

Heel Up or Heel Down

Ever since I started teaching golf 40 years ago there has been a question that golfers often put to me that was highlighted by images of Tom Watson at the age of 59 in the recent Open Championship. Many golfers quite simply find it difficult to achieve a full shoulder turn at the top of the backswing with any sort of comfort. I am sure that anyone who watched him play at Turnberry was impressed with Tom's simple, relaxed and full swing. I can't write this article without telling you how gutted I was that he lost the playoff. What a wonderful story it would have been had he won!

However, in this article I want to deal with a major reason for his ability to make such a full movement at his age, a reason that can help many handicap golfers achieve a better and more enjoyable game.

The issue I want to talk about this month is whether the heel of your front foot (ie left heel for a right-hander and right heel for a left-hander) should come off the ground during the backswing or not? Well, most people believe that it is best left firmly glued to the ground whereas most pros will tell you that it depends upon the flexibility of each player. I am not going to sit on the fence. The heel must come off the ground, especially on long shots, as players get older and less supple. I would also include anyone who doesn't play to a professional or low-handicap level. Of course, these are generalisations and there are exceptions, but the vast majority of you will play more comfortably and hit longer and better struck shots if you develop more footwork. Jack Nicklaus insisted that good footwork was essential and there are many old photos showing just how much his left heel came off the ground when he was driving, even when he was a youngster.

Peter Allis was reported to have commented on Tom Watson's heel coming considerably off the ground as if it had been normal in the past but was now considered unfashionable by today's breed of tour professionals. I agree with him. Let me give you these words from Bobby Jones in the early part of the 20th century: *"There is not 1 golfer in 5,000 who turns his hips sufficiently during the backswing."* Now, just try turning your hips more than usual with your front foot glued to the ground. Awkward, isn't it?

My mind goes back to my early days when I was appointed to my first position as a Club Pro at Barton-on-Sea GC near Bournemouth. I was proudly informed that 86% of the members were retired and, at the interview, the Club Captain asked how I got on with older people. I was 23 years old at the time and, despite being somewhat taken aback by the question, replied that I had a great relationship with my grandparents which got a chuckle from the committee members and probably got me the job.

Once I began to teach them, members were continually saying 'of course, I can't turn like I used to.' Unfortunately, at that time I only knew what I had been taught which was to keep the feet firmly on the ground on the backswing with my head completely still so I wasn't able to help them as much as I could have done. I was also encouraged as a youngster to turn my shoulders against my hips as it would apparently produce a powerful coil effect. In reality, it made a good swing more difficult for me and is one of the reasons I ended up with a serious back injury which required surgery when I was in my forties.

Now, the way your heel comes off the ground is important. Simply lifting it up with your knee moving forward in front of you can cause your whole body to rise up and won't help you to turn, whereas, if you study the 2 photos, you will see that, in no.1, I have turned my left knee so that it points to the right of the ball and my left heel has been rotated off the ground. (Tom Watson wrote an article in which he said that this was advisable when looking for extra distance with your drives. He was a young man then but still felt that it helped him). As you can see, it certainly helps me to achieve a full rotation and to get me fully behind the ball at the top of the backswing. Photo no.2 looks tight and static with the strain even showing on my shirt. Just what my vertebrae are feeling at this time is nobody's business!

Of course, having moved more freely in the backswing, you will now have more momentum to swing right through the shot and have a better chance of achieving a good weight shift to the front foot and a good finish position.

This advice is especially valid for you as you get older and has every chance of extending your golfing life. Positive Impact Golf has helped many over 50's golfers, both men and women, to move their feet with more confidence and to hit the ball further and enjoy their golf despite the onset of stiffening joints.

Take a leaf out of Tom's book and get your dancing feet on when you next play and add some extra fun into your game!

Brian Sparks

Find out more about how Positive Impact Golf can help you to swing the club better, hit more good shots and become more confident with Brian on a ONE-DAY COURSE at Manston Golf Centre near Ramsgate in Kent visit: www.positiveimpactgolf.co.uk or call Brian on 01843 590005