?” he said, with a hint of disgust in his voice.

“I’m just so frustrated,” I answered. “I can’t take this anymore.” I was ashamed to look him in the eye.

“I thought you were a Christian, Wally,” he said to me. “You’re supposed to set a good example.”

“I know I am,” I snapped, “but it’s just so hard out here.” I tried desperately to keep my composure.

Jack thought for a second, and then said to me, “I know what your problem is, Wally. I’ve followed you for the last few years, and I know something about you that you probably don’t understand. I know why you let this game get to you.”

He had my attention. “What is it?” I asked.

“Your problem is, you just won’t let God love you.”

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

-- Romans 8:38-39

For several seconds I sat and weighed Jack’s words. The full truth of his statement didn’t register in my mind at the moment, but as I moved through the final holes I began to understand what he meant. I had spent so much of my life on a performance treadmill, constantly trying to prove my

worth to myself, and others, that I had never learned how to simply be content with who I am. I couldn't handle failure, because failing meant I wasn't worthy. I thought I had to give 120% on everything I did.

I had convinced myself that the only way to be loved and accepted was to win, to be the best, to never mess up. Could God possibly love a miserable, wretched loser?

Jack's words of confrontation had a profound impact on my life. Looking back I can see the tremendous risk he took in challenging me. I'm now deeply touched by the thought that he loved me enough to step in and intervene when he saw the dangerous path I was traveling on. Today I try to remember Jack's boldness whenever I see a friend heading for trouble, and I pray that I'll have the same guts and wisdom that he showed.

After the round, Jack and I got together and he began to minister to me. We read through a number of the Psalms of David, focusing on the depth and breadth of God's love. Jack encouraged me to begin reading and meditating on the Psalms daily, especially in the 30s and 40s, and to learn to embrace the unconditional love that God has for us.

I took Jack's advice to heart, and over the months and years to come the Psalms became an incredible place of refuge for me. I began drinking of David's words, particularly within Psalm 37.

"If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand." (37:23-24).

Slowly I began to sense the incredible love and forgiveness of God, and as I read, I could almost feel his great loving hands encircle my heart and body. Nothing has done more to help me overcome my deep feelings of inadequacy and insecurity than learning to focus on God's love and affection. Today, when I pray, I no longer dwell on my failures, begging his forgiveness; I instead thank him for accepting me as I am, and remembering my sins no more.

I've learned to simply rest in his unconditional love, and be grateful that I no longer have to prove that I am worthy of it.

30

Keep A Positive Outlook

Some of my best golf on the tour occurred during my early years. At the time I enjoyed having my old college roommate come out and caddy for me. His name was Joe Prochaska (or “Joe the Pro,” as we called him), and he and I always had a great time on the course together.

We developed a routine that seemed to work well for me. As we approached a tee box, the first thing we would do is to survey the course for potential problem areas. We’d look at where the OB markers were, gauge the wind and other elements, look for hills and dips on the course that might get us into trouble. Then once we knew all of the bad things that could happen, Joe would turn to me and say, “Okay, Wally, what do you want to do?”

The minute the question came up my mind turned to focus on the positive plays. I’d pick a spot out in the fairway that I wanted to be, and then tell Joe what kind of shot I planned to use to get there. We’d discuss which club I needed to pull the shot off, and then he’d reach into the bag and get it for me. Then he’d say to me, “Okay, Wally, take a practice swing and show me what you’re going to do.”

I’d take a few swings, and then he’d say, “That’s perfect. Now tee one up and do it just like that. You can do it. This is an easy shot for you.”

Almost always I’d be able to pull it off, thanks to Joe’s encouragement. Throughout our rounds together he consistently built me up with positive thoughts and reinforcement. We remained keenly aware of the negative things that could happen, but we never allowed ourselves to dwell on them. Joe understood the importance of confidence and a positive outlook on the course. And I played some of the best golf of my life when Joe was on my bag.

In golf, it’s not only important to keep a good, upbeat attitude, but also to surround ourselves with optimistic people—people who believe in us, even when we start to doubt ourselves and our abilities.

Nothing will destroy a person quicker and easier than allowing negative thoughts to slip in and take hold. Losing faith in yourself and your game is a sure formula for failure—both on and off the course.

Half Empty Or Half Full?

There are two distinct ways to look at the many traps and obstacles lining a golf course. We can see them as hazards, intent on keeping us from

achieving our goal to score well, or as gentle guides leading us forward toward the hole.

The first view says that the course is out to get you, that you'd better be on your toes or else you'll find yourself in trouble, that golf is hard and cumbersome and full of bad breaks for those unlucky enough to find them, that the glass is always half empty.

The other view sees that boundaries are our friends, our helpers, that the trees and bunkers and OB markers are there to point us in the right direction and lead us on to where we need to be, that without them, we wouldn't know which way to aim and would have almost no chance of scoring, that the glass is always half full.

Both views are correct, of course, but only the latter one will help you play better golf.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

-- Philippians 4:8

Simple Pleasures

I have a vivid memory of a day when I was about thirteen years old. I was on the second hole of the Indian Lake Country Club in my home town, walking up and down the right side of the fairway, hunting for lost balls. I wasn't playing that day; I had a higher goal in mind. I had just qualified to play in a junior tournament, and I wanted a nice, clean Titleist ball to play with. I knew that all the pros used Titleists, but on my family's tight budget, I usually had to settle for whatever was on sale at the time, or what I could scrounge up in the cornfields around the course. But you don't play tournaments with worn out balls, so I was intent on finding a perfect, unblemished Titleist—just like the ones that Arnie and Jack and Gary always used.

I picked out a spot on the second hole of the Indian Lake Country Club in my home town of Oaklandon, Indiana, in the field about 250 yards from the tee box, right where a good slice might end up, and I began to work the ground beside the fence, back and forth. The hole bordered a dairy farm and as I watched for balls with one eye, I had to watch for bulls with the other. I also had to be careful where I stepped.

I found a few generic balls, and X-outs, and tucked them into my coat pocket, but they weren't what I was looking for, so I kept searching, feeling the ground with my toes as I went.

Suddenly, there it was! A brand new Titleist—a fresh, white one that looked like it had just come out of the box. I was so excited that I could hardly contain myself. Finally I was ready for the tournament. I slipped it into my pocket and started to leave, but thought I'd give the field one last go through before heading home. No luck. After ten minutes I decided to call it quits. I reached into my pocket to look at the Titleist one more time, and to my utter dismay it was gone! How could I have dropped it?

Immediately I began scouring through the rough trying to find it again. It was getting dark and time was of the essence. I knew it couldn't be far away, and I wasn't about to go home empty handed—especially since I knew it was there. I'd just had it in my fingers.

It took me ten more minutes to find it, but I finally did, buried in a deep patch that I had bent over during my last search. This time I hung on tight until I made it safely home.

<p><i>"Maintain a childhood enthusiasm for the game of golf." -- Chi Chi Rodriguez</i></p>
--

I'm not sure why this memory stands out so starkly in my mind. Since that day I've easily played over 10,000 bright and shiny Titleist balls on the course, both in tournaments and in games with friends. After all, it's only a golf ball, isn't it?

Perhaps it's because of the way this story reminds me to never underestimate the simple joys and pleasures of the game. It's so easy to get wrapped up in the big thrills of life, the shouts of the galleries, the shots that came out of nowhere to save the day, the course records, the big checks at the end of a tournament. We've all had moments that seem bigger than life, and they are the ones that usually dominate our memory—the ones we love to relive over dinner with friends.

And yet, it is the simple pleasures of life that give it the most flavor and meaning. Sneaking into your son's room to slip a quarter under his pillow and retrieve a lost tooth, holding your wife's hand as you walk along the beach, watching fireworks from your deck on the fourth of July. These are the little things that come our way from time to time to remind us that life is good, that we are loved, that God is still on his throne.

Maybe that's why this story has so stuck in my memory with such clarity.

Then again, maybe it's because I still get a thrill out of finding lost balls.

Keep Your Chin Up

There's a good tip that I give to a lot of my students on the driving range. Often I will notice a player standing over the ball trying to keep their

head down. This usually causes the muscles in their neck to tense, forcing their chin down into their chest. What this does is keep the shoulders from making a full turn during the swing.

What I suggest is this simple drill:

Address the ball and then hold up your chin. Look at the ball through the bottom of your eyes so you can see well enough to hit. As you make your swing, be careful not to let your left shoulder touch your chin on the takeaway. Then follow through with the swing, keeping your chin in the air and your eyes downward. You'll be amazed how this frees your shoulders to make a full and extended turn around the spine.

I also like to use a biblical analogy to help them remember this tip. When the Lord was preparing Gideon and his army to march on Midian, he started by commanding Gideon to cull his fighting men down for the battle. God told Gideon to take his army of 10,000 men to the lake for a drink, and while there to watch them. The ones who lapped up the water with their tongues were to be left behind, but the men who stood on their knees and scooped the water up with their hands would go with him into battle. Only 300 of the men passed the test. They were the ones who kept their chins up when they drank, allowing them to remain ready for battle at a second's notice. These were the men that the Lord wanted by Gideon's side as he took Midian. (see Judges 7:4-8).

That's a good mental image to remember, both in golf and in life. Keep your chin up, and stay ready for anything. And be prepared to make a good, full turn.

Watch Your Words

The late Harvey Penick was once serving as honorary starter at the Texas Women's Amateur championship at the Barton Creek Club course. While sitting in his cart, taking in the sights, a friend of his from Austin—a woman named Carrel—came over to say hi and give him a hug. They exchanged some polite conversation, and then Carrel stood to her feet and said, “Well, Harvey, I have to go play now.”

Harvey caught her by the hand and pulled her back, then said to her, “Carrel, you don't *have* to go play. You *get* to go play. There's a world of difference.”

“You're right,” she said, smiling at him.

From that day on she always watched her words when talking to Harvey.

“Playing golf is a privilege, not a sentence.”

-- Harvey Penick

The Perfect Golfer

“His drives are rather ragged and his iron shots are punk;
His putting’s an amazing thing; he’s rarely ever sunk,
A putt much longer than a foot; his mashie stroke’s a sin;
Somehow he cannot seem to get a touch of Hagen spin
To hold it safely on the green; his brassie shot’s the type
The devil teaches when the lads are slightly under-ripe.
And more than that he know all traps; not one but has its charms
And welcomes him with encores and, it seems, with outstretched
arms;
But somehow it can’t feaze him much; a song is in his heart
And on his lips a whistle and a jest of golfing art.
When he comes in he always has the graciousness to say
‘This Club is perfect, I have had a most delightful day.’
And though we jest and laugh at him, we’ll tell the wide world flat
God made the golf course brighter when he made a man like that.”

By John E. Baxter (from *Locker Room Ballads*, 1923)

31 Count Every Stroke

In one of my previous books, I asked my friend Tim Lahaye, a highly respected author and Theologian, if he would honor me by writing the introduction. He gracefully agreed, and submitted a wonderful writing that included the following excerpt about a man he used to play golf with.

“The man who first introduced me to golf was a fellow minister-friend with whom I had gone to school. Whenever we played, he volunteered to keep score, but after a few rounds, it dawned on me that he always got the lowest score in our foursome of pastors.

“One day we came to a small lake, and rather than take a penalty and move on if we went into the drink, he challenged us to hit until we got one on the other side. Believe it or not, all three of us hit our first drive safely to the other side, putting enormous pressure on him. It took him seven balls to get across. Later I noticed that he only counted two of those water balls.

“One time he had 3 balls going at the same time and claimed the one with the lowest score was his ‘official’ ball. Other times, instead of counting short putts, he just picked up his ball and said, ‘That’s a gimme.’ Finally, I got up enough nerve to suggest that his best club was his pencil, which was why he always got the lowest score.

“Over time, I have noticed that anyone who cheats in golf has a tendency to cheat in life. My friend was no exception. Of the four of us, this man was decidedly the best preacher, and the most highly respected in his denomination. Yet, the truth is, he was a cheat! He cheated in golf, and he cheated in life. He cheated on his wife, his church, his Lord, and his family. Today he is a hollow shell of what he could have been.”⁴

“The only way of really finding out a man’s true character is to play golf with him.”

-- P.G. Wodehouse

Play It As It Lies

Jack Nicklaus once said, “If there’s one thing golf demands above all else, it’s honesty.” By its very nature, golf is a game of honor and integrity. It takes a lot of character for a man to stand alone in a patch of deep rough with a pitiful lie beneath his ball and no one else in sight, and hit it as it lies. Or to make the long walk back to the tee after noticing that the ball has landed about an inch out of bounds between two white stakes. The

⁴ Jim Sheard & Wally Armstrong, *Finishing The Course* (J. Countryman: Nashville, 2000), excerpted from the Introduction by Tim LaHaye, 9-10.

temptation to prop the ball up a bit with a club is more than a lot of golfers can handle, so often we chalk it up in our minds to winter rules and make the adjustment. But that kind of habit isn't good for your game or your character.

The true character of any man is measured by what he does when he is all alone—when no one else is looking. Dave Hill once said, “Golf is the hardest game in the world to play and the easiest to cheat at.”

“Once you give up your ethics, the rest is a piece of cake.”

-- J.R. Ewing
(from the TV sitcom, *Dallas*)

Given that truth, it seems appropriate to me that when we step up to the tee box the first question asked is, “Who has the honor?” Even the language of golf demands an honest approach.

It's interesting to note that the Mulligan was never intended to have a place in the old game of golf. In fact, the idea was invented by some duffer in America, some time after the game came to the United States.

The rules of golf are clear. Wherever your ball happens to end up, if it's in bounds, you're expected to play it as it lies. You would expect the same from your opponent, so hold yourself to it, as well. It will make you a better golfer, and a better person.

A Shining Example

More often than not, when golfers are talking about the topic of honesty on the course, the name of Tom Kite comes to mind. More than most, he has shown to be a man of tremendous integrity, both in golf and in life.

Even during his earliest days on tour, Kite was quickly becoming known as a man that could be trusted completely. During one tournament about twenty years ago, he was coming down the home stretch tied for the lead. On one shot he inadvertently brushed the ball with the tip of his club, and without hesitation, he walked over to one of the officials and reported the violation, costing himself a stroke. No one had seen the infraction, and he could have easily gotten away with it, but he didn't. Instead he chose to do the right thing. He finished the tournament in second place, just one stroke off the lead, and afterward, reporters scrambled to his side to ask why he would call a violation on himself and throw away the tournament. His simple answer was, “There is only one way to play the game.”

Those who know Tom, understand that the foundation beneath his amazing integrity is his faith in God. He knew that God had seen his mistake, even if no one else had, and his relationship with his Lord was much too precious a thing to take for granted. When given the choice

between winning a tournament and keeping his integrity intact, he chose the higher road. And through the years, God has been glorified every time that story has been told or remembered.

During another tournament years later—the 1993 Kemper Open—Tom Kite was leading the pack and paired with Grant Waite of New Zealand during the third round. On the

fourth hole, Waite took a drop from a Ground Under Repair area, and as he was preparing to hit, Kite noticed that Waite’s heel was slightly outside the OB marker. It would have been easy for Kite to look

“In football and hockey you come into intimate—and often forcible enough—contact with the outer man; chess is a clash of intellects; but in golf character is laid bare to character.”

-- Arnold Haultain

away and hope that an official noticed the infraction, giving Waite a 2-shot penalty, but instead Kite quickly stopped his opponent and pointed to his heel. “We don’t need any penalties here,” Tom said to him.

The grateful Grant Waite changed his stance before making a beautiful approach shot into the green.

Waite won the tournament by one stroke, and Kite again came in second. Once more the reporters gathered around to ask Kite if he had any doubts about his decision to intervene. He told them, “It would be pretty chicken for me to stand by and watch a guy accidentally break a rule and then say, ‘By the way, add 2 strokes.’ That’s not golf. That’s other sports where guys are trying to get every advantage they can.”

A true man of God knows that honesty and honor are the only true paths to greatness, both in golf and in life.

32

Don't Forget To Have Fun

I mentioned earlier that during my early years on the tour I often called my old college roommate, “Joe the Pro,” to caddy for me. He and I always had a great time on the course. He initially thought that caddying would be a piece of cake—just a handful of guys walking around the fairways, shooting the breeze. But he soon discovered that it actually involves a lot of skill and work.

Before I met him, Joe didn't have much of a golfing background. He knew the basic rules, but he was often lost when it came to game etiquette, or the fundamental courtesies of the course. As a result a lot of the other players didn't quite know how to handle him. He was also something of a cut-up in life, and it spilled out onto the course. I liked it, because it kept me from taking myself too seriously, but his antics didn't always go over well with others, especially the other caddies on tour.

I remember once playing in a tournament at Westchester in Rye, New York, with Joe on my bag. We were paired with Hubert Green and his long-time veteran caddy of 10 years, a man named Shane. They'd won a lot of tournaments through the years, including the US Open, and Shane took his role very seriously.

Joe and I attended the University of Florida, and we were both rabid Gator fans. Joe knew that Hubert was an avid fan of Florida State—a Seminole—so Joe started ragging on him starting around the second tee. He continued to make

“The game is meant to be fun.”
-- Jack Nicklaus

comments to Hubert as we made our way down the course toward the third hole, taunting him about how badly the Gators were going to beat the Noles that season.

In golf it's kind of a given that caddies are not supposed to bother the players during a round, but Joe didn't understand this courtesy. Had I known that Joe was bothering Hubert I would have stepped in and stopped him, but I was so busy focusing on my own game that I didn't even notice.

On the third tee box, Shane grabbed Joe by the shirt and said, “Look, Hubert's not interested in hearing about the Gators. He's here to win a tournament.”

Joe got the message and backed off of him for a while.

Coming into the seventeenth hole, Hubert was 1 shot off the lead. We hit our tee shots, and then while making our way down the fairway, Shane

came over to me and said angrily, “You’d better do something about your caddy. If he bothers Hubert one more time I’m going to punch his lights out.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I asked Joe what had been going on. He laughed and said he’d just been having some fun with Hubert.

“What did you do to make Shane so mad?” I asked him.

He said, “Back on the sixth hole he was walking around with his chest stuck out, so I asked him, ‘Does this prancing around like a peacock come naturally to you, or do you have to work at it?’ He’s been mad at me ever since. And I guess he doesn’t like it when I talk to Hubert.”

Suddenly I understood why Shane wasn’t too amused.

The interesting thing is, Hubert didn’t seem bothered by any of Joe’s antics. In fact, I think one of the reasons he was playing so well was because Joe’s sense of humor loosened him up. But I decided that I’d better keep my eye on things through the next few holes.

Hubert’s second shot on seventeen went over the green and nestled into the rough for an almost impossible lie. My shot left me a long putt for birdie. Then Hubert hit an incredible pitch shot to within 6 inches of the hole. It was a brilliant recovery. Shane stood on the edge of the green holding the flag, grinning from ear to ear.

While lining up my putt, I looked over to see Joe slowly sneaking up behind him. *Oh, no! What’s he going to do now?* I thought to myself. Joe startled Shane by stepping up in front of him, and then said something to him that no one could hear. For a few seconds they just stood looking at each other, and then suddenly Shane began to laugh out loud. They shook hands and we finished the hole. Hubert ended the day 1 shot off the lead.

When I asked Joe later what he had said to Shane, he told me, “I just told him that even though it’s been a tough day, I wanted to make sure we were still best buddies.” That totally disarmed Shane, and erased any anger he might have had. After the round the two of them went out for drinks together.

Golf is a serious enough sport without us adding even more pressure to ourselves on the course. The best approach to a round is usually to keep it light and remember to have fun. To a lot of us it may be a business, but still it’s just a game.

Say What?

One of the first times Joe caddied for me was during a pro-am at White Marsh, an old course located just outside of Philadelphia. While standing on the first tee one of the players asked, “How far is it to the pin?”

Joe took a good look down the fairway and said, “Looks like about a block and a half.”

The funniest part is, he wasn’t joking.

One More “Joe” Story

Of all the times I thought Joe was going to get me into trouble, the one that truly takes the cake was during another tournament at White Marsh when I was paired with Jerry Pate. Jerry had recently won the US Open and was at the top of his game. We both started the tournament toward the top of the leader board, and he really had his game face on that day. I hoped and prayed that Joe would leave him alone and let him play, especially since I knew that Jerry was a big Alabama fan.

“Always keep it fun. If you don’t have fun, you’ll never grow as a person or a player.”

-- Tiger Woods

As always, Joe couldn’t stop talking about the Gators, and I could tell that Jerry was getting a bit irritated. On the third hole, which is a really long par-3, we both pulled our shots a bit. Jerry was on the edge of the green and I was in the bunker behind him. I hit a great sand shot to within 4 feet of the cup, and as Jerry was lining up to take his shot, I noticed Joe standing in the bunker raking the trap, totally oblivious to the fact that Jerry was about to putt. Jerry stood away from his putt and looked over at me, as if to say, “Where’d you get this guy?”

I went over and told Joe to get out of the trap and stand still until Jerry had finished hitting. Jerry ran his putt 10 feet past the hole, and then looked at me with disgust, like it was my fault. Then he ran his next putt 4 feet past the hole coming back. He was as hot as I’d ever seen him, and I prayed that he would make his next one and not end up 4-putting. Thankfully he nailed it.

I was terribly embarrassed about the whole thing, but Joe didn’t seem bothered in the least.

The fourth hole was a long par-4 that ran uphill, and behind the green was the ninth tee box. I was making my way over to the fourth tee box, I remember thinking about what I could say to Jerry to apologize for Joe’s behavior, but just as we reached the tee I looked around and Joe was nowhere in sight. Finally, Jerry and I looked over and there was Joe, standing on the ninth tee box with my bag, without a soul around him. Jerry looked at me in disbelief. I could tell he was thinking, “This guy doesn’t even know where the holes are!”

I was so embarrassed that I didn’t even bother to try and explain. Joe’s antics continued for the rest of the round, but fortunately Jerry was

able to overlook them and concentrate on his game. Coming into the eighteenth hole, Jerry was 1 stroke off the lead and playing well. He hit his tee shot right down the middle, and I ended up in the trees. His second shot rolled to within 10-feet of the pin on the backside. I hit mine over the trees to the front part of the green, and by the time I reached my ball, Jerry had already marked his and was squatting on the fringe, lining up his putt.

Joe and I didn't know this, so Joe walked over to take the flag out of the hole. Jerry said something to him under his breath, and Joe began walking toward him to see what he wanted. "What's wrong?" Joe asked him.

Jerry's face was red with anger. "Not only did you step on my line, but now you're walking right up it!" he scowled.

Then Jerry looked back over at me, to see what I was going to do about it.

I walked over and said, "Joe, you need to get off the green. Why don't you give Jerry's caddy the flag and go wait for me inside the scoring tent?"

As Joe walked off the green, I looked at Jerry and said, "I'm really sorry about Joe. I feel really bad about how he's been acting."

*"Enjoy the game.
Happy golf is good
golf."*

-- Gary Player

While I was lining my putt up, I glanced past the hole and toward the bleachers. Some sort of movement caught my eye and I was trying to see what it was. Once again, it was Joe. Right between a spectator's legs I could see him squatting down behind the bleachers peering at me through the small opening between the seats with a big grin on his face. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I 2-putted, then stood back and prayed that Jerry would be able to relax and make his putt.

Somehow Jerry was able to pull himself together and concentrated on his putt. He landed it in the cup to tie for the lead. I thought to myself, *Thank goodness this round is over!*

Afterward we all made our way into the scoring tent. I signed Jerry's card, and while sliding it over to him, looked over to see Joe standing right over his shoulder. I almost panicked. Jerry looked at him and said, "You again? What do you want now?"

Joe said to him, "I was just wondering if you had a caddy lined up for next week."

Jerry burst out laughing. I think that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Thankfully he was in a good enough mood after tying for the lead to forgive Joe, and we all walked away still friends.

Hogan Shocks The Gallery

Ben Hogan was once paired in a charity match with Morris Williams, Jr., Ed Hopkins and Harvey Penick. Hogan was known as a man who loved to drink, but he had never been known to show up on the course under the influence. You can imagine the gallery's reaction when Hogan showed up late to the first tee box, staggering, with a silly grin and his cap on sideways.

All over the crowd people could be heard whispering, "What's wrong with Hogan?" It seemed obvious to everyone that he was drunk.

As he stepped up to shoot, his knees buckled while he was trying to put the ball on the tee, and he fell over. He struggled to his feet, and then staggered to and fro while standing over the ball with his club. His first attempt missed the ball altogether. The crowd gasped at the sight of the great Ben Hogan whiffing his tee shot.

He grunted, and then accidentally knocked the ball backwards off the tee. His caddy replaced it, and he took another swing. This time he topped the ball about 50 yards down the fairway. His playing partners hit perfect drives, and then followed Hogan to his ball as the gallery followed. With his cap still sitting sideways on his head, he gave a mighty swing and sliced the ball towards the hole, but far off the fairway. The swing knocked his hat off, and his caddy quickly put it back on.

After several more shots, he made it to the green. On his first putt he knocked the ball 20 feet past the hole. His second putt did the same thing, only in the opposite direction. He staggered toward it and hit again, but somehow this one landed right in the center of the cup. Hogan fell down trying to retrieve the ball from the hole. No one could believe what they had just witnessed.

Suddenly, he jumped to his feet, straightened his hat, and said to his playing partner in clear English, "Okay pardner, it's up to you on this hole. I'll do it better from now on." At that instant, the gallery and the other players caught on and a roar of laughs went up into the air. He wasn't drunk, he was simply entertaining the crowd.

Hogan had always been such a stern competitor, that no one could imagine him as the course clown. But those who knew him well remember that off the course, he had always had a great sense of humor. And, obviously, his acting skills weren't bad either. Not one person on the course that day caught on to his little joke.

"Golf is a great and glorious game. Even those of us who earn our livings at it play it more for the pleasure than for the money."

-- Arnold Palmer

PART SIX
GIVING BACK TO THE GAME

“In golf, as in life, you get out of it what you put into it.”

-- Sam Snead

“The score is important, of course. And the discovery that you are superior to another golfer is satisfying. But when your score is bad and the other fellow beats you, golf still has been a blessing to you. The score isn't the 'be all and end all.'”

-- Tommy Armour

“I can sum it up like this: Thank God for the game of golf.”

-- Arnold Palmer

33

Develop A Love For The Game

Ben Hogan had a huge impact on me as a golfer, long before I had ever met him. As a child I used to marvel at his ability with a golf club, and the level of greatness that he brought to the game. I had always been a student of golf history, and Hogan was one of the few living legends of our time, so I always dreamed about someday getting to meet him. That chance finally came while I was playing at the Colonial Country Club in Ft. Worth, Texas.

I was playing in a Pro-am with Randall Reiley, a local federal judge. Somehow, during our conversation, judge Reiley mentioned that he lived on the Shady Oaks course, where Hogan came every day to hit balls. In fact, the back of his house overlooked the very spot where Hogan always stood practicing. It was on one of the holes on the par-3 course nestled within the confines of the regular course, and every day Hogan would practice on that hole, right across from Randall's house, hitting hundreds of balls to his caddie, who stood by with a shag bag.

The judge invited me to come over one afternoon to watch Hogan practice, and I quickly agreed. It turned out to be one of the greatest thrills of my life. The judge couldn't be with me on this particular day, but a friend of his named Kermit Zarley went with me. Kermit had met Hogan a few times, and promised to introduce me. In fact, he told me to bring my clubs along, just in case.

*"The game is the thing—not
gamesmanship."*
-- Nancy Lopez

I'd heard so many stories about Hogan's serious, competitive side that I was a bit apprehensive. Hogan is often depicted as a cold and hard man on the course—and during the heat of competition, he was. To my delight and surprise, however, he greeted us with a warm smile and a friendly handshake. I found him to be one of the most gentle and pleasant men I had ever met. As we stood visiting on the tee box, I was struck most by the gleam in his eye as he talked about golf. After an entire life on the course, practicing and playing tournaments almost every day, he still had a deep and abiding love for the game, as well as other pros.

As we talked, he hit shot after shot to his caddy down the fairway, each time landing the ball with arrow-like precision. He would demonstrate shots that he had been practicing recently, and you could see his eyes light up each time he took a stroke and pulled off the shot he was trying. He'd hit

a high draw, then a low hook, then a fade, each one flying exactly as he had planned.

After a while, he noticed that Kermit and I had our clubs with us, so he said, “Why don’t you boys hit some balls?”

Looking back the whole episode seems almost surreal to me. The fact that I was standing on a tee box, trading shots with the great Ben Hogan was more of a thrill than I ever imagined I could hope for. After a while he even walked over and began encouraging us as we hit balls toward the pin. It made me nervous to think that Ben Hogan himself was standing over me, watching my swing on the course. But he couldn’t have been any nicer about it.

Before that day, I was an admirer of Hogan’s swing and competitiveness on the course. I was in awe of what he had done for the history of the game. But since then I’ve come to see him as much, much more. He was great, not just because he played great, but because he epitomized everything that is right and noble about the game. What drove Hogan was not trophies or money or fame, but a deep desire to master a sport that he loved so dearly. It was the thrill of the game that brought him back day after day.

It was such an inspiration to see a man who had long since quit playing tournament golf to still love the game enough to come out every day and practice. Hogan was a living testament to the fact that golf is a game that can bring joy to our lives long into our later years. It takes so little to give back to a game that has given us so much happiness.

Of all the things I’ve done and seen in my career, it is my afternoon hitting balls with Ben Hogan that I treasure most in my memory. Just being near him, seeing the sparkle in his eyes, gave me a renewed love and appreciation for the greatest game on earth.

“The thing I’m most proudest of is that I got better every day.”

-- Ben Hogan

A Record To Be Proud Of

Mac O’Grady holds a golfing record that not a lot of players would be proud of, but I think he should see it as a badge of honor. He holds the record for the person who made the most efforts at qualifying school before making his way on tour. From 1971 to 1981, he made sixteen tries at getting his card, before finally making it in 1982, on his seventeenth attempt (from 1975 through 1981 the school was held twice a year).

Through those years he did anything he had to do to support himself and his family until finally making his way on tour. He worked as a cook, a busboy, a dishwasher, a caddy, even a hearse driver for a funeral home. Most men might have given up after a few years and went on to pursue another career, but not O'Grady. He continued to try, even when it looked as though he may never make it.

The fire that burned in O'Grady's heart and kept him going was his deep love for the game. He couldn't imagine a life without golf, so he never gave up trying. His persistence finally paid off for him.

I had the privilege of being able to play alongside Mac during the last round of qualification in 1982, as he finally gained his card. We were playing at the TPC Stadium Course in Jacksonville, one of the toughest courses around. We both were playing well that day, and going into the eighteenth hole it suddenly hit Mac that he was just one hole away from gaining his card. The two of us had a nice cushion, and it looked like we were home free. Then on the eighteenth, he hit one of the worst drives I've ever seen.

There was a lake running down the left side of the hole, so Mac aimed a bit right to make sure he didn't hit into it. His ball went about 150 yards dead right, ending on the far side of the sixteenth fairway. I could see the frustration in his eyes, but he was determined to recover. He hit his second shot back into the fairway, and then mis-hit his 3rd short of the green. He was so nervous that he shanked his 4th shot right into a deep bunker, leaving himself a near impossible shot to a pin nestled at the back part of the green with water just 8-feet on the other side of it.

Somehow he pulled himself together and was able to blast it out of the sand to within 1 foot of the hole, where he tapped in for a double-bogey. It was probably the greatest pressure shot of his career.

He made the cut that year by 1 stroke. If he had not been able to recover from the bunker, he would have been looking at another year of qualifying school. Instead he went on to make a respectable name for himself on the tour. He was able to accumulate just over one million dollars in earnings during his short time on the PGA circuit before being forced to step aside due to injuries.

Meeting Byron Nelson

During my high school and college days I did everything I could to just be near the game. I loved hanging around the top players of the day, hearing their stories and watching them play. I found that the best way to do that was to become a caddy, and often volunteered to carry bags at the

Indianapolis 500 Tournament whenever it came to our hometown in Indiana. It was the next best thing to actually playing.

During my senior year I was able to caddy in was the Byron Nelson Classic at the Preston Trail Club, in Dallas, Texas. It was Nelson's first year to host the tournament that bears his name, and a lot of big players had signed up to be there in honor of him. I was there to caddy for Dave Regan, a fellow Gator, and tour professional. I had just finished caddying for Dave in North Carolina, and then I hitchhiked all the way to New Orleans, where I caught a short, cheap flight over to Dallas. I flew in with my tour-size University of Florida golf bag and a suitcase and wandered the airport looking for a ride to the golf course.

"I remember playing my first practice round with JoAnne Carner and I could barely breathe. And I was a professional!"

-- Meg Mallon

I finally caught a ride with a rookie player from Canada, and he convinced me to ride with him in the courtesy car, and act like I was one of the players. That was thrill in itself for a young tour wannabe.

Just as we pulled up in front of the clubhouse, Dave Regan came around the corner to greet us. As soon as he saw me he said, "Hey, Wally, let's go in and have lunch." We went into the clubhouse and standing in the entrance was the great Byron Nelson himself. He had been working with Dave's swing, and as Dave introduced me to him, he immediately invited us to have lunch with him. Of course, we agreed, and as we went into the dining room, Chris Shenkel came by to join us. Sitting at the very next table was Arnold Palmer, bigger than life.

I watched the porter carry my bags into the clubhouse and began to get really concerned that someone would find out that I'm not really a player. Caddies were not allowed in the clubhouse, and having lunch with the players was unheard of. But I was already in too deep to back out now, so I just tried to keep my mouth shut and hope no one would notice me.

I'll never forget how great it felt to be sitting in the company of these living legends, listening to their stories over the lunch table. This is the kind of thing that every young player dreams of when he lies awake at night, and here I was experiencing it first-hand. It made an indelible impact on my life and career, and gave me even more reason to want to work hard and make it onto the tour as a player.

Halfway through the lunch, Gary Player came by and told Dave and me that his caddy was ill, and he asked me if I wanted to caddy for him. I had met Gary a week earlier at a tour Bible study in North Carolina, and while there, Dave had told him that if he ever needed a good caddy I'd be

the guy to ask. He remembered that meeting, and saw this as a chance to follow through on that offer. Dave was kind enough to let me caddy for him, and I worked for Gary for the next three weeks, at Dallas, Houston and New Orleans.

Byron Nelson was a delightful man to meet and befriend. He was just as I had imagined him, polite and friendly—a godly man, both on and off the course. Though he had long since retired from playing, he had spent much of his life giving back to the game, helping others any way he could, always ready to pass on his love for golf to younger players. He worked with a number of players on tour, encouraging them and helping with their game whenever he could. Tom Watson often asked Byron to watch him practice and give him pointers, and so did Dave Regan and many others. He did the same for me six years later when I finally gained my tour card and was able to come back in through the front door of the clubhouse—this time as a real player, instead of an imposter.

More than most, Byron Nelson remains an amazing example to others of what the game is all about. Even today, some thirty-two years later, he still graciously welcomes players at his tournament. Even more, the whole purpose of his tournament is to raise funds for young children. He reminds us all that no matter where we are in life we have an obligation to reach out and encourage those who are following in our footsteps.

One of the things that makes golf such a great a sport is the feeling of camaraderie and respect that players have for each other. Golf is a game that loves and cherishes its heroes, and never forgets those who have made it the sport it is—a sport rich in history and sentiment, with no shortage of legends.

We love the great players of golf almost as much as we love the game itself. And that makes it a sport like no other.

34

Pass On Your Passion

For most of the years that I played on tour, I often used local caddies from the courses where the tournaments were being played. A lot of guys on tour used the same caddy for all their games, but I liked getting to know the young players around the country.

When I was a kid I worked my way up to become the number one caddy at the Highland Country Club in Indianapolis, Indiana. I always seemed to be able to caddy for the best players, and it meant so much to me to be able work with them. I got to see a lot of great golf during those years. Most of the players were really encouraging to us as we made our way around the course. That's where I first developed a deep love for the game and the people who play it. And when I finally made it on tour, I saw it as my chance to give back a little of the encouragement that I had been given as a boy.

During my career, the people who ran the Western Open understood this principle, and made a rule every year that anyone who played in the tournament had to use a local caddy from the area. It was a great idea, even though some of the players didn't like it.

"The ardent golfer would play Mount Everest if somebody would put a flagstick on top."

-- Pete Dye

The young men and women they brought out to caddy for us were exceptional people. They were high school kids from the area, who were the best caddies from all the country clubs in the Chicago area. Many were in line to go to college on an Evans Scholarship—a program set up to help the most outstanding caddies in the area with their education. These kids were the cream of the crop from the Chicago area. It was a great tradition that has since given way to big bucks and pros with egos. I think it's sad that they don't still hold to this wonderful tradition.

The Western Open was one of my favorite tournaments to play, mostly because I so enjoyed getting to know these bright, young players. They loved the game as much as I did, and there was nothing I enjoyed more than getting together with them on the course or in the clubhouse and telling great golf stories. You could see in their eyes how much it meant to them when we included them in our activities. I understood, because I felt the same way when I was a young caddy, and players would show me the same kindness.

Still today I keep in touch with a few of my past caddies from that event. Many of them are now doctors and lawyers and schoolteachers, and I'm willing to bet that every one of them are still golfers. Once you've been bitten by the golf bug, you seldom lose your zeal for the game.

Golf is always more satisfying when you're able to share it with others. My advice to anyone who loves the game is to look for opportunities to pass on their passion, especially to younger generations. There is no better way to keep the history of golf alive and fresh.

Catching Sam Snead's Passion

During my rookie year on tour, 1974, one of the first tournaments I got to play was the World Open at Pinehurst. It was an eight-round marathon of golf on four different courses, and a lot of the old players were there to compete. Over 200 men from around the world showed up to play.

My wife, Debbie, was as thrilled to be there as I was, and on the first two rounds of play I kept looking up to find her. I assumed she'd be watching me. I later found out that she'd been following along with Arnold Palmer's gallery ("Arnie's Army"). It didn't bother me—if I hadn't been playing that's where I would have been, too.

On the third day of the tournament I got my pairing sheet and found that I would be playing with the great Sam Snead on the famous number two course. What an amazing honor and privilege. I'll never forget the thrill of playing with this living legend. His strength and flexibility were something to behold—even though he was well over his prime and into his senior years.

I'd heard stories of how Snead still worked to retain his flexibility. Even in his 60s and 70s, he would stand flat on the ground and try to kick the top of a doorframe with his foot. Every day he would stretch and work out to keep his edge and stay in shape. And you could certainly see that in his swing, as he crushed the ball a country mile on each hole.

"What you have to remember is that golf is a game that you can play almost forever. In other sports, a 40-year-old athlete is an old man."

-- Curtis Strange

Like most legends of the game, Snead was tremendously competitive, and gave it his all throughout every hole. We had a great time trading shots and stories on the course. From the first tee box it became apparent that he had never lost his competitive edge and his desire to win. He played every shot as if he were on his way to win the US Open, and his drive and passion flowed through to

rest of us. Just playing along with him served to inspire and push me to play better—to be the best I could possibly be.

The last time I saw Sam Snead at an event was at the Southern Open in Columbus, Georgia. He was hitting balls on the practice range, surrounded by a bunch of younger players, and I quickly grabbed my clubs and a bucket of balls to hit near him, hoping to overhear what he was saying. What I remember most about that practice range was that it was long and downhill, with a large twenty-foot high fence about 250 yards down the range. The fence was there to catch the balls on their first and second bounce. In order to make it over the fence your ball would have to carry at least 260 or 270 yards. Many players couldn't do it.

It was quite a sight to see the aging Snead challenging a bunch of flat bellies to see who could carry that fence. One after the other, he would crush his balls and sail them safely over to the other side, while these young, strong players would swing for all they're worth to try and keep up with him. Few could. It was a wonderful afternoon of competition, and I could tell that Snead was getting a kick out of it. In fact, it was probably the highlight of his week. Snead loved to show off his powerful swing.

One of the greatest aspects of golf is the way that it brings generations together. Young players are able to play right alongside the older ones, catching their love and enthusiasm for the game, getting advice and pointers, learning about the rich history of the sport from the very ones who made that history. You'd be hard pressed to find that dynamic on a basketball court, or a football field, or even a baseball diamond. But golf is a great equalizer—a game of skill and finesse and experience.

“Tennis Players don't sleep in parking lots on Saturday nights.”

-- David Owen

More than any other game, golf is played better when caught, instead of taught.

Passing On Your Faith

Through my writing and speaking ministry, I get the chance to travel the country and talk to a lot of great young men and women. I speak at a number of FCA gatherings, summer junior golf camps, Christian businessmen luncheons and golfing events. These engagements are the highlight of my life at the present.

There's nothing more encouraging than meeting young people with a deep love for God and his Word—people with a passion for growing in their faith. Though they love hearing some of the great golf stories—almost as

much as I love telling them—they're much more interested in hearing the testimonies of faith and integrity in the game. Stories of people who have used their platform as a celebrity or athlete to further God's Kingdom and shine the Lord's light to the world—players like Tom Lehman, Scott Simpson, Paul Azinger, and the late Payne Stewart. Instead of using their highly visible careers for personal gain, they instead choose to let God work through them to reach a generation of young fans and players. Many of these men give a great deal of their time and resources to ministries and charities around the world, looking for every opportunity to be a witness for Christ. Every time the TV cameras and microphones are turned on them, they see it as an opportunity to share their faith, and spread God's love to others.

To me, that's the true sign of greatness—both in golf and in life. It's not about how many tournaments you've won or how much money you've made, but about how many people were touched along the way by your life and words.

35

Mentor Younger Players

A number of years ago I got the chance to take my fourteen-year-old son, Blake, with me to watch the Masters tournament. Blake was born after I had left the tour full-time, and had never had an opportunity to see me playing professionally. But he had spent many an hour over the dinner table listening to stories of the courses I had played and the people I had played with, and it was a thrill to be able to finally share a piece of my past with him. He had always loved the stories of Gary Player, and he couldn't wait to meet him.

As we stood along the ropes of the seventh tee box, I retold some of the old tales of my days on the tour. I was busy telling him again about the time that I once pitched in for birdie on the sixth hole on Saturday of the Masters. Blake's eyes grew wide as I shared the account again from the very place at which it had happened.

Suddenly we looked up and Gary Player was making his way to the tee box. At that moment it hit me that it had been over twenty years since I was standing with Gary during a practice round on this very tee box. He still looked so young and fit that I found that hard to believe.

He saw me in the gallery and had a few minutes to kill, so he made his way over to say hello. He shook Blake's hand, and we reminisced a bit. Then he turned to Blake and told him of the time I had ruined his rain gear, and stunk up his bag. Blake listened with excitement, though I know he had heard the story hundreds of times before.

It happened in 1968 when I was caddying for Gary. During the Houston Open

I had slipped a few bananas into his bag for a quick snack for Gary and I on the course. I then forgot that they were in there, and a week later, while playing in New Orleans, a downpour erupted on the course. Gary said to me, "Reach into my bag and get me my rain gear and a clean glove."

I stuck my hand in the pocket of his bag and heard a loud squishing sound. Even Gary heard it. I pulled out a mass of rubber covered in black gook. The smell was atrocious, and everyone near me took a few steps back to gasp for air. I tried my best to separate the glove from the slicker,

"I wish every golfer could have the kind of golfing education I had. I wish every child could have the kind of father I had. If someone could grant me those wishes, the world would be a better place, and scoring averages would be a lot lower, too."

-- Davis Love III

frantically wiping off the rotting bananas, but to no avail. Gary was forced to play the rest of the round drenched, struggling to hold on to his club with a wet glove.

At the time I felt like an idiot, but it was good to see that Gary could look back on it and laugh. And I loved seeing Blake's eyes light up as he listened to the tale again, this time from the great Gary Player himself.

Of all the joys I've been blessed to experience during my career in golf, none compare with the thrill I get from sharing that passion with my children. There's nothing greater than getting to bring your kids into the sport, teaching them the mechanics and nuances of the swing, working with them on the range and on the course, sharing the rich history of the game with the people you love the most.

One of the great gifts God has given me is the opportunity to spend time on the course with my kids, allowing me the chance to mentor them both in golf and in life.

I encourage you to do the same. Use your love of the game to draw you closer to the ones you love the most, helping to create a bond that will never be broken.

When Your Mentor Mentors

During that same trip to watch the Masters tournament, Blake and I had the opportunity to attend a Fellowship of Christian Athletes prayer breakfast for the players and fans. It was great getting to hear the testimonies from many of the professionals about their faith in Christ, and how he has used them for his glory in their lives and on the course. But even better, I loved that Blake was there to hear their stories with me. That morning made an indelible impact on his faith and life.

Later that afternoon, Blake and I had the opportunity to help teach in a junior golf clinic at a local club in the area, and I got a chance to see him interacting with another young man—a boy who was dying of a terminal disease and had been brought to Augusta by the Make-A-Wish Foundation to watch the tournament. I had to fight back tears as I watched Blake work with this young man, spending most of the afternoon helping him with his swing and making him feel special. Seeing my young son pass on his passion to this little boy, mentoring him on the course, brought more joy to my heart than I could possibly put into words.

"I try to learn from everyone. I look at their strengths and ask myself, 'What can I do better.'"

-- Annika Sorenstam

Where's your Man?

I have the greatest respect for the Navigator Ministry, headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado. More than any organization that I'm aware of, they have done an outstanding work around the globe to bring people to Christ and then mentor them in their new faith.

What the Navigators bring to the body of Christ is a unique philosophy of spiritual growth through discipleship. Dawson Trotman, the founder of the worldwide organization, was a firm believer not only in leading people to salvation, but in working with them afterward, mentoring them and teaching them how to share their faith with others. He called it "spiritual multiplication"—a term that is still used to embody the ministry's role and philosophy within God's earthly kingdom.

This philosophy is grounded in Dawson's understanding of 2 Timothy 2:2. Paul is talking to Timothy, his spiritual son, when he says to him, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." This passage, he explains, is a charge for Christians to sow into the lives of others from generation to generation. Just as Paul mentored Timothy, he encourages him to mentor other believers, who will in turn pass their faith onto others. It's a simple principle, yet more effective than any other I've seen.

When meeting with other believing men during his life, Dawson was well known for his habit of turning to a person and asking, "Where's your man?" What he meant by that phrase was, "Who are you mentoring right now in your life?" He was a firm believer that every Christian should have at least one person that they were working with and discipling in the faith at all times. More than that, he believed that every man should also have a mentor—someone who they could look to for guidance and direction.

"I'm just a plowhand from Arkansas, but I have learned how to hold a team together—how to lift some men up, how to calm others down, until finally they've got one heartbeat together as a team... That's all it takes to get people to win."

-- Coach "Bear" Bryant

He used to say, "Somewhere in the body of Christ there is a Paul waiting to mentor you, and a Timothy, waiting to be mentored by you." Still today the Navigators have held rigidly onto that credo.

But mentoring implies more than just sharing your faith with someone, or guiding a brother into truth. In 2 Timothy 3:10-11, Paul says to his young apprentice, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and

Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.”

Paul did much more than teach Timothy, he ushered him deep inside of his world, letting him know “all about” his life and faith. Timothy witnessed Paul’s life from inside the ropes. He was given free access to his successes and failures, to his purpose and sufferings and faith—to his “way of life.” There were no secrets and no questions considered off limits. Paul led Timothy into his heart and mind while working to disciple him.

That same charge is there for you and I to take. Jesus said to his disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19). In effect he was asking them, “Where’s your man?”

That’s a good question for you and me as well.

36

Keep The Game In Perspective

One of the hardest working golfers I ever knew was Bob Unger. I met Bob and his wife Jenny in the early 70s while we were both struggling through mini tours, trying to qualify for the tour. They were great people, but neither of them had a relationship with the Lord.

Bob and Jenny lived and breathed golf. They owned a motor home and would park it on the edge of the parking lots at the tournament courses, and that's where they would live until the next event. They had very little interest outside of Bob's golf career, and were intent on remaining focused only on his game.

Bob practiced harder and longer than any player I'd ever met. And he had an amazing talent for the game. He was both skilled and determined, and had everything he needed to become a tour professional. All the pros were sure he was going to make it, because he had done so well on the mini tours.

*"Golf is not my god. Golf is a game.
Jesus Christ is my God."*

-- Paul Azinger

Debbie and I got to know them both on and off the course. They were completely wrapped up in the game of golf, intent on seeing that nothing deterred Bob from focusing on his game and gaining his card.

Then the night before the first round of qualifying school at Perdido Bay Country Club, in Pensacola, Florida, Debbie and I took the opportunity to share our faith with Bob and tell him about Jesus. I could tell by his eyes that he was coming to understand the truth of God's message. But something was holding him back. I knew that if I could ever get Bob to accept Jesus as his Savior, he would be an amazing witness for Christ. He didn't do anything halfway—it wasn't in his make-up. Bob was a passionate person who threw himself headlong into everything he did. Finally, toward the end of the evening, Bob turned to me and said, "I think I need to accept Jesus. Would you pray with me?"

I was overjoyed, and prayed with Bob as he accepted Jesus as his Lord.

That night he told his wife, Jenny, about his decision, and she was not a happy camper. The first thought that popped into her mind was that this was going to throw off his game. She knew her husband too well to think that he could focus on his playing with this new faith burning in his heart.

“Couldn’t you just wait two weeks?” she asked him. “Wait until after qualifying school, then you can become a Christian.”

But she was too late. Bob had made his decision and there was no turning back. He convinced Jenny to pray with him that night and ask Jesus into her life as well, and she agreed to do it. But she admitted later that she was only trying to please Bob. Throughout his prayer she continued to worry about what this was going to do to his game.

During that year, qualifying school consisted of eight grueling rounds of golf on two different courses—beginning at Pensacola and finishing over 600 miles away at Myrtle Beach. Bob started at Perdido Country Club with a strong opening round of 69, and a decent second day of 71, but his game started going downhill from there. The longer he played the harder he found it to keep his mind in his game instead of on his new decision to follow Christ. And the greater his zeal for the Lord grew, the more his game deteriorated. He shot a 75 and a 77 on the next two days of qualifying, pushing himself far back in the pack—around 60th place.

He knew he was down, but not yet out. He and Jenny quickly packed for the long ten-hour drive to Myrtle Beach. Then just as they started out of the parking lot in their large motor home, Jenny began to cry and unload on him. “You’re such a good player,” she told him, “and you’ve worked so hard for this. You’ve got everything you need to make it onto the tour; we both know that. But now you’ve just lost your heart for the game. I knew this would happen when you decided to become a Christian!”

As Jenny sat in her seat crying uncontrollably, Bob pulled the motor home over to the side of the road and said to her, “You’re right. I’m a nervous wreck. And I can’t seem to focus like I should. But I didn’t ask Jesus into my life for nothing. I’m going to pray right now and put it in his hands. If he wants me to make it he’s got to give me the power. If not I’ll do whatever he wants me to do—I’ll work at a hamburger stand if that’s what he wants. I’ll quit golf if he doesn’t want me to play. But I want that to be his decision.”

“We will all grip something, and we will all be gripped by something or someone. So my question to you is, ‘Do you have a grip on your life?’ You may have a controlled backswing, but do you have control down inside? Your answer is critical to your success in the game of life.”

-- Billy Graham

Then he took Jenny by the hand and said a simple prayer, laying his game and his future at the feet of Jesus. Afterward he looked at Jenny and said, “Okay, now we’ve given it to the Lord and we don’t have to worry about it anymore. When I’m playing I want you to watch me. Whether I

play well or mess up, I'm going to look over at you and point my finger in the air. That means 'one way.' Whatever happens, Jesus is in control."

Jenny wasn't sure what to think of Bob's new philosophy of golf, but she was willing to go along with anything that might help him get his mind back into his game. During the last four rounds of qualification, Bob's game came around for him. He was playing some of the best golf of his life. In spite of some of the worst weather of the year, he shot par golf all the way through to finally gain his PGA card. He ended up with the second lowest score during the last four rounds of playing, just behind Ben Crenshaw.

Throughout his rounds he did exactly what he told Jenny he would do. He put his trust in Jesus, and with each shot looked over at her and pointed his finger in the air. "One way." Players who were paired with him during those rounds couldn't believe Bob's commitment to staying focused on the Lord. They later testified that before each shot Bob would bow his head and say a simple prayer, then afterward look over at Jenny and lift his finger into the air with a smile.

Some months afterward Bob was able to lead Jenny into a deep and personal relationship with Jesus. Bob had a great two-year career on the PGA tour, but it paled in comparison to his new faith in Jesus. I've long since lost count of the number of people that he and Jenny led to the Lord through his days on tour. They were a shining example of true faith on the professional golf circuit.

Today Bob is a full-time pastor. He and Jenny work with an exciting church just outside of Colorado Springs, Colorado. Since the day that they each gave their hearts to Christ they have never waned from keeping Jesus at the center of their lives.

The True Beauty Of The Game

I recently had the chance to have dinner with Bob and Jenny and then later visit with them in their church home. I asked Bob if he gets to play much golf these days. "I play a few times a year," he said, "usually with some guys from our church. And I still love it. I wish I could play more often, but the ministry keeps me pretty busy."

I'd like to have had time to play a round with him while I was in town, but I had a number of engagements of my own to get to.

"And if you play golf, you're my friend."

-- Harvey Penick

As great as golf is to play, the true genius of the game is the way it brings so many lives together, and builds life-long friendships in the process. I've forgotten many of the games and scores and great shots of my career,

but I'll always remember the people I met along the way. God has used this great game to bring people into my life that I probably never would have met or developed friendships with otherwise, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Though I wish I could see my friends more often, it's comforting to know that someday, sooner than we may think, we'll all meet again for one last round in the great nineteenth hole in the sky. I'll be there with my Gator bag and my 1953 Wilson sand wedge, with "Joe the Pro" carrying my clubs. As always, he'll probably be bragging about the Gators, and cutting up with Bob and Jenny and all the rest of the gang. And I'll still be telling the gallery about my incredible tee shot on the sixteenth hole at Cypress Point for a tap-in birdie. Make sure you're there to join us.

Until then, stay in His grip, and I'll see you at the tee!

Quotables

Louie Anderson, comedian and best-selling author (quote taken from his book, *Dear Dad*).

Tommy Armour, professional golfer. Winner of 1990 Phoenix Open & 1993 Mexican Open.

Paul Azinger, professional golfer. Winner of 12 PGA tournaments and 2 International events. Named 1993 PGA Champion. Co-captain of 1994 President's Cup competition.

Seve Ballesteros, professional golfer, PGA European tour. Winner of over 74 tournaments in Europe, Asia and the US, and Captain of the 1997 European Ryder Cup team.

Henry Beard, author of numerous books, including *Golf Your Way*.

Coach "Bear" Bryant, infamous head football coach of University of Alabama, 1958-1982.

Percy Boomer, golf teacher from the 1940s and 1950s. Author of *On Learning Golf*, 1946.

Jack Burke, Sr., professional golfer from the early 1900s. 1941 PGA Seniors Champion. Inventor of the all-weather grip.

Billy Casper, professional golfer. Winner of 51 PGA tour events, including 2 US Opens and The Masters. Represented US in 8 Ryder Cup competitions, winning more points than any other American player—23.5. PGA Player of the Year in 1966 & 1970.

Oswald Chambers, best selling author of *My Utmost For His Highest*.

Fred Couples, professional golfer. Winner of 14 tournaments, including 1992 Masters. 2-time PGA tour Player of the Year (91 & 92).

Dave Dravecky, former all-star pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, best selling author and lecturer. Founder of Outreach of Hope Ministries.

Pete Dye, former president of the USGA and former commissioner of the PGA. Builder and architect of some of the greatest golf courses around the globe, including Crooked Stick in Carmel, Indiana, TPC at Sawgrass, in Ponte Vedra, Florida, and Old Marsh in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Steve Farrar, best-selling author, president of Point Man Leadership Ministries.

Dow Finsterwald, professional golfer from the 50s. Winner of 12 PGA tournaments, including 1958 PGA Championship. Won Vardon Trophy in 1957, and Player of the Year in 1958.

Raymond Floyd, professional golfer. Winner of 22 PGA tournaments, 14 Sr. PGA tournaments and over 26 International events.

John Freeman, author of numerous books, including *Tee-Ology: 18 Inspirational Lessons for Golfers*.

Doug Ford, professional golfer from the 50s. Winner of 27 tournaments.

Billy Graham, evangelist and best-selling author. Founder of The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Walter Hagan, professional golfer from the early 1900's. World's first full-time tournament professional. Winner of over 40 PGA tournaments, including 11 major Championships. 4-time winner of the British Open, and 6-time Captain of the US Ryder Cup team.

Martin Hall, Lead golf instructor with the Jim Flick/Jack Nicklaus Schools of Golf.

Ike Handy, amateur golfer and author of *How to Hit a Golf Ball Straight*.

Ben Hogan, professional golfer. Winner of 63 PGA tour events, including 9 Major Championships, 2 Masters, 4 US Opens and 1 British Open. 4-time winner of the PGA Player of the Year, 3-time winner of the Vardon Trophy, and 3-time Captain of the US Ryder Cup team. Leading money winner 5 times.

Arnold Haultain, author. Excerpts taken from *The Mystery of Golf*, 1908.

Ken Hubbard, American humorist, 1868-1930.

Hale Irwin, professional golfer. Winner of 19 PGA tournaments, including 3 US Opens and 2 Memorials. Represented US in five Ryder Cup competitions.

John Jacobs, professional golfer in the early 1900s. Winner of the Dutch Open, and the South African Match Play Championship. Best known as a pioneer architect of European golf, as well as a writer, commentator and coach.

Jerry B. Jenkins, best-selling author, novelist and biographer. Has written over 140 books, including the all-time best-selling *Left Behind* fiction series.

Bobby Jones, professional golfer from the early 1900s. Winner of 4 US Opens, 5 US Amateurs, and 3 British Opens. Played in 6 Walker Cup events. Only golfer to win Grand Slam, 1930.

Ernest Jones, golf instructor from the 1940s. Author of *Swing The Clubhead*.

Andra Kirkaldy, professional golfer from St. Andrews at the turn of the century. Author of *Fifty Years of Golf: My Memories*, 1921.

Joe Kirkwood, famous trickshot artist from the early 1900s. Winner of several tournaments, including 4 consecutive events in 1929.

Tom Kite, professional golfer. Winner of 19 PGA tournaments, 3 Sr. PGA tournaments and over 8 International events.

Greg Laurie, evangelist and author.

Steven Lawson, author and pastor of Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama.

Tom Lehman, professional golfer. Winner of 5 PGA tournaments, 4 Buy.Com Hogan tournaments and 2 International events.

Tony Lema, professional golfer from the 60s. Known best as “Champaign Tony,” for his tradition of passing out Champaign to the press at tournaments. Winner of several tournaments, including the British Open. Killed in plane crash in 1966.

Rush Limbaugh, radio talk-show host, best-selling author.

Nancy Lopez, professional golfer. Winner of 43 tournaments, including 4 major championships.

Davis Love III, professional golfer. Winner of 10 PGA tournaments, including the 1992 Players Championship. Represented US in two Ryder Cup competitions, and two Presidents Cup events. Winner of four consecutive World cup competitions.

Max Lucado, best-selling author of more than 20 books, including *No Wonder They Call Him The Savior*, and *God Came Near*. Minister of Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas.

Meg Mallon, professional golfer. Winner of 8 LPGA tournaments, including 2 Major events. Played in 4 Solheim Cup events.

Brennon Manning, best-selling author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel & Ruthless Trust*

Larry Miller, professional golfer and author of numerous books, including *Beyond Golf*, and *Exploring the Zone*.

Byron Nelson, professional golfer. Winner of 52 PGA tournaments. Holds record for most wins in one calendar year—18, and the most consecutive wins—11, both in 1945. Also for the most consecutive finishes in the money—113.

Jack Nicklaus, professional golfer. Named “Player of the Century,” winner of 71 tour events, including 20 major championships, as well as 5 Sr. PGA tournaments, including the 1991 Senior Open. Represented US in eight Ryder Cup competitions (twice as Captain), six World Cup competitions and two Walker Cup competitions.

Greg Norman, professional golfer. Winner of 90 tournaments world-wide, including 2 British Open Titles and 18 PGA events. 1995 Player of the Year. 3-time winner of the Vardon Trophy.

Mac O’Grady, professional golfer. Winner of 2 PGA tournaments.

Bill O’Reilly, best-selling author, and host of The O’Reilly Factor on Fox News.

David Owen, author of numerous books, including *The Chosen One: Tiger Woods and the Dilemma of Greatness*, and *My Usual Game: Adventures in Golf*.

Arnold Palmer, professional golfer. Winner of 92 PGA events, including 7 major championships, 12 Sr. PGA tournaments and 19 international events. Holds US Amateur title. Represented US in six Ryder Cup competitions, seven World Cup competitions, and five Chrysler Cup events.

Harvey Penick, legendary golf instructor, author of *Harvey Penick’s Little Red Book*, and *And If You Play Golf, You’re My Friend*.

Gary Player, professional golfer. Winner of 73 tournaments world-wide. Has won all four majors on both US and European tours.

E.M. Prain, journalist and entrepreneur from the early 1900s. Author of *Live Hands: A Key To Better Golf*, 1946.

Nick Price, professional golfer. Winner of 16 PGA tournaments and 24 International events.

Grantland Rice, sports reporter and author from 1910-1930.

Chi Chi Rodriguez, professional golfer. Winner of 8 PGA tournaments & 20 Sr. PGA tournaments.

Bob Rotella, author and Director of Sports Psychology at University of Virginia. Consultant to numerous PGA, LPGA & Sr. PGA professionals. Writer and consultant for *Golf Digest*.

Paul Runyan, professional golfer from the early 1900s. Winner of 28 PGA tour events, including 2 Majors, 2 PGA Championships and 2 Senior PGA events. Leading money winner of 1934.

Vivian Saunders, LPGA teacher from Great Britain. Author of *The Golfing Mind*, 1987.

Craig Shankland, sports writer. Excerpt taken from *Golf Illustrated*, May 1993, p. 62.

Jim Sheard, author and lecturer. Co-writer with Wally Armstrong of *In His Grip*, *Finishing The Course*, and *Playing The Game*,

Sam Snead, professional golfer. Winner of 81 PGA tournaments, including 3 PGA Championships, 1 British Open and 3 Masters. Played on 8 Ryder Cup teams and 6 World Cup teams. Was leading money winner three times. Four time winner of the Vardon Trophy for the lowest scoring average of the season.

Annika Sorenstam, professional golfer. Winner of over 31 LPGA tournaments, and 9 LPGA Awards, including Player of the Year 4 times. Won more LPGA tournaments than any other player in 1900s—18. One of 2 players in LPGA history (with Karrie Webb) to earn \$1 million in 3 separate seasons. Played in 4 Solheim Cup events.

Payne Stewart, professional golfer. Winner of 11 tour events, including the PGA Championship and the US Open. Represented US in 5 Ryder Cup competitions. Died in a plane crash in 1999.

Curtis Strange, professional golfer. Winner of 17 tournaments, including 2 back-to-back US Open titles. Leading money winner in 1985, 1987, and 1988. Represented US in four Ryder Cup competitions. Named PGA “Player of the Year” in 1988.

Bill Strausburg, former golf instructor at Columbia Country Club in Washington D.C.

Louise Suggs, professional golfer. Winner of the US Amateur title, the British Amateur, and 50 LPGA tournaments. One of the “100 Heroes of American Golf.”

J.H. Taylor, professional golfer from the turn of the Century. Winner of 5 Major Championships, 5 British Opens, 2 French Opens, the German Open and the 1908 British Match Play.

Bob Toski, golf instructor and part-time professional golfer. Author of numerous instructional books, including *The Complete Golfer*, with Jim Flick.

Harry Vardon, professional golfer from the turn of the century. Winner of 62 tournaments, including 7 major championships, 1 US Open and 6 British Opens.

Ken Venturi, professional golfer. Winner of 14 PGA tournaments, including the US Open. Named PGA “Player of the Year.” Has served as color commentator for CBS golf for 25 years, and is also a golf course design consultant.

Warren Weirsbe, prolific author of numerous books, commentaries and expositional studies of the Scriptures. Radio talk show host, lecturer and Bible scholar.

Gary Wiren, golf instructor and Master member of the PGA. Author of *The Teaching Manual*, as well as over 200 magazine articles and instructional booklets. Winner of numerous teaching awards, including the 1987 PGA Teacher of the Year.

P.G. Wodehouse, English novelist, and author of 36 golf novels, and over 600 short stories. One of England’s most prolific golf writers from the 1930s and 40s.

Tiger Woods, professional golfer. Winner of over 29 PGA tournaments and 6 International events. Has won all 4 majors consecutively—PGA’s first Grand Slam. In 2000, posted one of the greatest years in the history of the game, setting or tying 27 PGA tour records. In 1999 earned a tour record of over 6.6 million in earnings (3 million more than David Duval, the nearest competitor).

Babe Didrikson Zaharias, professional athlete from the early 1900s. Won 2 gold medals in the 1932 Olympics (javelin and 80-meter hurdles), then went on to play professional baseball. Took up golf in 1935 and went on to win 55 professional and amateur events, including 10 Majors. Helped found LPGA in 1949. 6-time winner of AP Female Athlete of the Year Award, and chosen as AP Athlete of the Half-Century in 1950.