

How To Relax Your Swing

If I had to choose the most damaging fault in the golf swing I'm sure you can imagine that I would be spoilt for choice. Classically, you would expect me to say a bad grip or bad posture. But, no, following on from my article in last month's magazine, the little devil I would choose is TENSION.

Tension, of course, can be both physical and/or mental. Bruce Lee famously stated that the mind leads the body. So, how can we control the mind so that our tension levels stay low?

In golf we have a sort of chicken and egg situation. Does physical tension come from the mind or does mental tension come from the body? Well, let's start by having a look at what we can do physically.

In just about every form of relaxation exercise, be it yoga, t'ai-chi or pure meditation, good breathing is essential to commence the process. Therefore, I suggest that the first step to gaining a relaxed state is to calm the body through the power and influence of correct breathing. Under stress conditions it is a fact that our breathing becomes shallow and high in the chest. As a result, our shoulders tend to raise and get tight as if we are readying ourselves for a fight. Luckily, in golf our only real adversary is that little white ball so no need to get too worried!

Try it now. Take a few deep breaths, literally as if it comes from a pump in your stomach. Good breathing starts with an expansion of the lower stomach area as if you are pushing your tummy out as this creates space for your lungs to take in the maximum amount of air. You should feel an immediate benefit as the oxygen starts to relax your muscles. This is a great way to prepare for any shot on the golf course, particularly difficult ones.

Let's stay with the physical aspect of tension by talking about 'state'.

On a recent course at The Belfry that focused on the relationship between martial arts and golf, I learned that T'ai-Chi experts spend an enormous amount of time getting into the right 'state' before going into their different exercises. In golf we often don't understand why we seem to suddenly play well or badly. In fact, we nearly always fall into the trap of questioning our technique. How many times do you ask yourself "what did I do wrong"?

The mental turmoil of trying to analyse what you've just done tends to increase your frustration and leads to a state of tension. This is what the famous teacher Ernest Jones said in his book 'Swing the Clubhead' in 1937;

"I want to point out wherein I feel most people make mistakes. Briefly summed up, I think the fundamental difficulty lies in a negative rather than a positive approach; golfers start from a

premise of trying to find out what is wrong when the shot does not come off satisfactorily, instead of getting back to the positive consideration of what it is that causes the shot to prove satisfactory.”

This is one of the best tips of all time even though I know that it is easier to say than to actually put into practice.

So, keep your breathing deep and low, don't analyse your bad shots and keep your arms and shoulders as loose as possible as they are where tension will be most damaging to your ability to swing the club smoothly.

I was coaching a friend of mine in France and he was going through a bad patch. He drove the 200 kms from Paris to see if I could sort out his problems. After convincing him that I could see no major technical fault (which surprised him) I noticed that his collarbone was very high and tight, a sure sign of stress. I asked him how his business life was going. “Oh, don't ask” he replied, with much frustration in his voice. “It's been a nightmare!” I spent the next 20 minutes purely getting him to breathe better and to relax his arms and shoulders and, hey presto, he started to strike the ball sweetly and authoritatively. His problem wasn't technical but simply stemmed from the state he was in.

You will often notice that the top players move their arms in preparation for a shot by wagging them as if to keep them loose or to shake off any tension. Jack Nicklaus and Tom Watson, in particular. In my experience, arm and shoulder tension leads to poorly struck shots and you should be wary of the classic advice of keeping your left arm straight on the backswing and both arms straight for as long as possible after impact, both of which will only add tension and unreasonable levels of effort to your swing.

Positive Impact Golf coaching understands the phenomenon of 'state' and recognizes the damaging influence of tension and the negative attitude that normally accompanies it. Our coaches are helping golfers to achieve astounding success and we'll be delighted to help you develop a more relaxed and satisfying game of golf.

If you have any questions or comments on this article, please e-mail me at brian@positiveimpactgolf.co.uk

Brian Sparks - Founder & Head Coach