

7 Biggest Practice Mistakes



....and what to do about them

Written by Peter Knight, Golf Possibilities

Been practicing hard but not showing the benefits of all that practice when you get to competition? This is extremely common and it occurs with players of all levels, from Tour players to high handicappers. Frustrating isn't it!

How would you like to ensure that your efforts in practice are transferred to the golf course, especially in competition? Of course that is what every golfer wants.

One way to ensure value from your practice sessions is to avoid making the errors outlined in this booklet by first being aware of them and following the advice

Problem #1 Practicing without a purpose

Solution Be intentional when you are going to practice.

This is probably the most common area of error. Players may have a vague idea of what they need to practice, or no idea of the parts of their game which let them down. Alternatively they try to practice a little bit of everything.

Most players are time poor when it comes to practicing; a couple of hours after school or work never seems enough. At the other end of the scale are players who have decided to dedicate themselves to the game and are spending quite a few hours at the golf course each day yet still struggle to improve.

Those who only have a limited time need to target their practice time to get the most from it. Those who have a number of hours each day need to be aware that the habits they develop in training will transfer to the course. This is especially important when training habits become a bit sloppy due to boredom and lack of focus.

Regardless of how much – or how little – time is available, you need to have a strong intention for what you want to gain from the session. Have this intention in mind constantly during the time you are training.

For example if you are working on a particular point of technique, then stay with the thought throughout the session, rather than wavering and trying something else. It is fine to use different drills, as long as the primary outcome of the session doesn't change.

If your intention is to complete three different competitive drills, then do so with full commitment to both completing them and doing so with complete attention to the task; as if you were in competition.

Being intentional brings a laser-like focus to the session. Because you are so intimately involved with what you are doing, it will enable you to more easily transfer your learnings to the course.

When you are intentional, describe your focus on practice?

Problem #2 Not knowing what to practice.

Solution Know your game and devise a practice plan.

This may seem similar to problem #1 however it is quite different. To be intentional in your training assumes you know what it is you are going to practice. In this instance the player isn't even really sure what to practice.

Nothing wastes more time than wondering what to practice. During the session the internal voice is asking whether you are practicing the right thing or not. This doubt will undermine the quality of the session and fail to cement any learnings from the session.

The easiest way to determine the areas of your game most in need of development is to collate statistical data from your game and to analyse it.

Generally there should be approximately a 60:40 break-up of time with 60% devoted to short game (putting, chipping, bunkers and pitching up to around 60 metres). There should then be a slight bias toward the areas of the game which are showing up as statistically in need of development. This certainly doesn't mean an 'all the eggs in one basket' approach as that would be unbalanced.

What are the strengths of your game?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

What are the strengths of your game?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

Which are the areas in need of development?

- 1 _____.
- 2 _____.
- 3 _____.

What is the priority in practice for you for this month?

Problem #3 Practicing only swing technique

Solution Use other types of training: competitive, routine, shot shaping, and mental skills

There is nothing better than the feel of a well-struck shot or the sight of a drive soaring through the air. Striking the ball correctly is one of the most impressive aspects of the game, especially when you are the one doing the striking. Perhaps this is the reason for such a preoccupation with the golf swing with both players and coaches.

A constant focus on swing technique, no matter how justified it may seem will be detrimental to the overall development of your game and the ability to transfer your practice to the course.

In order to create a more seamless transfer, other types of practice must be utilised. When you go to the course, the focus is on scoring rather than swing positions (at least it should be).

Other types of practice include competitive drills; performance in these has a direct correlation to performance on the course. Ideally you should do some competitive practice a few times a week and record the results so you can monitor your progress.

Routines should be considered to be part of the shot. As such they should be practiced at every session. When you practice routines, include shot visualisation, planning, focussing and creating your playing state. Development of your routines is a skill and should be treated the same as the development of any other skill.

Routines include pre-shot (assessment of lie, target, wind direction and strength), shot (walk-in, looks and waggles, etc) and post-shot (no emotional attachment to a poor shot and full emotional attachment to a great shot).

Shot shaping is useful not only for developing a skill that you can use on the course, but there is an added benefit: noting the shapes that are easy or difficult to play can point to areas that need to be addressed with your swing. If one shot is difficult to hit (for example a draw), then practicing hitting the draw will positively influence your entire swing.

Mental skills including visualisation, self-talk, goal setting, state management, concentration, etc can all be practiced during any training session. There is no need to develop them in isolation, as they can all be incorporated into any practice (except perhaps for relaxation). In fact they are either developed as good habits or bad habits during your practice as you respond to good and poor shots you hit while practicing.

Task: develop your own practice plan for a 2-hour session incorporating every type of practice.

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Problem #4 Neglecting short game

Solution Practice at least 60% short game and putting.

Short game practice is neglected partly because quality short game facilities are unfortunately in short supply throughout most of Australia. Another reason is due to the buzz from hitting a great full shot compelling golfers to practice hitting those shots.

Most players, if asked how they could improve their game fastest would say that improving their short game would give the fastest improvement in scoring. Yet it is still neglected.

This is proven with more than 50% of shots played by any player being from within 40 metres of the green. The best players in the world are all exceptional when they are putting or playing shots from within 40 metres of the green.

Statistics from the LPGA Tour show that the average number of putts taken by the leading players is around 28 putts per round, with 100th place at 30.7. Knowing how you compare to these players provides a measure that you can strive to achieve. Even with putting, it will take a long time to achieve this kind of level.

There are numerous short game drills to sharpen your scoring. Set up a scoring system using drills that you have used in squad sessions or compete against another person in putting and other short shots. This type of competitive practice will highlight areas of weakness due to your increased awareness.

Task: create a pitching, chipping, bunker and putting drill with a scoring system. Complete the drill at least twice a week and plot your progress over a month and notice any changes.

Problem #5 Trying to fix everything at once.

Solution Allocate time to each idea you need to develop.

Club championships or another important match coming up? Most golfers are a bit like students when they have an important game on the horizon, they cram their practice to try to make miracles happen overnight. Just like students cramming for exams the sense of overwhelm with information means that most, if not all the information is forgotten. Either that or it is given scant attention.

To learn anything well and have that learning embedded there is a need for continual exposure.

A concept may be understood on the first exposure, however having a deep understanding of fine nuances only occurs with practice and viewing the information from varying perspectives. This is true of all things being learned, but especially so of fine motor skills such as golf technique, even for short strokes such as putts and chips.

Provided there is a focus on improvement then holding one or two thoughts at a time will be sufficient to allow improvement to occur, especially if they are key points!

Devote sufficient attention to one point of focus / piece of information until it has become somewhat automated. This might take a few days and sometimes a few weeks. Persist and be intentional in your practice so that new information or skill becomes part of what you do.

What is the most important thing for you to focus on at the moment?

What specifically are you trying to achieve?

How many practice sessions will you devote to this specific point?

Problem #6 Jumping from tip to tip.

Solution Have some coaching

Most golfers are obsessed with self-improvement. Who has been incredibly curious to know what the coach said to the player who had a lesson and then beat their best score? I know I have.

Likewise when reading articles in magazines about Tour players who have been performing well, I'm interested to know why they think they are playing so well.

The most popular section in golf magazines are the instructional pages. We are constantly fed a golfing diet of tips. These tips are all useful when applied correctly in the right context. In much the same way that Panadol is useful for a lot of things, but won't help a broken leg.

In order to ensure the things you are working on in your swing are the right things, the best solution is to have some coaching.

A coach's assessment of your game and plan for improvement offers direction and also peace of mind that you can trust you are on the right path. With trust it is easier to persist with a correct course of action, especially when progress is slow.

Your coach will also ensure that what you are working on is the most important thing to develop. Often the advice a coach gives you will have a systemic influence; the advice helps improve aspects of the swing other than the specific focus.

Make sure you fully understand what the coach is suggesting and why it is being suggested...then commit to it!



TIP

TIP

Problem #7 Not monitoring your progress

Solution Understand the swing drills prescribed.

A golfer’s progress over time is measured by handicap and stroke average. Performance can vary quite a bit from round to round, so it is better to view performance over time rather than from round to round.

When goals for improvement are set, they need to be monitored so that progress can be acknowledged (if it is occurring), adjustments made (if there is no improvement) or reset (if progress is going backwards). Continuous progress is the aim of every golfer, so using practice time most efficiently is absolutely necessary.

There is nothing more frustrating than finding out that you have been on the wrong path for some time. Monitoring improvement can avoid this.

Monitoring includes ensuring your swing drills and thoughts are creating improvement. You should be clear on the most appropriate drills, their purpose and how they fit with your swing. If you have a specific point of technique to monitor, then use mirrors, video, your shadow or other means to know you are accurately carrying out your coach’s instruction.

Question the coach to gain a clear understanding of what you are trying to achieve and why it is important for you. Once you have that understanding it will be easier to commit to the instruction. This will make your session both meaningful and beneficial.

You may also be prescribed a competitive drill with a scoring system attached to it. Noting your scoring progress as you complete the drill over a period of a few weeks will alert you to whether improvement is occurring.

What points of technique are you working on?

How are you monitoring this?

What competitive drill are you doing to monitor this?



Web: www.golfpossibilities.com.au

Blog: www.golfpossibilities.com

Ph: 0416 142 658

Email: peter@golfpossibilities.com.au