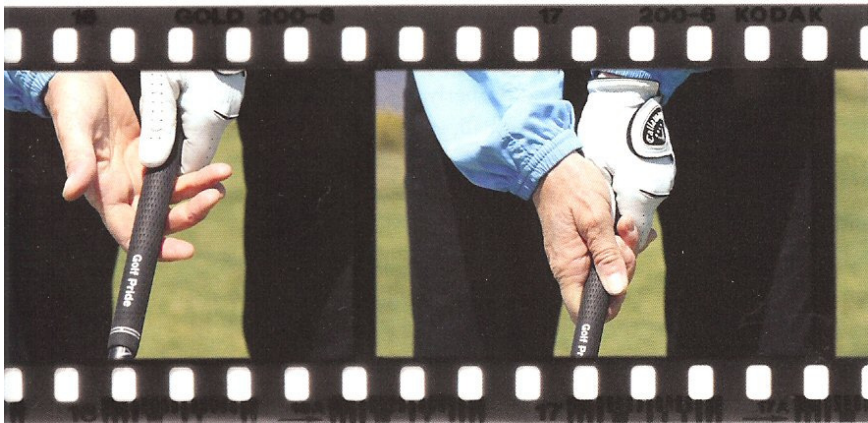




Driving Ambition



Innsbrook's head pro, Martha Faulconer, can't give you Palmer's distinctive rocket off the tee, but she can offer a few tips on developing a drive of your own. **PATRICK JONES** looks at the long game...



ARNOLD PALMER'S DISTINCTIVE SWING, to the detriment of golf fans everywhere, is not seen as often these days. The King, 80 years young this September, no longer plays competitively on a professional tour. Among the best available opportunities to glimpse Palmer launching into one of his patented all-out assaults on a tee shot nowadays is on the first tee at The Masters—he serves as the ceremonial starter—or in facsimile form in the person of PGA Tour veteran and spot-on swing mimicker Peter Jacobsen.

Palmer never steered a tee shot in his life. He always took full advantage of his personalized, perfectly timed kinesthetic whip to bomb the ball as far down the fairway as ability and physics allowed. Its effectiveness helped tally seven major championships and 94 titles worldwide.

None of us can duplicate Palmer's effective driving style. But we can learn sound fundamentals to improve our own ability. That leads to consistently finding fairways and gaining additional length with the driver.

Former LPGA Tour regular Martha Faulconer, head golf professional at Innsbrook Golf & Boat in Merry Hill, N.C., offers sound tips on putting yourself in the absolute best positions—both physically and mentally—to maximize golf's longest and most exhilarating shot.

Innsbrook Golf & Boat hugs the shoreline at the convergence of the Chowan River and Albemarle Sound in the northeastern quadrant of North Carolina. Several holes of this Palmer-designed layout overlook the picturesque waterfront setting. Innsbrook opened for play in 2008. In its first year it was rated among the top two courses in the eastern part of the state by the North Carolina Golf Panel, the state's de facto course rating committee. The 900-acre Innsbrook Golf & Boat community will also feature a 150-slip boat basin among its other amenities.

Faulconer knows the golf swing. She spent eight years on the LPGA Tour. Her best finishes were a pair of thirds at the Mazda Classic and the Safeco Classic, with a career low round of 66. Faulconer competed in the U.S. Women's Open Championship five times. An Indiana native, she was a two-time collegiate All-American at Southern Methodist University. She is a PGA professional with more than 15 years of teaching experience.

GRIP

Successful driving starts with sound fundamentals, says Faulconer, and that begins with the grip.

"The grip is of massive importance," she says. "It lines up the clubhead. If you have correct fundamentals (in your swing) you can get back to the ball squarely without making adjustments. If you learn the grip properly from the get-go, it is much easier to repeat that motion. An incorrect grip is a hard, hard thing to change."

Faulconer says the left hand is of particular importance (for right-handers) in the grip. The left three fingers should hold the grip and the heel of the hand should be on top of the grip. The V that forms between the thumb and the forefinger should point to the right shoulder. The right hand should rest on top of the left hand with the V also pointing to the right shoulder.

Hitting balls with preformed grips, which forces fingers into the correct positions, is a great benefit to beginners and even advanced players, says Faulconer.

"The grip is something that has to be practiced and practiced and practiced to get used to it," she says. "When you are at home at night, sitting on the couch, get a golf club and just nurse it. You have to get a feel for the correct grip."

Grip pressure should not be too tight or too loose when holding the driver. Golfers should just make sure they have secure control of the club. Faulconer recommends that all golfers, and particularly women, should spend time strengthening their fingers, wrists and forearms. She personally squeezes on Silly Putty in idle time for that purpose.

"You have a lot of little muscles in your hands and your fingers," says Faulconer. "And they really have to be firing in the golf swing. If you can't control the driver, or any club, the clubface is moving and you don't have a prayer of hitting a good shot. The grip is the beginning of everything."

SETUP POSITIONS

Other critical elements in successful driving are ball position, stance and posture. Faulconer advises playing the ball just inside the left heel (for right-handers). Your stance should be shoulder width apart. "Don't get your feet too close together," she says. "You need to be as stable as you can be and have a solid foundation for hitting the ball."

The proper posture for hitting the driver requires bending slightly from the hips with a slight bend in the knees. Faulconer equates it to the athletic position of a shortstop in baseball poised for the ball to be hit. Arms should be hanging relaxed from the body. Faulconer instructs her juniors to "swing like an ape" to get across the natural arm position.

Your right shoulder should be slightly below your left, but that comes naturally from the right hand being lower on the club than the left. The tilted position should not be forced.

"A proper and consistent setup is key to driving success," says Faulconer. "You always want the first shot of the hole to give you some positive feedback and to put you in a good position for the next shot."

SWING AND SWING PLANE

One of Faulconer's biggest challenges when teaching amateurs is getting their swing on the correct path. Most just don't understand the concept. "Many people mistakenly think the golf swing is on a plane that is up and down," she says. "It is actually on a slanted position."

One of her favorite drills is to plant a pair of flexible poles into the ground at approximately 45-degree angles—one pole on each side of the player—and have them swing under the poles. Most students are initially at a loss.

"They say, 'Martha, there is no way I can swing on this plane (under the poles). The path is too low.' But they can because you are bending over," she says. "When students learn that that is the correct swing path, from inside to square to back inside, they can learn to hit a ball with a little right to left (draw) spin. They learn that staying on the swing plane is a really good thing.

"The poles are good training tools because they force your muscles to do what they are supposed to do," adds Faulconer. "The object of the game is to make it as simple as possible. You want to repeat the correct motions as many times as you can."

Another drill favored by Faulconer is to practice hitting the driver on your knees. (A towel is suggested.) This forces a flatter swing plane. She says most players tend to swing too upright.

The club position at the top of swing should not be forced to horizontal to the ground or beyond. Body types, past injuries and flexibility determine how far the club needs to go back, says Faulconer.

IMPACT POSITION AND FOLLOW THROUGH

The impact position—clubface contacting ball—is the acid test of the movements that have preceded. "The momentum of everything carried into the back swing carries into the impact position and down the target line," says Faulconer. "You contact the ball and you make sure you follow through. Hopefully, everything has aligned properly. It's like shooting a free throw. By the time you hit the ball, you better trust what you are doing because you have to pull the trigger."

The correct finish position is on balance and with weight primarily on the front foot. Faulconer tells her students to "pose for the camera" to get across the visual of the proper finish of the swing. "I guarantee my juniors that, before too long, if they pose for the camera after every swing, they will be able to hit a good little golf shot."

THE MENTAL GAME

Along with mechanics, mindset is critical. Faulconer recommends golfers "stay within themselves" when teeing off. That means knowing their own abilities and not competing with others. "Don't get out of your rhythm," she says. "Focus on hitting it pure every time and don't be concerned with how far others hit it."

Positive thinking before pulling the trigger with the big stick is also helpful. "When you get ready to hit a driver, what do you see out there? Are you thinking about the hazards, the trouble you can get in, or are you thinking about all that green grass out there in the fairway? A lot of players have the talent. The ones with the best mental games—the brain power—make the best players because they believe in what they are doing." ■



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