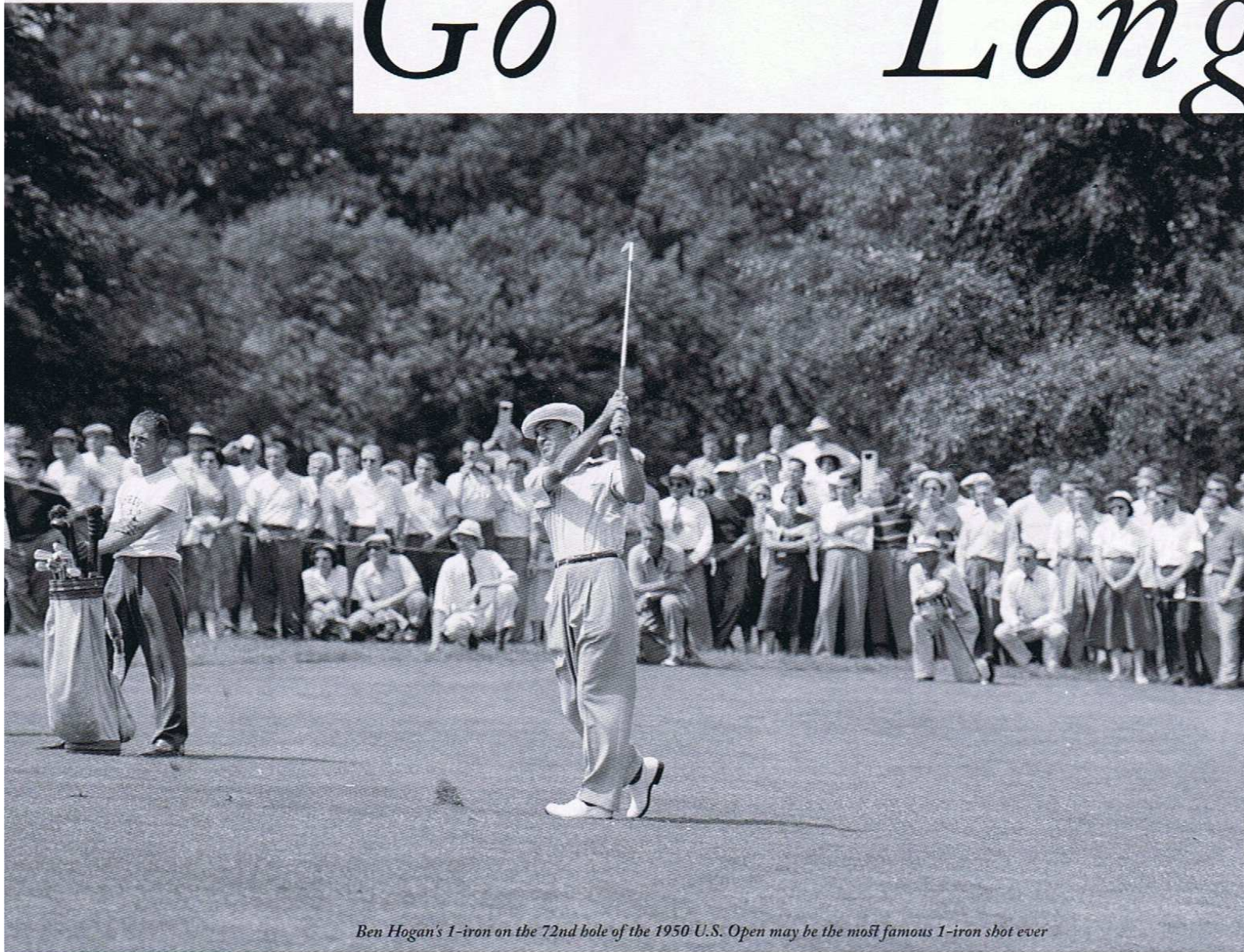


Tiger loves them, you're scared of them. But if you can hit one, a long iron can do serious damage to your opponents. Patrick Jones talks to North Carolina State University Golf Coach Richard Sykes about how to hit the lowest numbers in the game — before they disappear

Go Long



Ben Hogan's 1-iron on the 72nd hole of the 1950 U.S. Open may be the most famous 1-iron shot ever

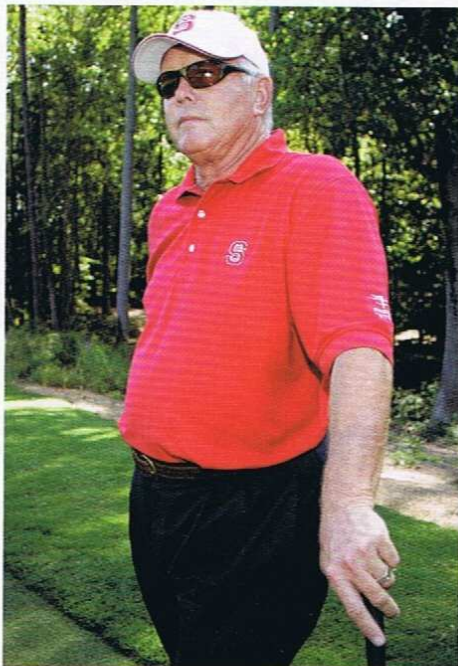
Some of golf's most memorable shots have launched off the clubfaces of the game's most difficult clubs to hit. They are the clubs classified as long irons — the ones etched with the imposing numbers 1, 2 and 3.

Historic shots include Ben Hogan's 1-iron on the 72nd hole of the 1950 U.S. Open that led to a regulation tie and eventual championship in a playoff. There was Jack Nicklaus' 1-iron to within six inches of the

seventeenth hole at Pebble Beach to clinch the 1972 U.S. Open. And then there was... Well, actually, the list of extraordinary long-iron shots remains a relatively short one. And with the advent of hybrid clubs, the existing register may remain frozen in time.

"Long irons are difficult clubs to hit," says Richard Sykes, head golf coach at North Carolina State University in Raleigh for the last 37 years. Sykes coached PGA Tour veterans Carl Pettersson and Tim Clark while

undergraduates on the Wolfpack golf team. “Long irons don’t have much loft on them. In most cases, they have a thin top line. And they are much longer clubs. All of that combined scares you to death about half the time when you just look at them. You have to be a pretty strong golfer to create enough clubhead speed to get a lot of height with a long iron. And if you can’t get height, you can’t keep the ball on the green.”



“Tiger Woods relishes the opportunity to hit long irons,” says Sykes. “It’s excitement for him because he hits them so well. But for the average golfer, the only excitement is where the ball might land. Most golfers are not proficient at long irons. Therefore, that puts more pressure on their game.”

Long irons are not extinct, but they are becoming a vanishing breed as hybrid clubs rapidly populate golf bags. Sykes says players on his collegiate team carry either a 2-iron or a 3-iron but “almost never both.”

Hybrid clubs have taken over at almost every level of the game. “Hybrids are much easier to play,” says Sykes. “Even on the pro circuits — and you are talking the best of the best, and they are not intimidated by much of anything — you are still seeing more and more hybrids at that level, especially as the courses become longer and the greens become harder. The hybrid club, because of its low center of gravity, throws the ball much higher, flies it just as far (as a long iron) and lands it softer. The pros are out there trying to make a living. They are trying to figure out the best way to get the ball on the green and keep it there. That’s why you are seeing more and more hybrids.”

Despite continuing ease-of-use improvements in golf equipment, there will always be traditionalists who insist on playing the more difficult game of their forefathers.

Furthermore, shot-making mimics, for the foreseeable future, will maintain at least a 2-iron in their possession so they can attempt Tiger’s controlled stinger shot when fairways seem to narrow to the eye of a needle.

Long irons do not yet face extinction. The demand remains for coaching professionals like Sykes to teach the intricacies of the game’s most demanding clubs.

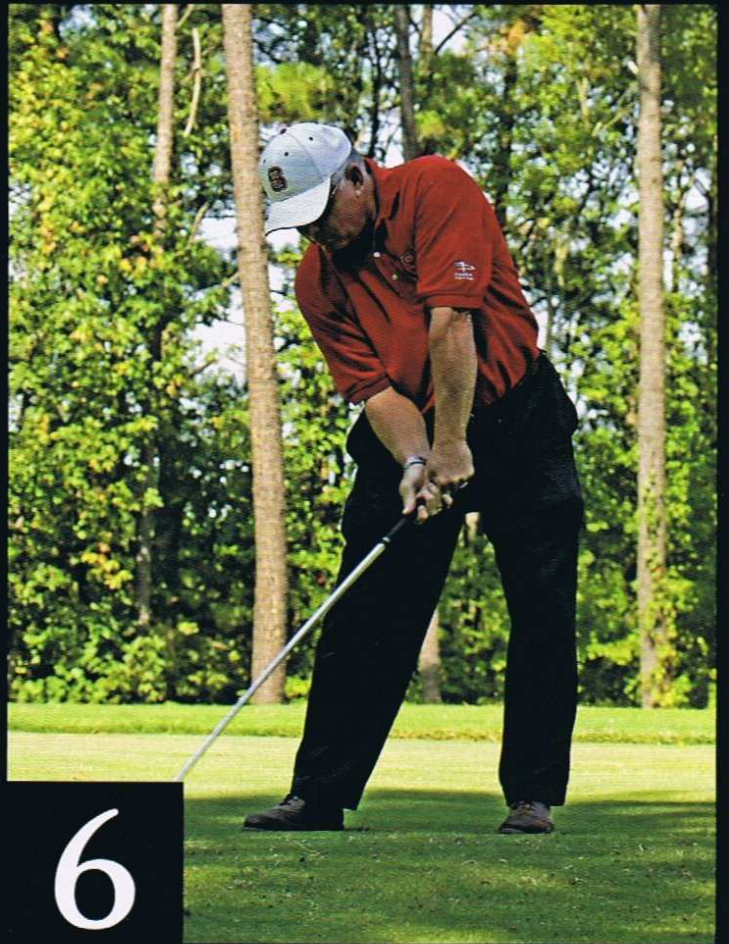
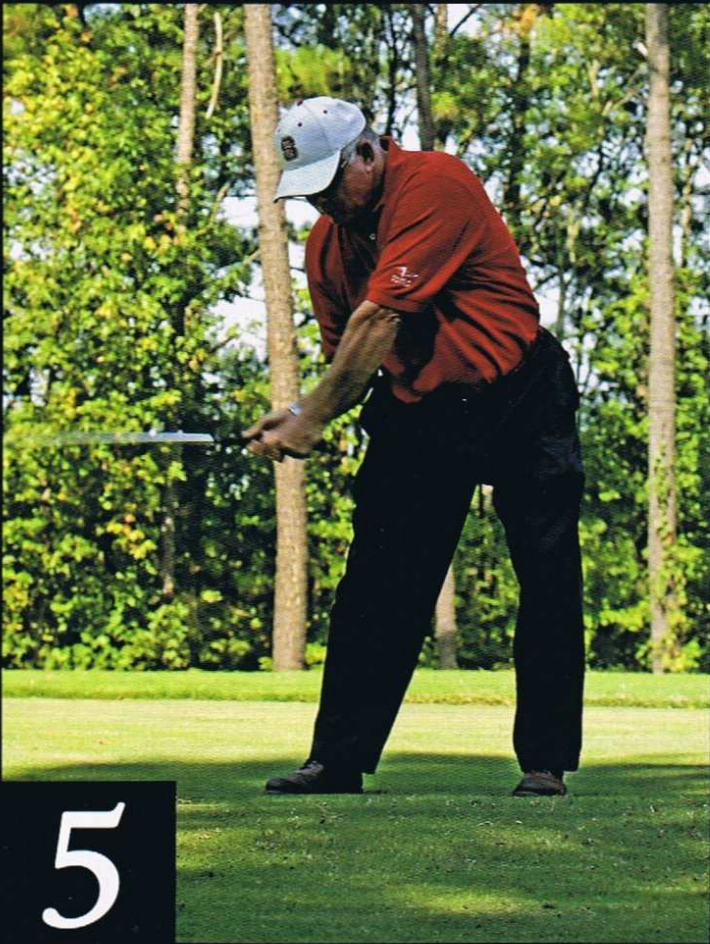
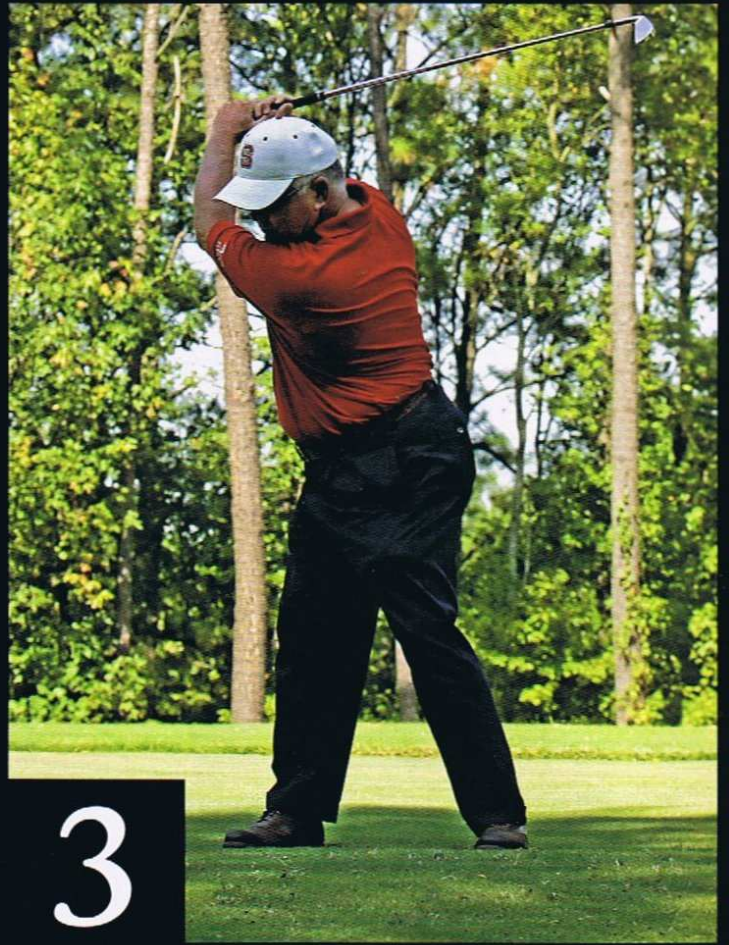
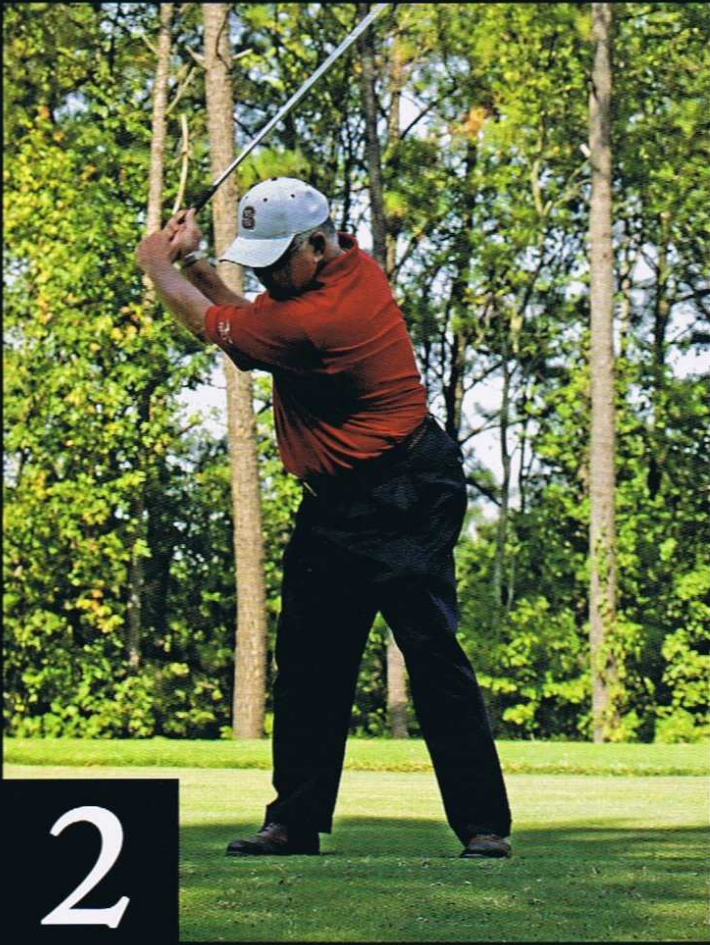
“First of all, the ball position when hitting a long iron should be a little left of center,” says Sykes. “That’s for a right-handed player, of course, and is opposite for the left-handed golfer. It requires great balance on those clubs. With short clubs, more of your weight is distributed to your front foot. Long irons require more of a turn, which means more of a controlled weight shift.”

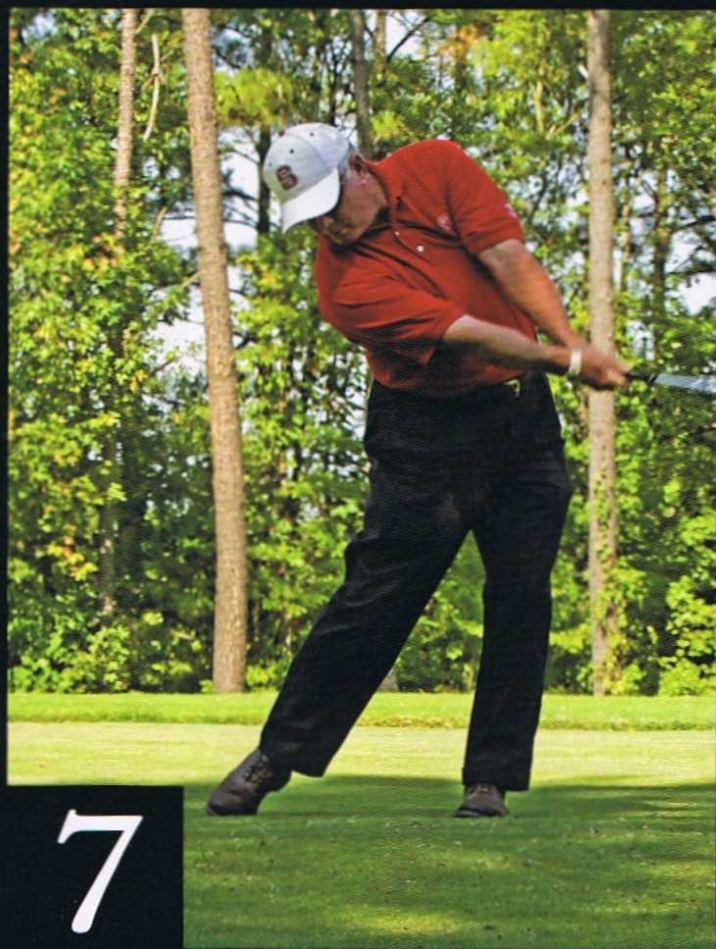


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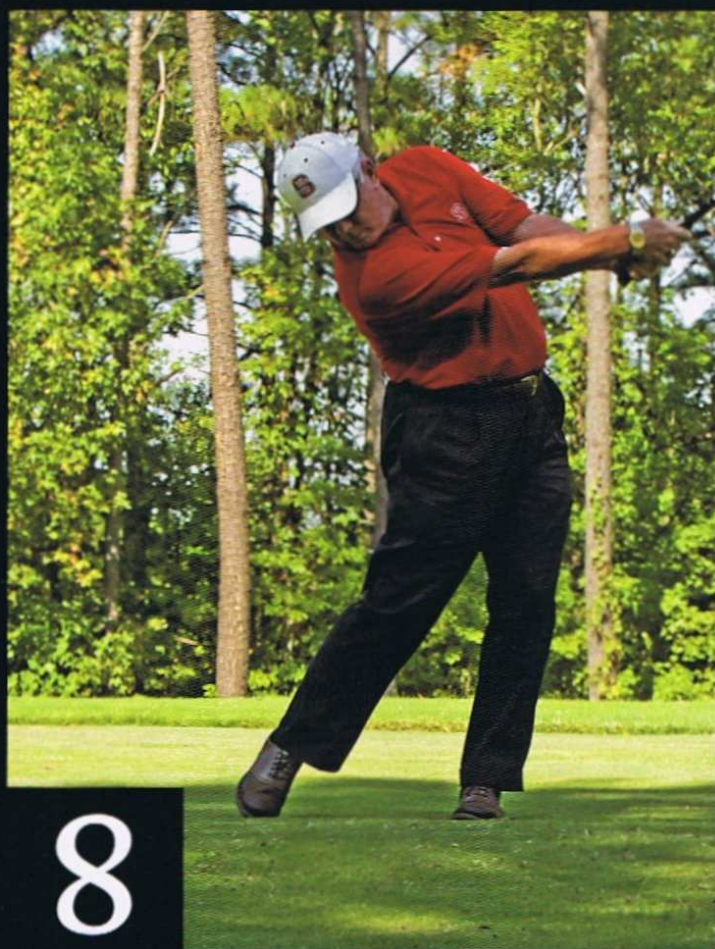


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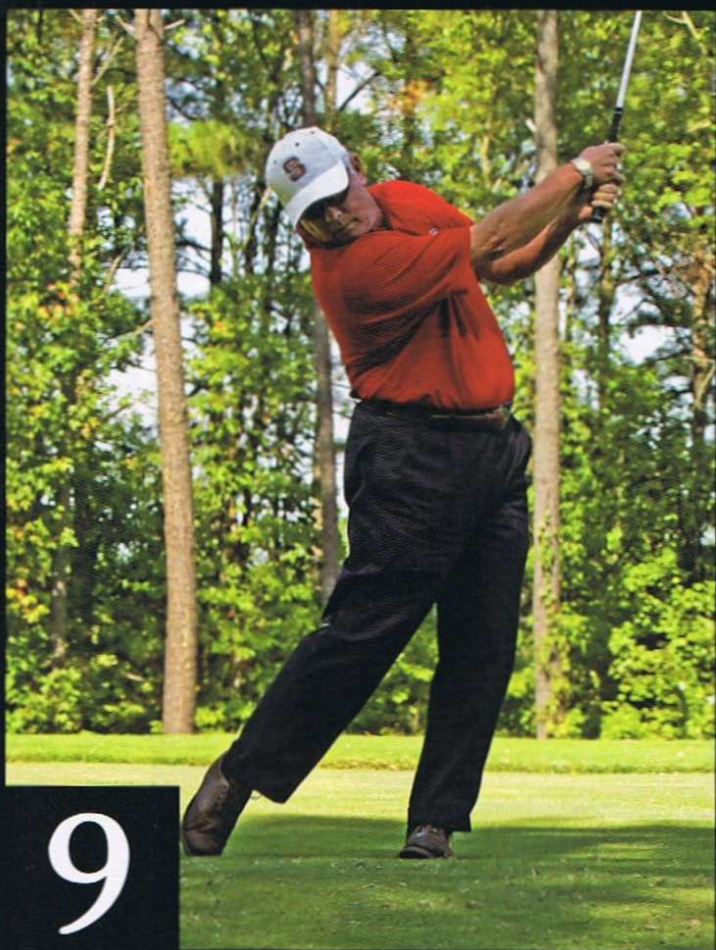




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"Probably the No. 1 thing is that golfers tend to lose their spine angle on long-iron shots," says Sykes. "The simplest way to put it is that you should try to keep your butt stuck out and up. That is an easier position to maintain with short clubs, but as the clubs get longer, golfers tend to lose that. They tend to hunch in and try to lift the ball in the air. The club designer decided how to help the shot, we don't have to. Keeping the correct spine angle will shallow out your swing and will help you sweep the ball in the air. There's a slight divot taken, but it's more about just brushing the turf."

Sykes says golfers should also strive to complete a full shoulder turn when hitting their longer irons because of the longer shafts.

"All of those [tips] in combination will help you make a good shot — or, if an element is missing, keep you from hitting a good shot," he says.

The most critical element in long-iron consistency is preparation. "Preparation relieves pressure," says Sykes. "It is real simple. If you are going to hit long-irons, go practice them."

As a university golf coach, Sykes has to come up with drills for his team. One of his favorites is to alternate hitting a 3-iron and a sand wedge. "Hit one and hit the other," he says. "Just keep hitting one and then the other. You maintain the same rhythm and spine angle and you will be surprised at how much better you are hitting the long irons after a session."

That is solid advice for the dwindling number of golfers who continue to rely on the toughest sticks in the game.

"The long iron is a great club, don't get me wrong," says Sykes. "But, except for the PGA Tour and some top-flight amateurs, they are disappearing" ■