

The Kent Golfer

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Improve Your Rhythm

In this month's article I am continuing my theme of discussing the six key basics of a good golf swing – Turning, Weight Shift, Rhythm, Balance and Relaxation and this time I want to talk to you about one of the most important of all the aspects of swinging the club well and hitting consistently good golf shots – RHYTHM.

One of the questions I often hear from the average club golfer is *'why can I play so well one day and so badly the next?'* This is usually accompanied by *'what is it that I do when I have that ever-so-rare round when it seems that I can do no wrong?'*

So, why does it feel so easy that day? Think back to the last time you played really well. Can you remember anything about how you felt? How was your rhythm? Give yourself a score between zero and ten for how it was that day (0 = low / 10 = high). Of course, I wasn't there so I didn't see you play but I can guarantee that you didn't score yourself a 2 or a 3. No, I'm sure it would have been at an 8, 9 or even a 10. I can't tell you why it was so high that day but I can suggest some ways to help you find that rhythm more often.

Firstly, a tournament player will prepare diligently for his round well in advance of his tee time. He does this partly by practicing and we know that most amateur players don't have the time or often the facilities to do the same. However, I'm talking about a preparation that starts even before you get to the golf course. For example, the famous Bobby Locke used to drive to the course at 30mph. He did everything slowly in the hours before his round so that his rhythm was already established by the time he hit his drive off the first tee. As a young novice golfer, I was fortunate to both caddy for and play with him. The one thing I remember is the pace of his swing. He never hit the ball hard, never once over-exerted himself, and had the most fluent swing you can imagine, be that on his full shots, short shots or in bunkers. His putting skills were legendary and his stroke was so smooth and fluid it was to die for.

It is worth noting that his technique was a very personal affair. He aimed every shot well to the right of the target and hit all his shots with a high, right-to-left hook. He even aligned himself three feet to the right on a straight 20-foot putt! Oh, but that rhythm. He appeared to caress the ball to the hole. Superb!

Now, I might surprise you by saying that you do possess good rhythm. We all do. We can't live without it. Let me give you an example. Fifty-four year old Graham came to see me a few months ago as a very frustrated, 27-handicapper who had been playing for 5 years. He just couldn't get his game together. When we talked about rhythm he was adamant, saying "I haven't got any." I asked him if he could contradict this statement in any area of his life. "No," he stated, with a resigned look of despair on his face, "I am lousy at anything that demands rhythm."

"How about when you drive your car through London," I asked, knowing that his business calls for daily trips across the capital?

"Oh," he replied, "that's different. I'm a good driver."

We went on to discover that the things he was trying to do in his swing were creating a huge amount of tension which, in turn, was having a detrimental effect on his rhythm. He had been taught to put a coin on the toe of his left shoe and keep it there throughout the whole movement. In addition, like most golfers, he was trying to keep his head as still as possible, especially during his backswing. These two elements resulted in little or no turn or weight shift in his backswing. Now, if you swing like that and swing very slowly you'll have nothing much to hit the ball with when you get back to the impact. It's like trying to hit a nail into a hard piece of wood whilst hardly lifting the hammer!

Graham didn't know that he was tense until he started to let go of these misconceptions and move in a more relaxed and comfortable manner. The change was amazing and his ball striking improved out of all recognition. He is really enjoying his game now and is looking like a player who will eventually get down to somewhere around 12-15 handicap.

I must add that he bought an Original SwingRite from me and this has contributed to his new-found rhythm. It is a training aid which simulates hitting a ball. It was invented over 50 years ago by an Englishman called Mindy Blake,

a member at Wentworth Golf Club in Surrey, and has truly stood the test of time. Because there is no ball, no target and no result to get frustrated about everyone swings it much better than when they are in the real situation of playing the game. This fact makes practicing with it so effective. It helps you to recognise and feel exactly how to make your best swing as you are freed from the usual anxieties about hitting the ball and getting it to go to your target. It also releases you from the possible embarrassment of a bad shot which, in itself, can cause a lot of the tension that tightens your muscles and ruins your rhythm. Practicing with it produces a consistently better swing and helps build real confidence. Trials have also proved that it increases clubhead speed and the ability to release the club through the ball.

It is now made in USA but is exclusively available in UK from Positive Impact Golf. It costs £125 which may seem expensive for a training aid but many golfers pay a lot more for a new driver whereas the SwingRite will help you increase your confidence and play better shots with all your clubs. It is virtually indestructible and will last much longer than the average club. You can read more about it by visiting the website at www.positiveimpactgolf.co.uk.

I was talking to Kent's Steven Tiley the other day shortly after he won the Egyptian Open, beating an international field including Colin Montgomerie. He gave me some insight into the life of a tour player and the difficulties of keeping the same rhythm week in week out. Coping with the amount of travelling these guys are subjected to makes swinging with the same rhythm a vital part of their overall strategy and their search for consistency. His career has really taken off this year and he attributes much of this success to using his SwingRite to produce the same rhythm all the time.

I can't leave the subject of rhythm without talking to you about breathing. It is well known and understood in Yoga, and any form of meditation or martial art for that matter, that deep breathing instigates a relaxation of both mind and body. I was watching golf on Sky recently and heard Butch Harman say that Tiger regularly uses breathing techniques on the course in tournament conditions. Get into the habit of breathing slowly and deeply before you go to the course and before every shot. It's a great way of reducing the very tension that stops you from swinging the club with your best rhythm.

Why not make it this year's objective to play with better rhythm, less tension and less effort? I'm sure you'll find it more effective.

Brian Sparks