



# THE URGE TO IMPROVE PRONTO

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**I**t often happens on the range. Days after making a small adjustment that at first seems to cause mechanics to regress, suddenly halfway through a bucket of balls everything clicks. Muscle memory takes the wheel, rhythm returns, and a swing feels more fluid, more automatic and more consistent. It's a feeling golfers striving for game improvement relish.

The drive to get better is a goal shared by athletes of all stripes, but the fire burns far longer for golfers than for those who play other sports. An outsized percentage of golf's massive middle-aged cohort adamantly, and often with good reason, believe they're just a couple tweaks away from shaving a few strokes off their scorecard and setting a new personal milestone.

Forty-somethings in beer league baseball who fixate on their on-base percentage and sign up for hitting lessons at their local batting cage are rare. While adult power skating and other hockey

skill honing classes are offered across the country, how many pick-up shinny veterans are as gung-ho on taking their game to the next level as an avid golfer?

A lengthy roll call of exemplary elders including Bernhard Langer, 57, Tom Watson, 65, and Gary Player, 79 certainly helps. If you hit the gym and stay limber, age and the complications and excuses that mount along with it don't have to be a detriment to your game. Besides, the older you get the more feasible it becomes to shoot your age.

## GAME IMPROVEMENT: AN ULTRA-MARATHON

While quick fixes proliferate the Web at the same clip as erectile dysfunction treatments, there is no panacea when it comes to game improvement. Swings are as varied as snowflakes and everybody has their own idiosyncrasies. Just look at Jim Furyk, Tommy Gainey or the late great Canadian legend Moe Norman for studies in extreme contrast. If you want to get better, signing up for lessons, sticking with the program and making a commitment to doing your homework between sessions remains a player's best shot at consistently shooting a lower score.

Pairing video and motion measurements, GolfTEC's coaches can thoroughly analyze a multitude of performance critical data points—everything from degree of shoulder turn to hip rotation metrics and sway at the top of your backswing. Next, the data gets crunched and compared with a database of statistics culled from more than 150 TOUR players, including grey hairs on the Champions circuit, all in the service of bringing your mechanics up to snuff.

Their software spits out colour-coded results, as simple to grasp as traffic signals so issues are easily communicated. "If you're close and it doesn't need to be exact—we're not trying to turn everybody into a Jordan Spieth—but if it's close, it's a green. If it is a little bit off it's a yellow, and if we've got some major issues it's a red," explains James Suttie, Chairman and CEO of GolfTEC Canada.

## LOST IN TRANSLATION

As anybody who has taken a couple of lessons knows, in real golf situations, when the pressure is on, sometimes all that practice goes out the window lending credence to the saying: "I left all my good shots on the range."

"We see a pretty dramatic difference between what a client is able to do inside and what their habits are when they're out on a golf course and you put a ball in front of them and they're trying to hit a 180 yard shot over water," concurs Suttie. "While coaches take on-course videos to show clients the swing difference between their typical indoor motion and how it looks outdoors in a real golf situation, the next step as technology evolves in the coming years will be to capture outdoor in-game motion measurements as easily and accurately as they can during indoor lessons."

While the golf industry pays a lot of heed to pace of play issues, pace of improvement is given short thrift. If we can fast track game improvement, it will be a lot easier to grow the game.

"A lot of people say golf is a hard game and it takes too long to get better at it," Suttie explains. "So, if we can get people happy and satisfied at hitting a few great shots in a round, that will catch peoples attention and will cause more people to take up the game and enjoy it more."

GolfTEC also schools their coaches with regular lesson reviews to make sure they're on point, succinct, and targeted and focused on aiding a client in their success.



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"One of the things we in the industry need to do a better job of is getting our coaches more capable of being able to provide the really salient key points and saying here's the issue that you got and here's an example of how you're doing it and this is what you should be doing and then being able to show them," Suttie adds.

Tracking and celebrating accomplishments as a motivational tool can also help golfers get better faster. GolfTEC has a wall of fame in all their centers where clients' accomplishments—aces, tournament wins, octogenarians shooting their age, and other major milestones are prominently displayed. Of the roughly 400 entries at their center in North Vancouver a recent standout was a woman in her early 50s who had only taken up the game five years ago and last fall shot a 78 from the whites. Accomplishments of that magnitude are what get golfers hooked on the game and spend even more time playing, setting higher goals, and getting better still.

## LET IT GROW

For the game to continue to grow, the industry needs to cultivate more casual players, turn them into avid golfers, and have them catch up skill wise with their links' buddies who've got a decade or more head start as expediently as possible. GolfTEC currently teaches roughly 25 per cent of all individual lessons in the U.S.; in Canada, their 12 per cent share is ticking up fast with plans to grow from a dozen locations to 40 over the next four years.

Game improvement is never a sprint. There are far too many disciplines that contribute to a complete game. Still, if players take a holistic approach, incorporate fitness and flexibility into the equation – and lessons continue to evolve and get smarter – they will start to get better faster.