

INSTRUCTION:

Managing Practice

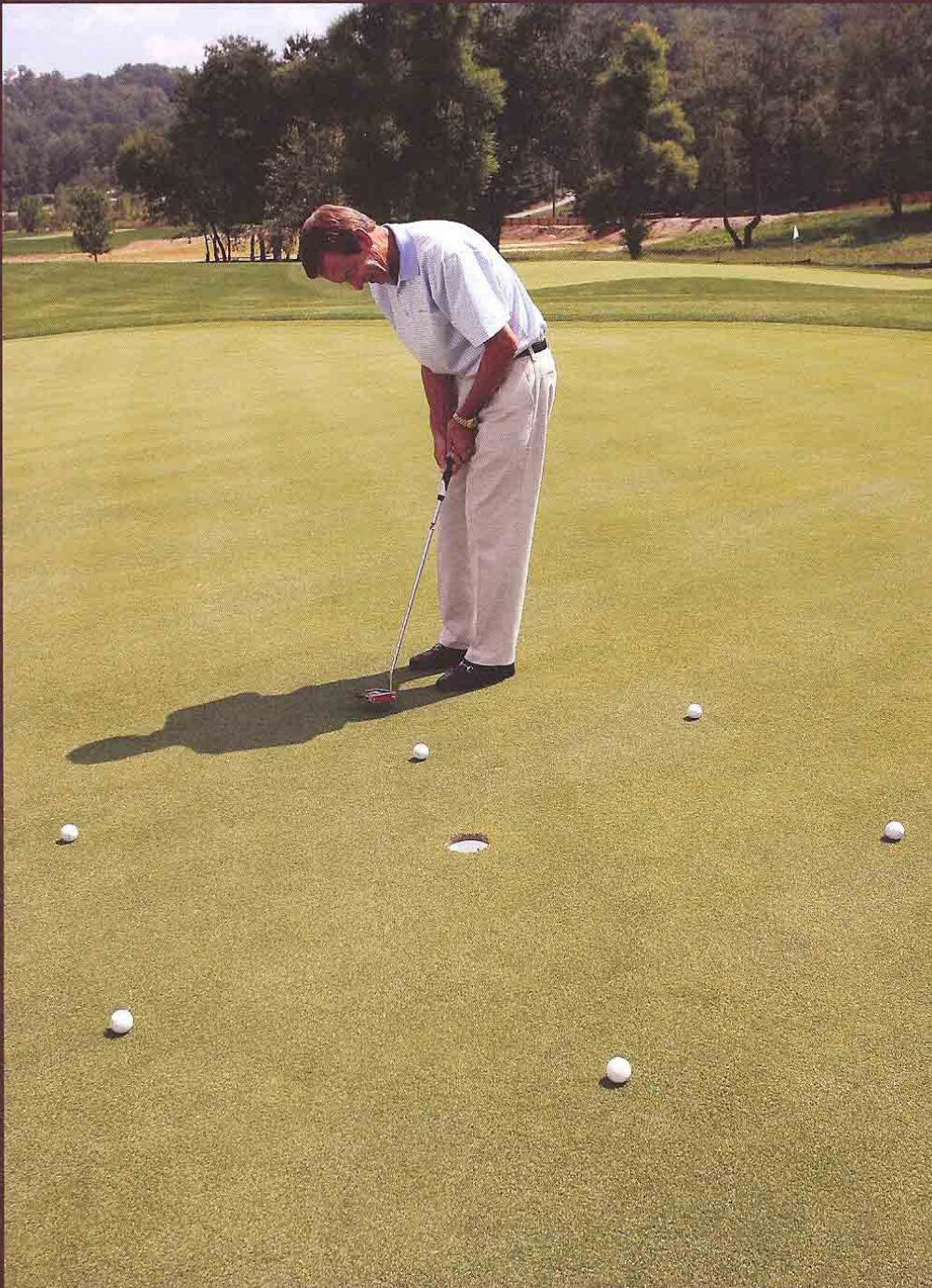
Building skills isn't just about crushing range balls. **PATRICK JONES** learns a little time management and improves his game with help from Seven Falls Golf and River Club's top pros **Mark Darnell** and **Pete Huber**

WHEN IT COMES TO IMPROVING your game, it's not always about the number of hours you spend swinging a club. If you don't know how to manage your time, then practice will not necessarily make perfect.

Residents of Seven Falls Golf and River Club in Hendersonville, N.C., don't have this problem. Their on-site Arnold Palmer Golf Academy (see sidebar) is one of the best practice facilities ever built, and it's staffed by two excellent PGA Master Professionals: Mark Darnell and Pete Huber. Joined by PGA member and golf fitness expert Matt Adamski, these guys offer a plan that will help anyone make the most of a 90-minute practice session. First step: Forget about your driver.

"For a 90-minute practice session," says Huber, "we would want to spend at least one hour on putting, chipping, pitching and sand shots. And the remainder of the time, basically, is just maintenance work with the full shots."





<< PUTTING

Huber and Darnell suggest spending the first 20 minutes rolling putts, with the initial five minutes not even putting to a target.

"Hit putts just to get a feel of the ball against the putter face," says Huber. "That keeps you from focusing on the hole and getting tight. Just get the freedom of the stroke. Start with short putts and then lengthen it... All the while focusing on direction and distance.

"I once heard that every putt that you hit is a science experiment," he adds. "The hypothesis is that if I start the ball in this direction with this speed then it will go in. Then every time you hit a putt you are conducting your experiment. No matter the result, you have learned something. Have fun with it."

1. Phil Drill (one of Mickelson's favorites) Place seven or eight balls in a three-foot circle around the hole, preferably not on a flat area, and practice holing them from uphill, downhill and side hill angles.

2. Ladder Drill

Stick five tees in the ground at 10-foot intervals up to 50 feet. The goal is to lag closely on the 40- and 50-footers. For the shorter distances, the ball should roll at least to the tee and no more than a putter-length past. Do the drill on a flat area, then on both uphill and downhill angles.

3. Straight Putts

Practice sinking a succession of straight putts from six to eight feet, even laying down a chalk line for feedback. Huge confidence builder.

CHIPPING >>

The next step in the short game session is to practice chip shots from the fringe. A chip shot, says Huber, is "just a putt with a little bit of airtime in it." He says contact issues are to blame for most struggles. "You want the clubface to brush the grass in the right place. Brush the grass after hitting the ball."

Darnell and Huber say that the most effective setup for a chip shot is with the club shaft leaning slightly forward and with weight slightly on the front foot. A putting grip is fine.

As for club selection, both say it is important to start by mastering just the one club first. Chip to targets in the front,

middle and back of the green. But prior to this practice tossing balls underhand to get a feel for trajectory and roll, and then introduce the club.

Two Tees Drill

Stick two tees in the ground and (without a ball) practice brushing the grass forward of the tees. "The club needs to be descending slightly down when it is hitting the ball, like an airplane landing. You don't want it bottoming out before it hits the runway. All you need to do in a chip is to have the club moving backwards and forwards. Brush the grass forward of where the ball is and the club loft will get the ball in the air."



BUNKER

After chipping and putting, golfers should spend time in the bunker. Huber teaches not hitting behind the ball in the sand, but under it.

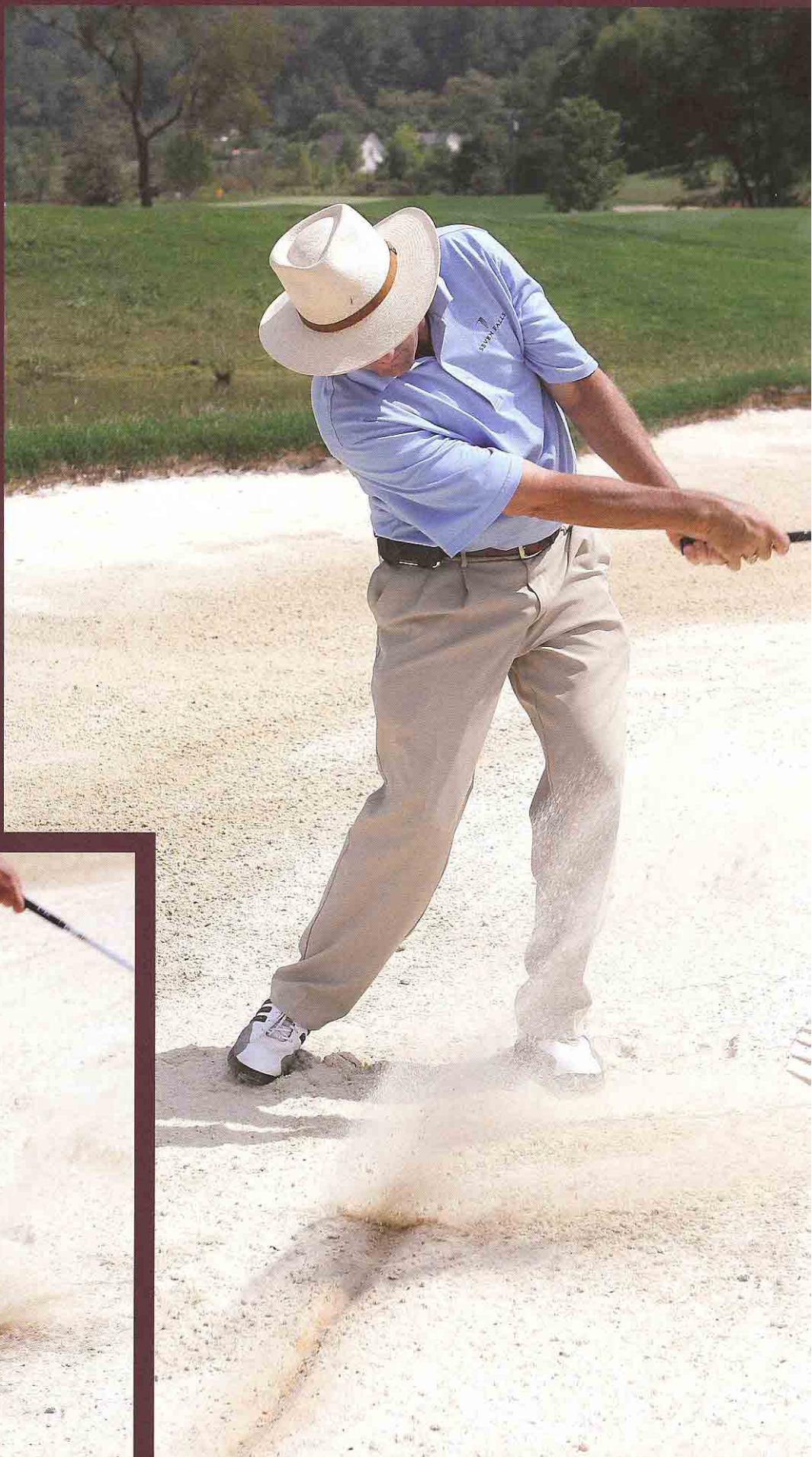
"The ball is incidental," he says. "You are not hitting the ball on a bunker shot anyway. If the ball is anywhere on that cushion of sand, the cushion of sand is getting the ball out (see below). I find most people make sand shots way too difficult. They think, 'OK, I am in the bunker. Now I have to open the face a lot, swing out to in, get steeper with my swing' and all this other stuff. If you do your normal golf swing, that is pretty much what we want to do. Open the clubface a little but not too much. Have the ball position a little forward. That way, your normal swing hits the ground behind where the ball is."

1. Dropping the Tee Drill

Place the ball on a tee in the sand and practice knocking the tee out. Gradually lower the tee to where the ball is flush to the sand.

2. Line in the Sand Drill

Draw a line in the sand, representing where the ball would be, and then practice erasing the line with swings.



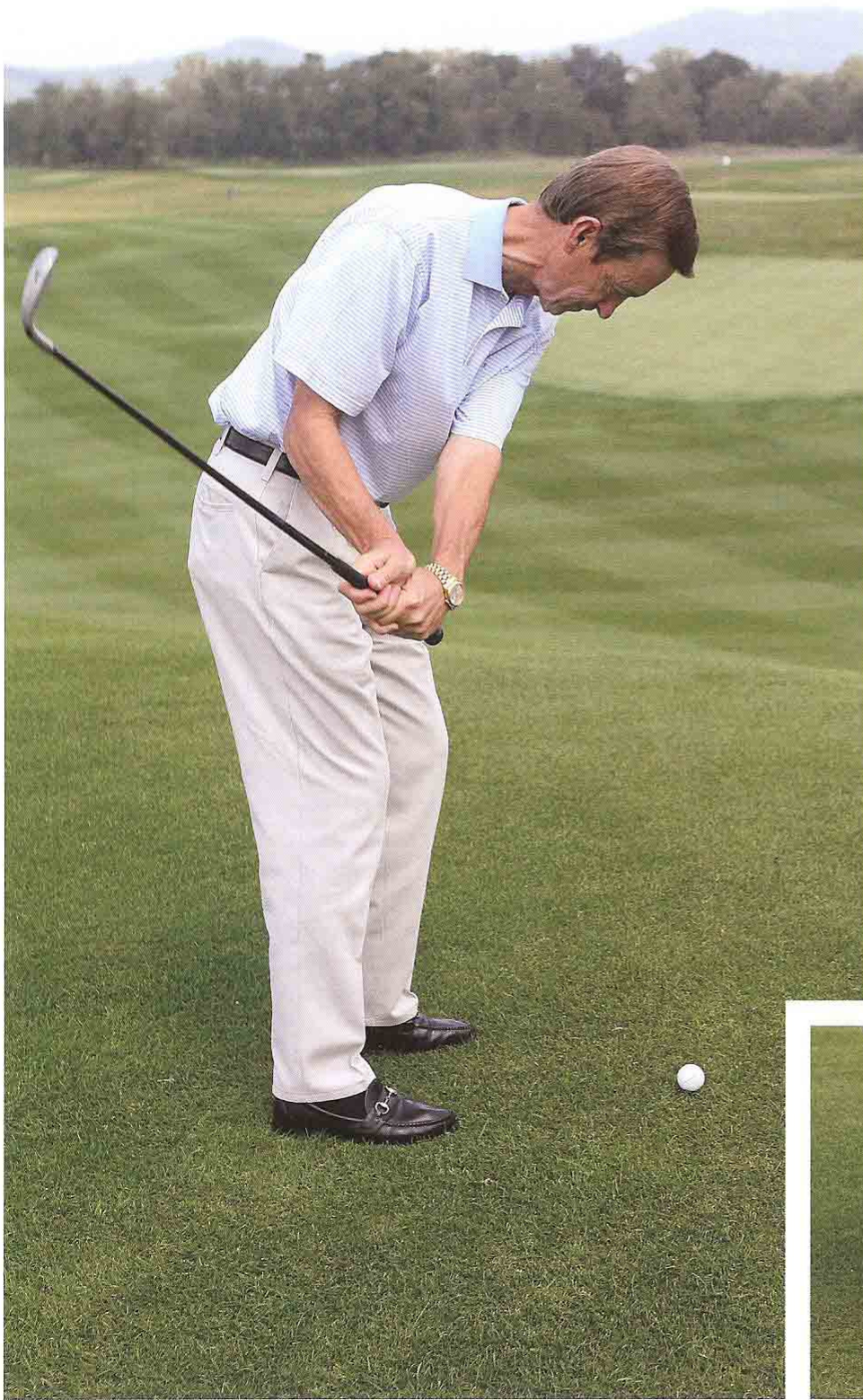
WEDGE

Spend the last 15 or so minutes of the hour of short-game practice with the wedge. Darnell says that incorrect ball position is the biggest problem facing golfers struggling with wedge play. "They think that if they have a wedge in their hand that they have to play the ball forward to get the ball in the air. The result is that they get the ball too far forward. If they drop a plumb bob down from their hands they'll see the bottom of the [swing] arc is farther back. [Too far forward] means they are going to skull it or chili dip it. The trick is to play the ball in the middle of the stance or favor the back [of the stance]. In a perfect world, play it in the middle because that is where the bottom of the arc is going to be."

Darnell emphasizes keeping wedge shots a simple task. "Just think about going straight back and straight through and keeping the clubface straight (see below). It is no different than the putt and the chip. You have an imaginary line that goes from the ball to the hole. You start the club back on that line and hit it and keep it on that line." He says to not let your hands pass the clubface, and to have a slight weight transfer and pivot on the swing to avoid swinging with just the hands and arms.

Stairs Drill

Hit wedge shots at targets spaced at 25, 50 and 75 yards. "Don't do the same shots in a row but stair-step them back and forth," says Darnell. "Hit one 25, then 75, then 25, then 50. You develop the sensitivity of the feel by not just hitting in 25-yard increments. As you practice, you are going to get your shots tighter and tighter to the targets."



FINAL 30 MINUTES

Once on the driving range, Huber and Darnell recommend picking a target and having a specific plan for every shot. "Visualize where you want the ball to start and how you want it to fly," says Huber. "In practice, try to recreate what is going to happen on the golf course when playing a round." He suggested working on the driver and fairway woods more than long irons in practice because percentages show those will come into play more often.

Darnell also recommended staying away from just hitting short irons. "Some players go to the range and just hit 7-, 8- and 9-irons because it is a comfort zone," he says. "They know they can get the ball in the air and hit the ball relatively straight. It makes them feel good. The really good players, the Arnold Palmers and Jack Nicklauses, worked twice as long on mastering [the tougher to hit] longer clubs. That makes the shorter clubs that much easier."



Mark Darnell (right) spent more than 30 years as head golf professional and general manager at West Lake Country Club in Augusta, Ga. He was an All-American golfer at Purdue University and captain of its NCAA Championship team in the 1960s. He is a two-time PGA National Award Winner.

Pete Huber (far-right) has served as lead golf instructor for *Golf Digest* Instructional Schools, John Jacobs Golf Schools and Troon Golf Signature Schools.



PERFECT MAKES PRACTICE

See if you can follow the flight of this new golf spin on an old sports cliché: Practice makes perfect if you have the perfect place to practice.

Members of the Seven Falls Golf and River Club in Hendersonville, N.C., have every advantage for showing rapid improvement in their golf games. The club's recently opened **Arnold Palmer Golf Academy** provides lucky Seven Falls members with the finest collection of facilities, technology and professional instruction to be found, perhaps, anywhere. Its 60-acre teaching campus was exclusively designed by Arnold Palmer Design Company for the specific purpose of lowering handicaps.

Its amenities include a 5,200-square-foot building that features a 3-D Motion Analysis Technology studio, Trackman Launch Monitor, V1 Professional Video Analysis, TOMI Putting Analysis System, fitness and stretching room, and club repair and fitting room. The campus offers a nine-hole teaching course, six-acre short game area, full swing and wedge practice tees, covered teaching bays and even a members' grill to replenish those burnt calories.

To add to the game-improvement nirvana, the Arnold Palmer Golf Academy is staffed by a pair of PGA Master Professionals, Mark Darnell and Pete Huber. Also on staff is PGA member Matt Adamski, a golf fitness expert certified by the Titleist Performance Institute. Adamski is also a certified club repair technician and club fitting specialist.

"We contacted seven or eight different golf academies around the U.S. and talked to their directors of instruction and directors of golf," says Darnell. "I asked them if you had a blank sheet, if you were going to build your ideal golf academy, what would you have in it?"

"We took all of that information, compiled it and came up with a master plan," says Darnell. "And that is what we have here. Some academies have 75 percent of what we have, but there are none, to the best of my knowledge, with everything that we have. That is what makes this learning experience so different and unique."