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# History of Golf Instruction

1721

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The story of golf instruction begins rightly in the medieval era (no later than 1353), when golfers adopted the principle of allowing each team to hit a second uninterrupted shot. Previously, teams of players would alternate hitting a ball back and forth across a field. Strategy and technique went no further than devising the most efficient means of bashing a ball over the heads of the opposition, preferably in the direction of the goal line, or at least into some abyss from which the other team could not extract itself.

With the adoption of the second shot, and with the principle of each team playing it's own ball, this primeval game became golf and at the same time acquired a strategy, something that it's medieval rival, football, did not until the invention of the scrimmage in the 19th century. It also rapidly acquired such a popularity, which so utterly eclipsed the sport of archery (which was vital to Scotland's preparation for national defense), that playing golf in Scotland was made a criminal offense punishable by hanging. No idle threat that, for at least one poor golfer did pay this sorry price for his round - but ultimately a peace with England was achieved and the Scots devoted their renowned intensity to the study of what would become their national game.

Since that time, there doesn't seem to be any aspect of ball-striking or mental technique that hasn't come under scrutiny, particularly in our own highly scientific 21st century. Stance, grip alignment, swing plane, waggle, wrist cock, shoulder turn, and angle of attack have all been addressed by the parade of teachers, visionaries, kinesthetic, scientists, engineers, mystics, duffers, and well-meaning Uncle Bobs who have over the past 600 years plunked a ball on the turf and offered the magic phrase "let me show you?"

19th century

The show-and-tell of golf instruction took on new importance in 1848 when, with the invention of the gutta percha ball (or "guttie"), golf became both exportable and cheap. Prior to 1848, golf ball construction was a laborious and costly art practiced by a handful of cottage manufacturers in the vicinity of Edinburgh - and if a ball was expensive, freight was prohibitive. Golf at this time simply had no chance to expand beyond the Scottish lowlands. Since all of golf was compacted into such a tiny area, golfers were able to learn simply by imitating the great players of the day on the handful of courses then in existence.

The guttie changed all that. By 1865, the game had expanded to England, Ireland, France, and India. These new clubs hired full-time professionals, many of them expatriate Scots, and with them came the flowering of formal golf instruction as the canny professionals undertook the task of teaching golf in foreign lands and foreign conditions. The first book of golf instruction can be firmly dated to this period, with the publication in 1857 of *A Keen Hand*, by H. B. Farnie. The 19th century was a time of slow advancement in technique, with concentration primarily on a long-running disagreement as to whether an open stance or a closed stance was the better way to address the guttie, which for all it's low cost was something of a dodo and difficult to put into the air. The controversy was only truly resolved when the modern wound (Haskell) ball appeared in the early 1900's and made the guttie obsolete.

At roughly the same point in time as the Haskell, golf instruction was advanced even more directly by the arrival of the touring professional golfer. Soaring popularity and plummeting travel costs ushered in the barnstorming era when golfers such as Harry Vardon could earn a living from personal appearances, tournament purses, and exhibition matches, avoiding the low status and even lower pay of the golf club professional.

Vardon's tournament success and his proselytizing work in far-flung places such as Canada and the United States led to popular adoption of two of his innovative techniques- a steady, rhythmic, and utterly simple swing technique, and the overlapping (Vardon) grip, which is still the most popular method of gripping a club. Vardon did not personally invent either but his success stamped them first with legitimacy and finally with a certain inevitability as he racked up six British Open crowns and the 1900 U.S. Open title

## 20th Century

Although both the first golf magazines and the British and American Professional Golf Associations appeared early in the 20th century, barnstorming professionals and Bobby Jones would continue to dominate golf instruction right up to the Great Depression. Huge crowds flocked to see Jones and Walter Hagen on both sides of the Atlantic, learning such secrets as Hagen's straight-line putting: drawing the clubface back from the ball in a straight line rather than a slight arc popular at this time. His innovation was important in the 1920's and allowed him to win many tournaments - but it is even important today with the increased emphasis on fast difficult putting surfaces.

The modern sand wedge and bunker techniques were also a by-product of the era - this popular innovation the work of several golfers, most notably Gene Sarazen. But the Great Depression had a devastating effect on touring professionals, and the age of coast-to-coast exhibition tours came to a close. The years between 1932 and 1956 are not celebrated in golf instruction lore, but that isn't to say that the instructors of the era weren't any good. In fact, club-level and local instruction were better in this era than at any time during golf's history, as aging tour pros such as Tommy Armour retired to club jobs while young pros like Tom Harmon decided not to join the nascent PGA tour, owing to its low purses and often appalling conditions.

Ernest T. Jones was at his studio on Fifth Avenue in New York City, preaching the virtues of "swing the clubhead" at five dollars a lesson to all comers. In addition, the best northern pros would travel to Florida in the winter and pick up new teaching styles and techniques in winter teaching meetings, or on the winter tournament circuit. Finally, modern golf range equipment began to appear, eliminating the need for a ball-shagging caddie, and sparked a boom in driving-range construction. College-based instructional programs were also adopted by many major universities during these years, attracting future stars such as Arnold Palmer.

In the mid-1950's, largely due to television, a new golf boom began, and with tournament purses soaring and golf acquiring a certain cachet, younger amateurs and club pros abandoned careers in insurance, or on the practice tee, for glory on the PGA Tour. Prize money and endorsement income made millionaires out of Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, and with thousands of dollars now resting on the success of this putt in the Masters or that five-iron in the Open, leading professionals began to openly seek the advice of golf gurus such as Gardner Dickinson, Bob Toski, Harvey Penick, and Jack Grout.

At the same time, Palmer, Nicklaus, and Gary Player parlayed their tournament success into an empire of instructional publications- magazine articles, television tips, and ghost written, handsomely illustrated books. National magazines such as Golf and Golf Digest capitalized on the newfound popularity of the game to achieve relatively mass circulations and a national forum of cutting-edge instructional techniques. Golf instructors too, found that golf magazines, and their increasingly visible work with touring professionals, brought them more business than they could handle on a local level. So, although golf schools had been in existence since just after the war, in 1968 the first national golf schools would evolve.

Golf did not sustain in the 1970's the same level of popularity it had enjoyed in the 1960's, but significant changes were looming for the game as golf's expansion had created a large enough golf economy to allow for substantial investment in research and development. The groundwork was laid in the 1970's for radical transformation of turf preparation, golf club technology, and instructional technique. The cavity-backed iron, the metal wood, the graphite shaft, as well as revolutionary changes in irrigation technique and turf-laying, date to the 1970's. All would have substantial impact on the game as golfers achieved better and better control over the golf ball (in flight direction, overall distance, and spin characteristics.)

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## Today

By the 1990's, and into the new millennium, golf instruction in the U.S. had boomed to the point that there are now a multitude of national golf schools offering hundreds of programs across the country, with a cornucopia of techniques, price points, regimens, and training goals. The largest of these is America's Favorite Golf Schools with more than 40 locations nationwide. Virtually all of the national golf schools offer books and videotapes for sale. Prominent golf gurus such as Dave Pelz, Bob Toski, Rick Smith, and Jim Flick are in demand not only with the touring pros but at skyrocketing master class rates at the finest resorts. Harvey Penick's Little Red Book also became the biggest selling sports book of all time. In short, golf instruction has expanded into one of the largest and most vibrant sectors of the substantial golf economy.

Looking back over the entire grand parade of gurus and teachers, if one were to assign a grade to golf instruction as a whole, six centuries into it, one would pencil "I" for "incomplete". It's well-worth knowing that even in this day of gurus and their technical wizardry, fewer than half of the world's players can regularly break 100. It's also fitting to mention that when James Durham recorded 94 at the Old Course at St Andrews in 1767, he set a course record that lasted 86 years. Golf instruction has indeed come a long way.

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