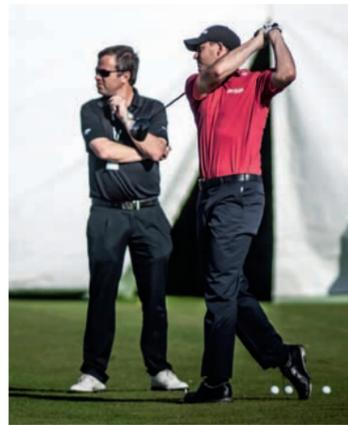


1 HOUR

AWAY FROM A BETTER GAME

Get set for the new season with our tour-endorsd practice plan

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Whatever your handicap, everyone thinks more practice is the key to success. However, as a golf coach for more than 25 years, I'd say that, of those who practise regularly, 70 per cent do so in a way that hurts their game, and 20 per cent in a way that neither hurts or helps. That leaves just 10 per cent who actually practise in a way that helps them.

And this isn't just amateurs. When I started working with David Howell (above) in 2011, he told me he felt more confused and less confident after a practice session. But whatever your ability, focused practice is the foundation to lower scores, handicap improvement and golfing success.

Focus on the objectives

There are two main objectives to practice. Firstly you need to develop a skill (this might be a certain shot shape, for instance) and secondly you need to develop competitive confidence in that skill. Having confidence in high-pressure situations is vital to playing peak performance golf. You can meet these objectives by breaking your practice session down.

Work in thirds

A conversation with US Open winner Michael Campbell 15 years ago had a big impact on the way I coach players to practise. He was introduced to the 'one-third rule' in the early 1990s, which sees you break your practice into three sections. The first third focuses on technique, the second on rhythm and the final third simulates competition. This is the way my Tour players practise. The following pages show you how to do the same.



Pick one target... and one club

The most common mistake I see in practice is golfers spending 100 per cent of their time attempting to make the swing and technique perfect. They hit every ball thinking about technique and, by the end

of the session, have more swing thoughts than they started with. Avoid this trap by making sure no more than one third of it is spent on technique. The focus here is on building a technical skill. It's fine to use

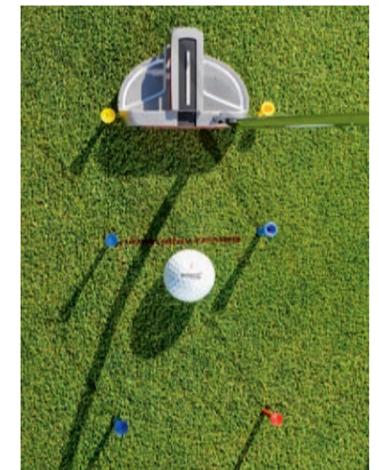
training aids (to help you set up correctly, for example) but use one club and focus on one target. This removes any variables and places the emphasis solely on the technical side of your game.

Set up for the hour

Find a place on the range that allows you to work on each of the three practice disciplines. For now we are going to pick just one target, but choose a spot that gives you lots of targets to hit towards. In this spot, for example, you can work on feel by hitting single shots to each of the baskets, and introduce a competitive element by trying to hit one target a set number of times in 10 shots.

Use the same club

Start your 60-minute practice session by aiming at one target with one club - I'm using the 100-yard marker and a wedge here - for 20 minutes. During this time you can work on your alignment, set-up and finding key points during your swing. Improving these areas should see you find the target consistently by the end of this section.



On the putting green

During a 60-minute putting session, use the first 20 minutes to practise your alignment and stroke direction. If you can nail these basics you're well on the way to becoming a good putter. Make a line - I've used a pen to show you - square to the target and use tees to create a gate for the head of your putter to pass through. Take care to set up the gate evenly and in line with the target.

Practise like a pro

Freshen it up to develop feel

The focus in this middle third shifts from technique towards establishing motion, feel and rhythm. Developing these skills is vital if you want to feel comfortable hitting a range of distances and shot types on the

course. The key to this section is making every shot different, as if you were on the course. Do this by trying to shape different shots (fade, draw, low and high). I see too many people 'ball beating' on the range,

trying to develop their game simply by hitting ball after ball. This is misguided as beating balls bears little relevance to hitting the same shot on the course where there is no chance to replay it.



On the putting green

Feel is an essential skill for putting so part of your practice should be designated to developing it. Practising with your eyes closed is a drill Nick Faldo utilised frequently. Spend 20 minutes trying to putt balls in clusters with your eyes closed and guess whether the ball is short or long before you open your eyes. Repeat this to different distances and on different slopes.



Seek out variety to improve your tempo

I have used this chipping area as an example as it offers ample opportunities to play different shots. Spend 20 minutes hitting shots from different lies (down and up slopes, tight and heavy lies) to different distances with different clubs and shot types. Use a range of swing tempos to see what works best in each scenario.

Simulate on-course pressure

Put yourself under pressure in the final third of your session by introducing a 'win-lose' element. This last section creates a bridge from your practice to your play as it helps you transfer your

range work to hitting good shots down the stretch, whether that is in a club medal or when you're heading for your best score. Extensive testing has shown that practising in pressurised situations

is the most effective way of inoculating yourself against the negative effects of pressure. Use your pre-shot routine just as you would on the course and have no more than one swing thought.



On the putting green

On tour this is called the 'birdie-par' or 'around the world' drill. Set up four tees at north, south, east and west about one putter length from the hole – these are the 'par' putts. Set up four more tees in the gaps (at north-east, south-east etc.) two putter lengths from the hole – these are the 'birdie' putts. Make 3 circuits (24 putts in total) and see what your score is to par. Record your score and look to improve through the season.

Set yourself a target

For the final 20 minutes of your session, create an imaginary fairway by using signs or landmarks in the distance to create left and right edges. Give yourself a target to meet (three in a row or seven out of 10, for example); and try to put that number on your 'fairway'. Miss and you must re-start from ball one.

Secrets in the dirt

The world's best golfers share their practice plans

Going with the flow

When practising, McIlroy works on three specific pitching lengths – 90, 100 and 115 yards. He achieves these by focusing on tempo and flow, not swing mechanics.



Rory McIlroy

"My favourite club is the one I practise most when I'm on the range. My 6-iron is right there between a long and a short iron. I can hit a bunch of different shots with it and over the years it's really served me well on the range and the course. I've actually become pretty accurate on approach shots from 175-200 yards because I spend so much time practising with it. I'm typically inside the top-five or close to it every year in the PGA Tour proximity to the hole stat from 175-200 yards."



Jack Nicklaus

"All my life I've tried to hit practice shots with great care. I try to have a clear-cut purpose in mind on every swing. I always practise as I intend to play. And I learned long ago that there is a limit to the number of shots you can hit effectively before losing your concentration on your basic objectives. I have to believe that some of the guys who virtually live on the practice tee are there because they don't have anything better to do with their time. And I have to believe they often weaken their games by letting their practice become pointless through sheer monotony or fatigue."



Nick Faldo

To keep practice entertaining, Faldo would often replicate entire rounds on the range, never hitting the same club twice in a row. According to his former coach David Leadbetter, he played that game on the range at the 1996 Masters. "He was working on every shot he'd face on the course, saying things like 'the flag is 10 paces right, five from the back'. This routine made Nick work the ball instead of hitting it dead straight. It made the course more familiar."



Matt Kuchar

"I start with wedges and work my way through the bag, but I won't hit every club. Play to your strengths, use the clubs and shot shapes that you're going to use most frequently out on the course. For example, I'm not going to spend ages trying to hit a draw if I'm struggling to do it or unlikely to use it too often that week. My sessions are really geared towards trying to eliminate any clubhead rotation. If the club comes into impact open and exits closed it's almost impossible to deliver the head perfectly square at the ball."



Tiger Woods

"At a tournament, I don't really spend a whole lot of time on the range, or even on the putting green or anything like that. When I get to a tournament site, I feel like my game should be ready. That's one of the reasons why I don't play as many weeks as a lot of these guys do, because I spend a lot of time practising at home. I do most of my

preparation at home. Once I'm at a tournament site, I'm there just to find my rhythm, tune up a little bit, and get myself ready to go play the next day."



Henrik Stenson

"Whenever I'm on the range I always use the 'left-arm-only' drill with a range of clubs. I'm actually left-handed so have lots of feel in my left side. I start by hitting full shots with just my left hand on the club, then hit shots where I take the club back with my left hand to about halfway in my backswing. From there I pause and put my right hand on before completing the swing. This helps me find a good position on the way back and really turn my shoulders. From there my body and arms stay in sync through the swing, which improves striking and power."



Jim Furyk

"If you want to hole lots of putts you have to keep the ball on line and that becomes even more important the quicker the greens are. I always start my putting sessions by using a ball with a line drawn all the way around the middle. I'll then roll a series of putts on a flat lie to around 10 feet. The key is to make the line roll perfectly straight. If it wobbles you're putting sidespin on the ball which means your putts won't hold their line. I'll work on this until the line stays straight every time."



Phil Mickelson

I like practising either in my yard at home where I built a facility or at some of the local clubs when I'm on the road at tournaments. I practise flying my wedges to a specific yardage three days a week. I hit over 1,500 golf balls in that time and try to land each one within a yard of the target – or hit the target. For the most part, I'm able to do that 90 per cent of the time. It's not an accident that my wedge game is what it is, because I stand there and work on it."



Adam Scott

"Before a round I work my way up the set. I start by hitting 10 wedges to 75 yards and 10 to 100 yards. This sharpens my distance control in the scoring zone. I'll then hit 10 shots to 150 yards before resting for a couple of minutes. I then go to 175 yards



Practise like a pro

and 210 yards, 10 shots to each. I finish the irons with 10 3-irons to 240 yards before ending the session with the woods. I hit five with the 3-wood and five with the driver."



Billy Horschel

"I start with putting and try to lag putts to get the speed of the greens. Then I'll hit straight putts using a chalk line as this helps me make sure my eyes and putter are matching up. Then it's off to the range. I start with a lob wedge and hit 40-50-yard shots. Then I grab my gap wedge and hit 90-100-yard shots. After that I go 9-iron, 6-iron, 4-iron, 5-wood, 3-wood, and driver. Then I hit one or two balls with a pitching wedge to exactly 115 yards. When I'm hitting balls, I'm just trying to get in a good rhythm. I'll hit draws, cuts, low shots, three-quarter shots."



Ernie Els

"It depends how much time you've got, but whether it's 20 minutes or 90 minutes, don't rush. Too often I see golfers go through a bucket of balls in double-quick time, mostly with driver. Hit half as many balls and take a moment between shots to think about what you're trying to achieve. Visualise the ballflight and mix up your targets. Always start with the wedge – just gentle pitch shots – and gradually work your way up through the bag. Don't use every club; go with 9-iron, 7-iron, 5-iron, fairway metal and then driver. At the end of the session, wind down with a couple of easy pitch shots. Then make sure in your next session you ignore your long game and work exclusively on your chipping and putting."



Edoardo Molinari

"I always start with the 60-degree lob wedge. I then go through the set, with the odd numbers one day and the even numbers the next. The 6-iron is probably the club I use the most, though. Alignment is very important and I probably work on that more than anything by putting one cane or club the other side of the ball and one just in front of my feet to make sure I'm aiming at my target."



Jordan Spieth

"I can leave lots of putts short so on the putting green I find two holes that are a good distance apart, maybe 40 feet. I place a club three feet past the back edge of both holes. If they don't go in, the putts



Henrik Stenson works hard on body/arm connection.

must finish in this zone between the hole and the club. I start 10ft from one hole, leaving 30ft to the second hole from the same spot. I putt three balls to the 10ft hole and, if all three stop within the zone, I putt three to the longer hole. I only stop once I've got three consecutively in the zone at both ends."



Bubba Watson

"The range for me is really all about loosening up. I'm not too worried about my swing or where the ball ends up. I'll start with a sand wedge and then go right up the set to finish with a couple of drives. I'm really just making sure my body is ready to play and that I'm loosening those key areas. Everybody's different but I don't have any drills because that makes it a job!"



Lee Westwood

"I probably spend 60 per cent of my time on chipping, putting and bunker play. Variety in your practice is the key with these areas. A drill I use a lot on the chipping green, for example, sees me hit five chips from a range of lies and distances, but to the same flag. I have to get all five balls within a total of 10ft from the hole or I start again. In terms of my long game on the range I'll mostly work on making sure my basics like ball position and

alignment are correct. Lots of amateurs work on their swing, but they're aiming 20 yards right or left which isn't a great start!"



Ian Poulter

"Use an alignment aid every time you're on the range. These tools install it in your brain that you're standing square to the target. You can groove stance, posture, hand and ball position with one of these tools and if all those things are right then all you have to do is swing the club. Once I'm comfortable with my set-up I work on my scoring clubs. I'll usually have four wedges in the bag which can hit every yardage from inside 140

Practice in numbers

55 Consecutive 10-footers Rory McIlroy holed before the final round of last year's Tour Championship.

4 Shots Tiger Woods finishes a range session with, using the club he'll hit on the first tee.

1,500 Wedge shots hit by Phil Mickelson every week.

80 Percentage of putts Ian Poulter hits one-handed during a tournament practice round.

54 Wedge loft with which Luke Donald starts every practice session.