

REVIEWS

This manuscript is Part One in the trilogy that reveals practical mental tools that are often overlooked in traditional instruction.

Volume Two: The Gorilla Is Loose: Your Innate Swing Unleashed!

Volume Three: Playing Out Of Your Mind: Moving Beyond Swing Mechanics

“As an avid, but deeply struggling golfer, I was always looking for anything that could improve my game. This book was not only concise, but I genuinely felt understood. After reading it, I feel more confident than ever that my swing will not only improve, but I will finally enjoy the game again. By breaking down the mental stress associated with a bad shot, Dave creates an environment where golfers can naturally excel.”

R. Wood (14 Handicap) Newmarket, ON.

"As we try and strive for golf improvement, Dave's simple, effective and humorous ideas teach that conventional wisdom (ie. based strictly on mechanics) is often ineffective and that there are other ways to playing better golf than spending hours on the driving range hoping to discover "the secret." Read this book. You will not only thoroughly enjoy it. It will do wonders for your game!"

Jonathan Levitt (12 handicap) President, Levitt Insurance Brokers, Toronto, ON.

“What makes Dave Johnston's golf instruction great, is his remarkable ability to focus on the handful of things that make all the difference, and to communicate them in an easily understood manner. Just like Dave, this book is focused, easily understood, humorous and (most of all) very, very helpful in improving your game – no matter what level you play. This will be the year I finally break that elusive 90 barrier, thanks to the principles outlined in “Just Hit The Damn Ball!”

G. Hardman (16 handicap) London, ON

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DEDICATION

To my father who could never quite figure out,
if golf was a microcosm of life or life itself.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for purchasing this book.

The concepts are a distillation of notes compiled from 31 years of teaching golf for a living. My fundamental goal is to provide the “average” golfer with practical tools to develop their natural ability. If I had these tools 20 ago, you would have seen my name on the leaderboard beside Arnie and Jack.

Or maybe not.

At the very least, I would have understood that the key to developing your natural ability is abandoning the search for technical perfection.

Modern equipment technology has given us the potential to play our best golf consistently with less effort. Yet the proliferation of on-line assistance for the forlorn golfer, reveals that the search for the missing piece of the puzzle is stronger than ever.

I look forward to helping you on the journey to playing better than you ever believed possible!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no way I can thank everyone who has provided the impetus to write this manuscript. Every one of the students I have had the privilege of working with have contributed in one form or another. You have shown me more than I have ever taught you. Thank you.

My wife Mary deserves a medal for enduring thirty years of marriage with a golf instructor. Words cannot express my gratitude for allowing me to pursue a career path that has been anything if not boring! She provides an anchor to reality, without which the game would be a consuming obsession.

My brother, Gord, who has I'm sure on numerous occasions, wondered what kind of a geek he has for a sibling. I could very well daydream my life away without his periodic metaphorical kick in the butt to jolt me back to reality.

Harvey Patterson, musician, writer, perpetual student and lifelong friend who has endured my emotional roller coaster on the golf course. Our conversations during the

past twenty years, have provided the incentive to write this manuscript. Thank you for being a willing sounding board. Your feedback has been invaluable.

Dave Richardson, CPGA Retired Head professional, thanks for your guidance. Your insight provided the background information that was the springboard for this work

Jonathan Levitt, thank you for your encouragement when I felt like abandoning the project.

Randy Wood, perpetual student, for challenging me to keep my instruction straightforward and practical.

Shelley Hitz, for providing the tools that allowed me to publish the manuscript that has been floating around in the back of my mind for the past twenty years.

Dr. Paul Kennedy D.D.C. for taking the time to explain the self-regulating mind/body machine to me in layman's terms.

Dr. Karl. Morris, for his insight on the connection between emotion and memory.

Dr. Harlan Kilstein, for his revelation on the effects of everyday language on performance.

Anthony Robbins, for simplifying the principles of Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

Bloomington Downs Golf Club and the Miller Paving Group for allowing me the freedom to implement my theories in real life.

"...to model ourselves on a champion is about as profitless, as to copy out Hamlet in the hopes of becoming Shakespeare."

The Art of Golf, Sir. W.G. Simpson, Bart.

FOREWORD

When Dave approached me to write a forward to this book, I asked him why he didn't get someone who was a little better known—like Tiger or Phil. He said he wanted a real life golfer, one that the average golfer could relate to.

Dave and I have been friends for many years and I have followed his blossoming career as a teacher. He talks in his book of his struggles in the past to overcome negative thinking. I can attest to this, for when we used to play, each swing for Dave was a life or death undertaking.

When he hit a bad shot, he would stand in the fairway (or rough), a look of complete bewilderment on his face as if to say, why is this happening to me?

As you read in the following pages, he learned to turn his thinking around and enjoy the game for what it is. By a strange coincidence, at the same time his swing and his game improved.

Through it all, he has been the most supportive teacher one could have, always looking for something positive to say, no matter what disaster occurs.

I have joked that someday when we're playing, I would take a mighty swing and completely miss the ball. Dave would consider a moment, smile encouragingly and then say, "nice sweater".

You wouldn't get that from Tiger or Phil.

I know you'll enjoy his book and if you take the lessons to heart, you will never have to hear a compliment about your sweater.

Harvey Patterson (musician, writer, golf fanatic)

INTRODUCTION: THE GLASS CEILING

“Your swing is your swing.”

Jackie Burke Jr.

The 20th century golfer is the penultimate research scientist. Like a modern day alchemist, the rabid golfer experiments tirelessly to uncover the combination of elements that will unlock the vault guarding the secret to a consistent game.

The Golf Gods tantalize us with the illusion that the missing piece of the puzzle is *out there* somewhere. Golfers have an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Amazon.com lists over 1,240 instruction books. YouTube boasts 13,000 videos on *How To Cure A Slice*. These numbers are multiplying daily at an exponential rate.

It would appear that every instructor has a different version of the golf bible.

Any golfer with a computer has free access to unlimited resources on every aspect of the game, from swing mechanics to physical conditioning to mental secrets of the world's best players. Esoteric knowledge is no longer the exclusive domain of scratch players and elite instructors.

Drivers with self-adjusting screws allow a golfer to compensate for a chronic slice or hook, without taking out a second mortgage to enlist the services of a highly-touted teaching professional.

Smart phones with built-in, high-definition cameras are capable of slow motion playback. Within minutes a golfer can see the critical flaws in his swing. With all this knowledge (literally) at one's fingertips, you would think the average golfer would score in the 80's consistently.

According to the National Golf Foundation, the 2012 median handicap for the average male golfer in North America is 16. Only 10 percent of golfers score below 90 consistently. This figure hasn't changed appreciably in 40 years! My search for an answer to this paradox was the tipping point for writing this manuscript.

SAME OLD, SAME OLD...

Upon reviewing my lesson notes compiled over the past thirty-one years, I've noticed a disturbing pattern. My regular clients take a series of lessons every spring, practice regularly and improve. During the summer, the golf clubs are often relegated to the basement as kid's activities, family holidays and home renovations assume top priority.

Often, I wouldn't see the student again until the following spring. In the majority of cases, the first two lessons of the new season were devoted to correcting the swing faults that were supposed to have been exorcised the previous year!

This ritual repeated year after year with alarmingly regularity. (The image of a mouse on a treadmill pops into my head as I write these words.) When the student had time to practice, the new technique produced significant improvement. After an extended layoff, however, the old habits re-emerged.

Most once-a-week golfers do not have the time or resources to invest in regular lessons. Resigned to this fact, you may abandon any hope of improvement. You just play for fun right? Score doesn't really matter, does it?

My approach is based on fundamental concepts of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) as popularized by Anthony Robbins. (Don't worry, it's not as scary as it sounds). You have untapped natural ability. The key to your best golf is learning how to unlock your mental vault and access your innate swing on demand. One of the biggest roadblocks to improvement is our automatic tendency to dwell on apparent flaws in technique.

Based on my experience, most golfers find it easier to think negatively; we have been conditioned to look for mistakes. An awareness of critical flaws is necessary for improvement, however, our obsession with fault-finding leads to the embedded belief that our natural instincts betray us and must be constantly suppressed.

How often do you hear a golfer ask, "What's right with my swing?"

The technology that permits us to dissect the golf swing into a hundred pieces perpetuates our tendency to look for errors; technical nuances that cannot be seen by the naked eye.

Disassembling the motion is easy. Learning how to put the pieces back together again is the "kicker". The secret to constant improvement is refining, not destroying, your innate ability.

Traditional golf instruction is akin to "throwing out the baby with the bath water". For the once-a-week golfer, attempting to correct every swing flaw in pursuit of an esoteric ideal is lunacy.

So what's the alternative?

Every golfer has hit shots that just felt right. Re-creating this feeling is the key to unlocking your best golf. Feeling is, by implication, the absence of conscious thought.

A common misconception among high handicap players, is that one must have the proper form in order to recapture the gossamer feeling of a perfect shot. The skilled

golfer knows that the exact opposite is true. Learn how to “find the feeling” and the swing will take care of itself.

Every seasoned player has heard that golf is ninety percent mental. Taken to its literal conclusion, one might assume that technique is irrelevant and you can learn to will the ball to the hole. At this point in our evolution, telekinesis is not a viable alternative to hitting the ball with a club. While the (technical) 10 percent of the above equation sounds trivial, it is critical for improvement.

You must have the essentials of technique firmly established to implement the ninety percent effectively. A house without a solid foundation will eventually crumble.

There are three mechanical prerequisites which form the foundation of every effective swing. These three essentials are much easier to master than you are led to believe. Adhering to the above maxim, ninety percent of this book is devoted to helping you master your mental arena. Every instruction book offers a different perspective on proper swing mechanics.

It's my hope that the chapter on the Three Essentials will allow you to incorporate them quickly into your unique style. They are offered as signposts to help you avoid the recurring dead ends that many golfers encounter in the search for their innate swing.

One of the fundamental concepts of NLP is the power of habits or rituals. If you had to think about which pant leg to pull on or which shoe to tie first, your daily existence would grind to a halt. Habits are essential to help us navigate smoothly through our day, however, they can cement beliefs and shut off your potential to explore new possibilities.

How does this relate to your golf game? Good question

Your handicap is the result of habitual ways of thinking and acting. Over time, this pattern creates a wall to improvement that appears insurmountable.

Until you become aware of your rituals and learn how to develop new empowering ones, the wall remains intact. You have more natural ability than you realize.

The first step to breaking through the wall is to uncover it...

YOUR INNATE SWING

*"I've learned to trust the subconscious,
my instincts have never lied to me."
Tiger Woods*

Have you ever hit a perfect shot? A shot that just felt right; a shot that you *knew* you couldn't hit any better? If you have, then you've tapped into your natural ability, or as I like to call it, your innate swing.

For many golfers, this out- of- mind experience is a happy accident that occurs when we least expect it.

Perhaps you were trying to lay up to a hazard and hit the ball 20 yards further than you intended. Maybe you were caught up in a conversation and didn't realize it was your turn to play, so you just stepped up and hit the shot. Many golfers experience this anomaly during the first game of the season - no expectations, no pressure. You get the idea.

Did you dismiss this phenomenon as a fluke, something beyond your control? This apparent accident was your true swing. Helping you access it on demand is the goal of this text. Stop for a moment and replay the shot in your mind. Can you recall what you were thinking just before you hit the ball? I'll bet you weren't thinking about the nuances of swing mechanics or past failures. Just look at the target and hit the shot. Piece of cake!

Every golfer has experienced the frustration of hitting perfect shots on the practice range, then dubbing the first tee shot 20 yards along the ground and watching helplessly as the ball comes to rest ignominiously on the forward tee.

Words cannot describe the humiliation!

What the hell happens during the 10 minute walk from the practice range to the first tee? No wonder it's called the longest walk in golf.

You've probably heard the standard advice: "...practice like you play. Make every shot count."

The notion of making your practice as realistic as possible makes perfect sense, but practicing and playing will never be the same.

Does that mean the only ball that counts during practice is the last one? Apart from good aerobic exercise, what's the benefit of hitting hundreds of balls, week after week, year after year?

These questions deserve a plausible explanation.

This text has four fundamental goals: (1) to help you discover your natural ability (2) to help you develop empowering habits (3) to offer guidelines for accessing your innate swing (4) to help you take control of your progress.

The most important prerequisite is an open mind.

By the end of this text, you will be in the driver's seat; you will understand why you keep "spinning your wheels" when you attempt to integrate the latest cutting-edge information on proper swing technique.

If you are expecting a simple variation of the classic "keep your head down" variety, then you should return this book and get your money back. I can offer you the tools to take your game to a new level, but how you use them (and the results you achieve) rests squarely on your shoulders.

Let's begin the journey to unleashing your untapped ability as you uncover...

THE KNOWLEDGE TRAP

“Try smarter, not harder.”

Moe Norman

How long have you been playing golf; one year, five years, ten years or more? Are you constantly improving or have you hit *the wall*?

Do you ever get the feeling that you could, or even should, be playing better than you do, but can't seem to find the missing piece of the puzzle?

If you do, then read on.

This text offers an alternative to traditional golf instruction. Once you understand the habits that keep you confined to your present comfort level, then you have the first key to unlocking your potential.

The Learning Paradox

The thirst for more knowledge is a laudable goal, but it comes with a condition. The more you learn about swing mechanics, the more essential it becomes to switch off your conscious mind for one and one-half seconds and just hit the damn ball!

I recall the sage advice from a mentor (who scored in the low 80's) cautioning me about an obsession with swing mechanics. He stated, as if reciting an undeniable fact, that for every golf book I read, my score would go up by two strokes. At the time I silently scoffed at the caveat.

The old adage “knowledge is power” contains the underlying assumption, that one understands how to use the knowledge effectively.

Learning the technical nuances of proper form, without knowing how to apply them, is akin to winning a million dollar home in a lottery without the key to the front door.

YOU AND YOUR HABITS

*“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again,
and expecting different results.”*

Albert Einstein

Your golf game is a product of habitual ways of thinking and acting. The longer you've played, the more ingrained the habit. If you've developed the habit of focusing on mistakes, then you will unconsciously reproduce them ad infinitum in one form or another.

To paraphrase Dr. Karl Morris, “our nervous system craves familiarity”.

Habits are essential to maintain our sanity. At times, however, these rituals (sounds like we are trying to placate a capricious golf god) prevent us from discovering better ways to accomplish our goals.

Have you ever realized that you were travelling the wrong way on a highway, the route you automatically follow every day, when your destination was in the opposite direction?

The first step to uncovering your dormant ability is awareness. Once you understand your automatic reactions to specific triggers in the environment, the next step is to eliminate ineffective rituals and replace them with empowering ones.

It will take some diligence. We tend to follow the path of least resistance.

For most of us, even the slightest change can be a scary proposition! If you can devote five minutes a day, every day, a new habit can be developed in just 30 days. The key is regular daily maintenance.

The procedures illustrated are tipping points. They are offered as a stimulus to help you develop new patterns of thinking about your golf game. There are no absolutes, only guidelines.

How you use the guidelines is up to you.

APPEARANCES ARE DECEIVING

*“How can I swing like Fred Couples
and play like Fred Flintstone?”*

Dave Johnston

There is one fundamental principle that separates a low handicap player from his double-digit counterpart.

Are you familiar with the maxim, *form follows function*? The phrase has a scholarly ring to it alright, but what does it actually mean?

The best players in history are those who have been criticized by purists as having unorthodox swings; styles which are beyond the limits of aesthetically pleasing.

Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, Moe Norman, Jim Furyk and Annika Sorenstam are only a handful of players whose swings are not pure in the classic sense.

Every generation has had prominent players who seem to violate the apparent essentials of perfect form. The longevity of their careers testifies that they have learned how to deal with their flaws and overcome their effects most of the time. But they still retain the idiosyncrasies that make their swings unique. We tend to regard these deviations in style as exceptions, when in reality, they are the norm.

An aesthetically pleasing swing is a fortuitous by-product of developing a swing that repeats itself.

The silky smooth swings of Fred Couples, Ernie Els, Gene Littler and Julius Boros (sorry, showing my age) make many golfers drool with envy. Admiring their form is understandable. Attempting to copy it is disastrous.

It's an exercise in futility to try and copy another player. There are essential elements found in every effective swing. Understanding these elements and helping you incorporate them is the task of a competent instructor. The trick is learning how to adapt these essentials into your unique style. You have to discover the motion that feels right for you, work on refining it, and let the aesthetics take of itself.

THE LEARNING PLATEAU

“Conquer the fear of failure and you conquer the fear of success.”

Dr. Karl Morris

During the first three to five years, most players improve rapidly. They learn the fundamentals, acquire a basic swing and break 100 regularly. Despite investing in lessons, the latest high-tech equipment and watching the golf channel religiously, the majority of golfers never break 90.

You might attribute this lack of improvement to time constraints; between work, kid's activities and social commitments, you just don't have time to beat enough balls to develop any consistency.

It certainly sounds reasonable doesn't it?

If you honestly believe this statement, then you are shutting off any access to your untapped natural ability. I'm not implying that all of us have the god-given talent to shoot par every round.

A chosen few of the games' disciples have been granted the natural ability to swing a club over one-hundred miles per hour (My back starts to twinge when I even think about swinging a club that fast!)

No doubt about it, the golf gods are fickle. Even though you may not be one of the chosen few, you have enough innate ability to score in the eighties consistently. Many of my students, have a comprehensive knowledge of swing mechanics. They've learned the subtleties of the swing; the nuances of pronation, supination, hitting from the top and the delayed release - but they were never taught how to use this knowledge to improve their own games.

I can think of no better phrase in this regard than one often enunciated by the late Canadian golf legend, Moe Norman.

During our impromptu conversations at the Scarlett Woods Golf Club in Toronto, he would repeat the same maxims time after time in his inimitable high-pitched style. It has taken me 20 years to appreciate the significance of these phrases.

The meaning behind this particular one has been percolating in my mind for the last 10 years: “be a mind beater – not a ball beater.”

REVERSING THE LEARNING PARADIGM

Contrary to popular belief, your ability to memorize the intricate details of the swing is not a passport to improvement.

A second cousin to this belief is the conviction that the key to your best golf is perfect mechanics. Traditional golf instruction is based on the premise that (especially if you began to play after 10 years old) our natural instincts betray us and must be constantly suppressed.

The ability to repeat a motion consistently must take priority over technical perfection.

At this point you may be thinking: "...sure, easy for him to say. He's probably been playing since he was 4 years old. What does he know about struggling to break 90?"

Permit me to indulge in a brief biography, and I think you'll see that the principles outlined in this text provide the elements that can unlock the mental vault and elevate your game to a whole new level.

THE LURE OF PERFECTION

"If what you're doing isn't working, then try something else."

Anthony Robbins

I had no intention of teaching golf as a career. Since I was 16, my goal was to pursue a career in clinical psychiatry (I know, I know, that explains a lot).

Having only played twice before entering university, I regarded the game as a silly pastime played (at the time) mostly by men who had nothing better to do than waste an afternoon trying to bury a ball in a hole.

My father played twice a month. He subscribed to Golf Digest, Golf Magazine and the local newspaper to read the weekly serial by Jack Nicklaus. My Dad could describe the technical flaws in any swing, yet he struggled for years to break 100.

Every year from age 12 to 16, he tried to convince me to caddy for him in the annual office tournament. Every year I refused. In the fourth year, after running out of excuses, I finally agreed.

Once beyond the scope of the pro shop, the casual atmosphere (and free beer) prompted my Dad's colleagues to give me a club. With only a basic grip and no knowledge of proper technique, I hit a number three wood about 150 yards down the middle of the fairway.

My father's typically stoic demeanor transformed to a look of sheer amazement! Upon completing the round, he immediately registered me for a series of lessons with the club professional.

Up until this point, I had played football, basketball and baseball reasonably well, but they held no particular attraction to develop my skills. Suddenly, hitting a golf ball now held a peculiar fascination. So far, the story is pretty much what you would expect, right?

Sit tight. It gets better.

During the summer, I spent six hours a day practicing the square to square method which was in vogue at the time. The paradigm focused on a flat wrist in the backswing and driving the knees in the downswing.

Obsessed with developing proper muscle memory, I built several devices which (in retrospect conjured up images of the Spanish Inquisition) would force my body to follow the requirements of sound technique.

In order to flatten the back of the left wrist at the top of the backswing, I constructed a brace consisting of two pieces of plywood about half an inch thick, 3 inches wide and 6 inches long. There were two bolts at either end to maintain a constant pressure and force the wrist to hinge properly. (I still have faint scars where the plywood was pressed so tightly it cut off the circulation.) I wore the brace every time I practiced.

After three months of practice, I could keep the wrist relatively straight by conscious effort. I was eager to play. Can you guess what happened?

Playing my first game in three months, I scored 102! Dejected doesn't come close to describing the empty feeling in my gut. I was reasonably athletic and, heaven knows, analytical to a fault. Yet with all this practice, any natural ability I had to hit a golf ball had completely vanished!

Perplexed as to my next course of action, I booked another lesson with the pro. Perhaps I had ingrained some tragic flaw by hitting thousands of golf balls. After watching me for half an hour, he assured me that I was on the right track and that, sooner or later, all the hard work would pay off.

It never did.

I played four more games that season. My best score was 92. If I hadn't been a decent putter, I would have been lucky to break 100. The clubs were banished to a dark corner of the basement and remained there for four years as I continued my education.

Having graduated with a degree in Psychology, I decided to take a year off to assess my vocational options. Daunted by the prospect of four more years of medical training plus an internship, I pondered the potential real-life applications for my current knowledge.

Teaching was a viable alternative, but I had had enough of four walls and lecture halls. I vividly recall the moment that changed my life forever.

Killing an afternoon by wandering through a local bookstore, my eye snagged on a picture of Jack Nicklaus on the cover of Golf Digest. The caption read: "The Deadly Flaw in Jack's Swing." The article went on to describe how this technical flaw had to be fixed in order for Jack to have any success on the PGA Tour. The so-called flaw (his flying right elbow) was never fixed. Nicklaus went on to win eighteen major tournaments. The apparent flaw was an endemic part of his swing. If he had given credence to the critics and tried to eliminate it, I seriously doubt that he would have become the oldest golfer in history to win the Masters tournament.

I scanned the magazine rack and discovered five more golf publications. The feature story in each one focused on the most common mistakes made by the average golfer. Lifting the head too soon, bending the left elbow and the reverse weight shift were the most popular deadly sins. The implication was that the golf swing was not a natural motion. The ultimate goal was technical perfection.

I spent the next 30 years searching for a method that would complement a golfer's natural ability and gradually refine the technical aspects without sacrificing his/her unique form.

Get ready to take your game to a new level! You're about to discover the secret to...

MIND OVER MUSCLE

"The ball gets in the way of the swing."

George Knudson

One of the most common delusions among the mid to high handicap golfer is the expectation that practice makes perfect. The number of practice shots you hit, good or bad, have absolutely no causal relationship to how you play. For years, I entertained the idea that the more I practiced, the better I would play.

Does this sound familiar?

This firmly entrenched belief was challenged on a golf vacation, when I was paired up with an older gentleman in his late fifties (I was thirty-two at the time, so I considered anyone over forty old) who shattered my belief in the value of practice. We met on the practice range twenty minutes before our tee time. My swing felt effortless. Every shot traced a perfect parabolic trajectory towards the target. I could hardly wait for the accolades from my partner.

I glanced over periodically and couldn't help but notice Bob's short, choppy backswing and abbreviated follow-through. His shots varied from fair to good to worm-burners and fat shots. I'm ashamed to admit that the prospect of spending four and half hours looking for lost balls, almost impelled me to feign a mysterious illness and ask for a raincheck.

If I had followed through with that impulse, today I would be spending countless hours lying on a therapist's couch struggling to come to terms with the inequities of the game.

I played reasonably well that day and shot 77. My playing partner shot 75!

A gnawing voice somewhere in the back of my mind kept screaming that the score wasn't a true reflection of our respective abilities. Was there no justice?

Tinged with frustration and burning with curiosity, I had to find out how Bob (not his real name) flipped a switch and went from a total duffer on the practice range to a very respectable player under pressure. There were no bets involved, so the thought that I was being hustled quickly dissolved.

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