

# Lessons from Coaching Successful Golfers

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The definition of successful golfers extends across the playing range. There are golfers who wish to scale the heights of professional golf and those whose great hope is to one day score somewhere close to par.

The points below apply equally to all these groups and are patterns I have noticed from over thirty years of coaching. During that time I have seen male and female golfers who wanted to play on the world professional golf Tours. Some made it to those Tours and many didn't. Of those who did, even fewer were able to create a comfortable living from the game.

This list is of the traits common to those who are living their dream or in the process of making that dream a reality.

## Know where you want to go

Whether they are chasing a huge dream which will take years to achieve or whether the objective is more modest, the successful golfers know what they want to achieve. I have known many golfers who started out with the goal of improving their handicap or scoring average. Once they had achieved that improvement, they altered their sights to becoming even better...and did so. It isn't necessary to have massive goals to begin with, in fact having goals that seem unreachable are the ones lots of golfers give up on early as they seem 'too hard'.



Not only do the successful golfers know where they want to go, they also have a good idea of how to get there.

They are proud to let others know of their dreams. Letting others know might – surprisingly – mean they become very interested in your progress and become keen to support you. Letting others know of your goals also reminds you of what they are and creates some accountability on your behalf. By telling others, you feel more committed yourself.

## Assume responsibility for yourself

All too often when speaking with golfers about their performances, they are quick to point out why they didn't play as well as they would have liked to. The excuses come thick and fast, as though their poor performance was someone else's fault. Golf is a non-contact sport, where you are the one in control of your performance. In fact one of the appealing things about the game is that you really do have no-one to blame other than yourself.

As a golfer, you are completely responsible for where you and your game are at all times. The best players recognise this and while they are naturally unhappy with a poor round or tournament, they know that it is up to them to do something about creating an improvement next time.

It seems nowadays on the golf course and in life generally, people are very keen to think that they are somehow not responsible for their circumstances. In all but a very few cases, this is simply not true.

Next time you have a bad round, rather than blaming the greens, practice your putting; rather than blaming an early tee time, get up early; rather than blaming bad bounces, hit the ball straighter! Besides, nobody is interested in why you didn't play well when all you have to offer is excuses. Your coach is only interested in hearing something constructive...then you can get some help.

## Seek and Accept Advice

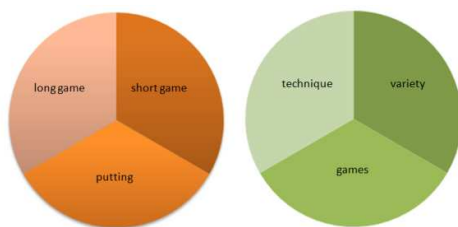
I mentioned above that for the most part, successful people seek and accept the advice of others with experience. Prior to the US Masters this year both Adam Scott and Jason Day sought advice about the Augusta Golf Course. Adam spoke many times with Greg Norman and Jason Day spent a lot of time speaking with Nick Faldo about the tournament, the golf course and what was required to play well there.

You will have people you can approach to help you. They may be members of your golf club who are experienced golfers, coaches or others who may have insights into you or your golf. When you speak with these people, ask for honest feedback and listen to what is being said. Often it can be difficult for someone to give you honest feedback as they may be fearful of hurting your feelings, however constructive feedback, designed to support and assist you, will be invaluable in the long run.

## Work Hard

Often you will hear the saying "we need to work smarter, not harder". While there is some truth to this, it is important to work hard as well. Golf is a fine-motor skill and like all fine motor skills, it takes lots of repetition over an extended period of time to master. There are no secrets or quick fixes when it comes to becoming a highly skilled golfer.

Practicing serves one primary purpose: to improve your competitive performance. You need to ensure you are doing whatever you can to be able to transfer your improvement to the course. You must also create balance in your practice plan to ensure you are devoting sufficient time to each area of your game.



One way to achieve a balance in your practice is to be mindful of how your shots are distributed on the course. Statistically, approximately 40% of your shots will be full shots, 40% will be putts and 20% will be short game shots. Given the variety of short game shots: chips, pitches and bunker shots, it is fairer to spend 1/3 of your time on your long game, 1/3 on your short game and 1/3 on putting. Nice and easy to remember.

How you sub-divide that time is also crucial. Many players practice only technique when they are hitting full shots on the driving range. While there may be a short-term benefit in the quality of ball striking, there is usually difficulty in taking this improved form to the golf course, particularly under pressure.

To enable a transfer of form from the range to the course, you will need to add variety to your practice and also to create some pressure when you are hitting your shots. For full shots, variety can mean changing the club you are using, your target, shot shape or trajectory, or effort level.

To create pressure and test how robust your skills are, you can carry out competitive drills and games with a scoring system attached to them. One of the most common is the National Skills Test, which has been used by players at the Australian Institute of Sport since the early 1990's. The way the drill works is that targets are set at 90m (3 metres wide), 100m (5m wide), 150m (10m wide) and 200m (20m wide). The clubs used at these distances are wedge, 9 iron, 5 iron and driver respectively. Some adjustment may be needed for the distances depending on how far you are able to hit the ball.

So how much time should be devoted to technique, variety and skill testing? One third of your time for each. When you are putting, spend 1/3 on putting technique, such as stroke path or stroke pace; 1/3 of your time on variety, such as green reading or long putting; and 1/3 of your time on skill testing, such as hitting 10 balls from 1 metre at different points around the hole and then hitting a further 10 balls from 2 metres.

When you first adopt the Rule of Thirds to your practice, you are likely to complete the technical part of your session and want to spend just a little more time on it because you have just about got the swing feel you are after or you want to groove a good shot. When this happens, usually the entire time passes without doing anything other than working on technique. I have seen this countless times. The result is very little balance in your practicing, which is reflected on the course.

Practicing according to the Rule of Thirds, which means adding variety and skills testing to the your practice sessions will create a far better transfer to the course and lead you to becoming a much better golfer in the long run.

## Monitor and Adjust

Just as you wouldn't set off on a journey without a map, you should also have some checkpoints or signposts to guide your progress in improving your golf. And just as you would correct your course if you suddenly found you were travelling in the wrong direction, so you need to adjust your progress as you develop as a golfer.

The most common means of monitoring your progress is to keep some form of round analysis statistics. These can be as simple as recording fairways, greens and putts. They can also be more sophisticated, with a number of web-based programmes, such as Shots to Hole which can record much more information. [www.shotstohole.com](http://www.shotstohole.com)

The more information you record, the clearer you can become about your strengths and weaknesses. Once you have a clear picture of your game, you can be more confident in creating practice plans that are well balanced and target the areas of your game which require the most attention.

The feedback which will be of most benefit to improving your game and golfing technique is from your coach. Coaching takes the guess work out of knowing what you need to do to improve; it also removes the frustration with trying something to improve, but not really knowing whether it will work for you or not.

## Take on challenges – belief and resilience

All your improvement will come from being prepared to step outside your comfort zone. This includes

- Taking on challenges, even if they scare you. When you first enter tournaments you will naturally be nervous. Over time, this nervousness will reduce and be replaced by an excitement about facing the challenge of the tournament. It is natural to perform below your 'social golf' ability when you are in competition. You will get used to this.
- Being prepared to do things differently to others when you know it will benefit your golf in the long run. This could mean asking the best players and the professional at your club for advice or a game. It may mean altering what you eat or getting up early to train; these are things that the best players do and average players don't because they feel it is too hard.
- Committing to changes to the way you go about your golf, even if there is a short-term stalling of your progress. This refers to swing technique. The best players in the world are the ones who spend lots of time with their coach.

The reason you are able to do these things is that you have a belief that you will achieve your ultimate golfing goals. If this is a stretch for you, then focus on the most immediate step, something that you can clearly see you can achieve. Do this often enough and you will be amazed at your progress.

What are you not doing that if you did, would make a massive difference to your golf?

## Be consistent, not extreme – persistence

Making huge changes takes a lot of energy, not just physical energy, but also emotional energy. When you expend emotional energy you will quickly feel drained; much more so than just expending physical energy.



In the early stages of chasing big goals, you will be full of enthusiasm and probably make some good progress. The time that you will be tested is when you feel like your progress stalls, or even goes backwards. This is the time when there is a risk that your motivation will drop significantly.

It is better to make changes one at a time and be consistent in your rate of development, rather than looking to make great big leaps in progress all at once.

Whether you are attempting large or small improvements, the fact is, they are changes. For a change in thinking or behaviour (including swing changes) requires constant attention and persistence.

What is the one small step that you can take that you will persist with, knowing the benefits of achieving the change? Take this step today.

The ideas in this article offer good advice. It is up to you to convert that advice into practical benefits for your golf. Otherwise it remains just a good idea.

For other ideas on development of yourself as a golfer and successful person, visit the Golf Possibilities Blog at [www.golfpossibilities.com](http://www.golfpossibilities.com)