

GEORGE DUNCAN

The famous young Hanger Hill professional, one of the finest golfers, and probably the best golf coach, in the world.

THE SOUL OF GOLF

BY P. A. VAILE AUTHOR OF 'MODERN GOLF,' 'MODERN LAWN TENNIS,' 'SWERVE, OR THE FLIGHT OF THE BALL,' ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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**TO PHILIP REGINALD THORNTON MY
CO-WORKER IN IMPERIAL POLITICS**

PREFACE

It is frequently and emphatically asserted by reviewers of golf books that golf cannot be learned from a book. If they would add "in a room" they would be very near the truth—but not quite. It would be quite possible for an intelligent man with a special faculty for games, a good book on golf, and a properly equipped practising-room to start his golfing career with a game equal to a single figure handicap.

As a matter of fact the most important things concerning golf may be more easily and better learned in an arm-chair than on the links. As a matter of good and scientific tuition the arm-chair is the place for them. In both golf and lawn tennis countless players ruin their game by thinking too much about how they are playing the stroke *while they are doing it*. That is not the time to study first principles. Those should have been digested in the arm-chair, where indeed, as I have already said and now repeat with emphasis, the highest, the most scientific, and the most important knowledge of golf *must* be obtained. There is no time for it on the links, and the true golfer has *no time* for the man

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who tries to get it there, for he is generally a dreary bore.

Moreover, the man who tries to get it on the links is in trouble from the outset, for in golf he is faced with a mass of false doctrine associated with the greatest names in the history of golf, which is calculated, as he follows it, to put him back for years, until indeed he shall find the truth, the soul of golf.

This book is in many ways different from any book concerning golf which has ever been published. It assumes on the part of the reader a certain amount of knowledge, and it essays to bring back

to the truth those who have been led astray by the false teaching of the most eminent men associated with the game, teaching which they do not themselves practise. At the same time it seeks to impart the great fundamental principles, without which even the beginner must be seriously handicapped.

It does not concern itself with showing how the golfer must play certain strokes. That certainly may be done better on the links than in the smoking-room; but it concerns itself deeply with those things which every golfer who wishes really to know golf, should have stowed away in his mind with such certainty and familiarity that he ceases almost to regard them as knowledge, and comes to use them *by habit*.

When the golfer gets into this frame of mind, and not until then, will he be able to understand and truly appreciate the meaning and value of "the soul of golf."

This he will never do by following the predominant mass of false teaching. This book is a challenge, but it is not a question of Vaile against Vardon, Braid, Taylor, Professor Thomson, and others. The issue is above that. It is a question of truth or untruth. Nothing matters but the truth. It rests with the golfing world to find out for itself which is the truth. This it can do with comfort in its arm-chair, and afterwards it can with much enhanced comfort, almost insensibly, weave that truth into the fabric of its game, and so through sheer practice, born of the purest and highest theory—for there is no other way—come to the soul of golf.

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CHAPTER I

THE SOUL OF GOLF

Nearly every one who writes about a game essays to prove that it is similar to "the great game, the game of life." Golf has not escaped; and numberless scribes in endeavouring to account for the fascination of golf have used the old threadbare tale. As a matter of fact, golf is about as unlike the game of life as any game could well be. As played now it has come to be almost an exact science, and everybody knows exactly what one is trying to do. This would not be mistaken for a description of the game of life. In that game a man may be hopelessly "off the line," buried "in the rough," or badly "bunkered," and nobody be the wiser. It is not so in golf. There is no double life here. All is open, and every one knows

what the player is striving for. The least deflection from his line, and the onlooker knows he did not mean it. It is seen instantly. In that other game it may remain unseen for years, for ever.

Explaining the fascination of anything seems to be a thankless kind of task, and in any case to be a work of supererogation. The fascination should be sufficient. Explaining it seems almost like tearing a violet to pieces to admire its structure; but many have tried, and many have failed, and there are many who do not feel the

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fascination as they should, because they do not know the soul of golf. One cannot appreciate the beauty of golf unless one knows it thoroughly.

Curiously enough, many of our best players are extremely mechanical in their play. They play beautiful and accurate shots, but they have no idea how or why they produce them; and the strange thing about it is that although golf is perhaps as mechanical a game as there is, those who play it mechanically only get the husk of it. They miss the soul of the game.

Golf is really one of the simplest of outdoor games, if not indeed the simplest, and it does not require much intelligence; yet it is quite one of the most difficult to play well, for it demands the greatest amount of mechanical accuracy. This, on consideration, is apparent. The ball is the smallest ball we use, the striking face of the club is the smallest thing used in field sports for hitting a ball, and, most important, perhaps, of all, it is farther away from the eye than any other ball-striking implement, except, perhaps, the polo stick, in which game we, of course, have a much larger ball and striking surface.

In all games of skill, and in all sports where the object is propelling anything to a given point, one always tries, almost instinctively, to

get the eye as much in a line with the ball or missile and the objective point as possible. This is seen in throwing a stone, aiming a catapult, a gun, or an arrow, in cueing at a billiard ball, and in many other ways, but in golf it is impracticable. The player must make his stroke with his eye anywhere from four to six feet away from his little club face. One may say that this is so in hockey, cricket, and lawn-tennis. So, in a modified degree, it is, but the great difference is that in all these games there is an infinitely larger margin of error than there

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is in golf. At these games a player may be yards off his intended line and yet play a fine stroke, to the applause of the onlookers; while he alone knew that it was accident and not design.

The charm of golf is in part that its demand is inexorable. It lays down the one path—the straight one. It must be followed every step, or there is trouble.

Then there is in golf the sheer beauty of the flight of the ball, and the almost sensuous delight which comes to the man who created that beauty, and knows how and why he did it. There is at any time beauty in the flight of a golf ball well and plainly driven; but for grace and the poetry of flight stands alone the wind-cheater that skims away from one's club across the smooth green sward, almost clipping the daisies in its flight ere it soars aloft with a swallow-like buoyancy, and, curving gracefully, pitches dead on the green.

Many a man can play that stroke. Many a man does. Not one in fifty knows how he puts the beauty into his stroke. Not one in fifty would be interested if you were to start telling him the scientific reason for that ball's beautiful flight. "The mechanics of golf" sounds hard and unromantic, yet the man who does not understand them suffers in his game and in his enjoyment of it. That wind-cheater was to him, during its flight through the air, merely a golf ball; a golf ball 'twas and nothing more. To the other man it is a

faithful little friend sent out to do a certain thing in a certain way, and all the time it is flying and running it is sending its message back to the man who can take it—but how few can? They do not know what the soul of golf means. So, when our golfer pulls or slices his ball badly, and then—does the usual thing, he cannot take the message that comes back to him. He

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only knows the half of golf, and he does not care about the other, because he does not know what he is missing. He is like a man who is fond of music but is tune-deaf. There are many such. He may sit and drink in sweet sounds and enjoy them, but he misses the linked sweetness and the message which comes to his more fortunate brother who has the ear—and the knowledge.

There is in England a curious idea that directly one acquires a scientific knowledge of a game one must cease to have an interest in it so full as he who merely plays it by guesswork. There can be no greater mistake than this. If a game is worth playing well, it is worth knowing well, and knowing it well cannot mean loving it less. It is this peculiar idea which has put England so much in the background of the world's athletic field of late years. We have here much of the best brawn and bone in the world, but we must give the brain its place. Then will England come to her own again.

England is in many ways paying now for her lack of thoroughness in athletic sports. Time was when it was a stock gibe at John Bull's expense that he spent most of his time making muscle and washing it. Then it was, I am afraid, sour grapes. England had all the championships. The joke is "off" now. The grapes are no longer sour. The championships are well distributed throughout the world—anywhere but in England; and we say it does not matter; that the chief end of games is not winning them. Nor is it; but we did not talk like that when we *were* winning them, and the trouble is not so much that we are losing, as the manner in which we are

losing. The fact is that we are losing because our players do not, in many sports, know the soul of the game. The ideal is lost in the prosaic grappling for cups or medals, in the

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merely vulgar idea of success. Thus it comes to pass that many will not be content to get to the soul of a game in the natural way, by long and loving familiarity with it.

Hordes of people are joining the ranks of the golfers, and their constant cry is, "Teach me the swing," and after a lesson or two at the wrong end of golf, for a beginner, they go forth and cut the county into strips and think they are playing golf. Is it any wonder, when our links are cumbered with such as these, that those who have the soul of golf are in imminent daily peril of losing their own?

One who would know the soul of golf must begin even as would one who will know the soul of music. There is no more chance for one to gather up the soul of golf in a hurry than there is for that same one to understand Wagner in a week.

It is this vulgar rushing impatience to be out and doing while one is still merely a nuisance to one's fellows, which causes so much irritation and unpleasantness on many links; that prevents many from starting properly, and becoming in due course quite good players; for it is manifest that the "rusher" is starting to learn his game upside down, as, indeed, most professionals and books teach it. There can be no doubt that the right way to teach anything is to give the beginner the easiest task at first. About the easiest stroke in golf is a six-inch put. That is where one should start a learner. The drive is the stroke in golf that offers the greatest possibility of error, so he is always started with it. It is his own fault. "Teach me the swing" is the insistent cry of the beginner, who does not know that he is losing the best part of golf by turning it upside down. He will never enjoy it so much, or play so good and confident a game

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he would were he to work his way gradually and naturally from his putter to his mashie, to his niblick, his iron, his cleek, his brassy, and his driver. Such a one may come to an intimate knowledge and love of the game. The rusher may play golf, but it will be a long time before he gets to the soul of the game.

A very good golfer in reviewing a golf book some time ago stated that he did not care in the least what happened while the ball was in the air, that all he cared about was getting it there. He has played golf since he was five years old, but he has clearly missed the soul of the game.

It is not necessary to dilate upon the wonderful spread of golf throughout the world. An industrious journalist some time ago marked a map of England wherever there was a golf club. It looked as though it had been sprinkled with black pepper. It is not hard to understand this marvellous increase in the popularity of the great game, for golf is undoubtedly a great game. The motor has, unquestionably, played a great part in its development. Many of the courses, particularly in the United Kingdom, are most beautifully situated. Many of the club-houses are models of comfort, and some of them are castles. The game itself is suitable for the octogenarian dodderer who merely wants to infuse a little interest into his morning walk, or it may be turned into a severe test of endurance for the young athlete; so no wonder it prospers.

There is a wonderful freemasonry among golfers. This is not the least of the many charms of the game, and to him who really knows it and loves it as it deserves to be loved, the sign of the club is a passport round the world.

Many a time and oft I see golfing journalists, when

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writing about the game, stating that something "is obvious." It has always seemed to me that it is impossible to say what is obvious to anyone in a game of golf. Writing of George Duncan, the famous young professional golfer, during the first half of the big foursome at Burhill, a great sporting paper said that a certain mashie shot was a "crude stroke." The man who wrote that article did not know the soul of golf. He saw the mashie flash in the air, some turf cut away, and a ball dropping on to the green. Just that and nothing more, and it was "obvious" to him that it was a crude stroke.

One who knew the soul of golf saw it and described it. It was a tricky green, with a drop of twenty feet behind it. To have overrun it would have been fatal. There was a stiff head-wind. The player would not risk running up. He cut well in under the ball to get all the back-spin he could. He pitched the ball well up against the wind, which caught it and, on account of the spin, threw it up and up until it soared almost over the hole, then it dropped like a shot bird about a yard from the hole, and the back-spin gripped the turf and held the ball within a foot of where it fell. It was obvious to one man that it was a crude shot. It was equally obvious to another, who knew the inner secrets of the game, that it was a brilliantly conceived and beautifully executed stroke. One man saw nothing of the soul of the stroke. He got the husk, and the other took the kernel.

Much has been made of the assumption that golf is the greatest possible test of a man's temperament. This has to a great extent, I am afraid, been exaggerated. It is one of those things in connection with the game that has been handed down to us, and which we have been afraid to interfere with. I cannot

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see why this claim should be quietly granted. In golf a man is treated with tragic solemnity while he is making his stroke. A caddie may not sigh, and if a cricket chirped he would be

considered a bounder. How would our golfer feel if he had to play his drive with another fellow waving his club at him twenty or thirty feet away, and standing ready to spoil his shot?—yet that is what the lawn-tennis player has to put up with. There is a good deal of exaggeration about this aspect of golf, even as there is a good deal of nonsense about the interference of onlookers. What can be done by one when one is accustomed to a crowd may be seen when one of the great golfers is playing out of a great V formed by the gallery, and, needless to say, playing from the narrow end of it. Golf is a good test of a man's disposition without doubt, but as a game it lacks one important feature which is characteristic of every other field sport, I think, except golf. In these the medium of conflict is the same ball, and the skill of the opposing side has much to do with the chances of the other player or players. In golf each man plays his own game with his own ball, and the only effect of his opponent's play on his is moral, or the luck of a stymie. Many people consider this a defect; but golf is a game unto itself, and we must take it as it is. Certainly it is hard enough to achieve distinction in it to satisfy the most exacting.

When one writes of the soul of golf it sounds almost as though one were guilty of a little sentimentality. As a matter of fact, it is the most thorough practice which leads one to the soul of golf. Many a good professional can produce beautiful shots, such as the wind-cheater and the pull at will, but he cannot explain them to you; and no professional ever has

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explained clearly in book or elsewhere what produces these beautiful shots.

A famous professional once asked me quite simply, "How do I play my push-shot, Mr. Vaile?" I explained the stroke to him. He is as good a sportsman as he is a golfer, and would be ashamed to pretend to a knowledge which he has not. When I had told him, he

said, "Thank you. Of course, I can play it all right, but I never could understand why it went like that. Now I shall be able to explain it better to my pupils."

Now it may in some measure sound incongruous, but I repeat that unless one knows the mechanics of golf one has missed the soul of the game. It is simply an impossibility for the blind ball-smiter to get such joy and gratification from his game as does the man who from his superior knowledge has produced results which are in themselves worth losing the game for. Many a golfer, or one who would like to be a golfer, will wonder at this. Many a game at billiards has been lost for the poetry of a fascinating cannon when the win was not the main object of the game; but in this respect billiards and golf are not alike. One is not, in golf, penalised for putting the soul and the poetry of the game into his shots, for they come of practice, and simply render one's strokes more perfect than they would otherwise be. So in the end it will be found that he who knows the game most thoroughly will have an undoubted advantage.

Therefore it behoves every golfer to strive for the soul of golf.

And now, as we must for a little while leave the soul of golf, let us consider its body, that great solid, visible portion which is the part that appeals most forcibly to the ordinary golfer. It is this to which the

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attention of players and writers has been most assiduously directed for centuries, yet it is safe to say that no game in the whole realm of sport has been so miswritten and unwritten as golf.

This is very strange, for probably there is no other game that is so canvassed and discussed by its followers. The reason may possibly be found in the fact that golfers are a most conservative class of people, and that they follow wonderfully the line of thought laid

down for them by others. This at its best is uninteresting; at its worst most pernicious.

Another contributing cause is the manner in which books on sport are now produced. A great name, an enterprising publisher, and a hack-writer are all that are now required. The consequence is that the market is flooded with books ostensibly by leading exponents of the different sports, but which are, in many cases, written by men who know little or nothing of the subject they are dealing with. The natural result is that the great players suffer severely in "translation," and their names are frequently associated with quite stupid statements,—statements so foolish that one, knowing how these things are done, refrains from criticising them as they deserve, from sympathy with the unfortunate alleged author, who is probably a very good fellow, and quite innocent of the fact that the nonsense alleged to be his knowledge is ruining or retarding the game of many people. This is a most unscrupulous practice, which should be exposed and severely condemned, for it must not be thought that it is confined to any one branch of sport.

While we are dealing with the slavish following of the alleged thought of the leading golfers of the world, we may with advantage consider a few of the most pronounced fetiches which have been worshipped

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almost from time immemorial, fetiches which are the more remarkable in that they receive mental and theoretical worship only, and are, in actual practice, most severely despised and disregarded by the best players; but unfortunately the neophyte worships these fetiches for many years until he discovers that they are false gods.

Perhaps one of the silliest, and for beginners most disastrous, is the ridiculous assertion that putters are born, not made. In the book of a very famous player I find the following words:—

It happens, unfortunately, that concerning one department of the game that will cause the golfer some anxiety from time to time, and often more when he is experienced than when he is not, neither I nor any other player can offer any words of instruction such as, if closely acted upon, would give the same successful results as the advice tendered under other heads ought to do. This is in regard to putting.

Now this idea is promulgated in many books. It is, in my opinion, the most absolute and pernicious nonsense. The best answer to it is the fact that the writer of the words was himself one of the worst putters, but that by careful study and alteration of his defective methods, he became a first-class performer on the green. Also it will be obvious to a very mean intelligence that there is no branch of golf which is so capable of being reduced to a mechanical certainty as is putting.

The importance of removing this stupid idea will be more fully appreciated when one remembers that quite half the game of golf is played on the green, leaving the other half to be distributed among all the other clubs. It is well to emphasise this. A good score for almost any eighteen-hole course is 72. The man who can count on getting down in an average of 2 is a

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very good putter. Many professionals would throw away their putters if they were allowed to consider it down in 2 every time. This gives us 36 for puts. With this before us we cannot exaggerate the pernicious effect of the false doctrine which says that putting cannot be taught, that a man must just let his own individuality have full play, and similar nonsense; whereas the truth is that one might safely guarantee to convert into admirable putters many men who, from their conformation and other characteristics, would be almost hopeless as golfers. I must emphasise the fact that there is no department of the game which is so important as putting; there

is no department of the game more capable of being clearly and easily demonstrated by an intelligent teacher; and there is no department of the game wherein the player may be so nearly reduced to that machine-like accuracy which is the constant demand, and no small portion of the charm, of golf.

Another very widely worshipped fetich, which has been much damaged recently, is the sweep in driving a ball. Trying "to sweep" his ball away for two hundred yards has reduced many a promising player to almost a suicidal frame of mind. Fortunately the fallacy soon exasperates a beginner, and he "says things" and "lets it have it." Then the much-worshipped "sweep" becomes a hit, sometimes a very vicious one, and the ball goes away from the club as it was meant to. It is becoming more widely recognised every day that the golf-drive is a hit, and a very fine one—when well played.

Perhaps the most pernicious fetich which has for many years held sway in golf, until recently somewhat damaged, is that the left arm is the more important of the two—that it, in fact, finds the power for the drive.

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Anything more comical is hard to imagine. There is practically nothing in the whole realm of muscular exertion, from wood-chopping to golf, wherein both arms are used, that is not dominated by the right, yet golfers have for generations quietly accepted this fetich, and it has ruined many a promising player. The votaries of this fetich must surely find one thing very hard to explain. If we admit, for the sake of argument, that the left arm is the more important, and that it really has more power and more influence on the stroke than the right, can they explain why the left-handed players, who have been provided by a benevolent providence with so manifest an advantage, tamely surrender it and convert their left hand into the right-handed players' right by giving it the lower position on the shaft? If this idea of the left

hand and arm being the more important is correct, left-handed players would use right-hand clubs and play like a right-handed player, with the manifest advantage of being provided by nature with an arm and hand that fall naturally into the most important position. I think that this consideration of the subject will give those who put their faith in the fetich of the left, something to explain.

Almost from time immemorial it has been laid down by golfing writers that at the top of the swing the golfer must have his weight on his right leg. A study of the instantaneous photographs of most of the famous players will show conclusively that this is not correct. It is expressly laid down that it is fatal to sway, to draw away from one's ball during the upward swing; the player is specially enjoined on no account to move his head. A very simple trial will convince any golfer, even a beginner, that without swaying, without drawing his head away from the hole, he

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cannot possibly, if swinging correctly, put his weight on his right leg, and that at the top of his swing it must be mainly on his left—and so another well-worn belief goes by the board.

So it is with the exaggerated swing which for so many years dominated the minds of aspiring golfers to such an extent that many of them thought more of getting the swing than of hitting the ball. It is slowly but surely going.

The era of new thought in golf has dawned. It will not make the game less attractive. It will not make it any more exacting, for the higher knowledge cannot become an obsession. It sinks into a man, and he scarcely thinks of it as something beyond the ordinary game. It brings him into closer touch with the best that is in golf. He is able to obtain more from it than he could before. He is able to do more than he could formerly, for a man cannot get to the soul of golf except through the body, and love he not the body with the

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