

PRACTICE





17 Getting Better at Getting Better

So you've been bitten by the golf bug. You love the challenge of sending a tiny ball three or four football fields down the fairway toward a hole barely 3.75 inches wide. You've taken a few lessons, bought some clubs, and started playing with friends. Now what? How do you actually get better?

Anyone who has played a sport or an instrument knows the truth: Skill comes from practice. As the old saying goes, How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice. Practice. Practice.

The Transition From Tennis to Golf

When I moved from tennis to golf, I was baffled. In tennis, I had one racket and one ball. Golf hands you fourteen clubs, each with a different loft, lie, and purpose. The only club you use on every hole is the putter.

As a teen tennis player, I spent hours pounding balls against a wall. Naturally, I tried to bring that same approach to golf. I hit bucket after bucket on the range, mostly drivers, with the occasional fairway wood or 7-iron thrown in. I thought that was practice. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Why Range Routines Don't Translate to the Course

Golf demands confidence, but confidence comes from control and consistency, not from mindlessly hitting balls. Tennis

HEADWAY

courts are identical, golf courses are not. Every hole, lie, slope, and wind condition changes the demands on your skill set.

Most golfers at my club arrive 25-35 minutes before their tee time, hit 20-30 balls, roll a few putts, and call it “practice.” But that’s not practice. That’s warming up.

Intentional Practice: The Real Game-Changer

Intentional practice is different. It improves technique, builds control, and creates consistency. And when you combine those three, confidence follows. Control plus consistency equals confidence.

A typical 23 handicap golfer hits 93-100 shots per round:

- 18 tee shots
- 14 fairway shots
- 12 approach shots
- 3-4 bunker shots
- 8-10 chips or pitches
- 38-42 putts

93 to 100 shots

Add it up: 65% of your shots are inside 100 yards. Does your practice routine reflect that? Probably not. Most golfers don’t invest in intentional practice, and many simply don’t know how.

The NAPS Experiment

At my club, we have two women’s groups: the competitive 18 holers and the more social 9 holers. I’m at the course often, and I rarely see either group practicing. One exception is Lisa, an 18 holer who heads straight to the range after her round, usually to hit her driver, which represents only 13-14% of the game.

Meanwhile, our VIPS—post college players chasing Tour dreams—practice with purpose. They calculate carry distances,

grind on short game, and spend long sessions putting. That's their job. Most amateurs don't have six hours a day to dedicate to practice. But they can learn how to practice smarter.

Last year, I suggested the 9 holers schedule monthly practice sessions. They embraced the idea and even named it NAPS: Niners Achieving Practice Success. We met twice a month from 3:30-5:00 followed by refreshments. Inspired by an LPGA pro's themed clinics—Putting & Pinot, Sandshots & Sangria, Chipping & Chardonnay—we created our own fun, social, educational sessions.

The players learned where they were losing shots, discovered that most of their game lived inside 100 yards, and realized that chasing more distance off the tee wasn't the best return on investment. We practiced in groups, added game like pressure, and built skills from green to tee. Their confidence soared.

A Simple Shift That Changed Everything

One breakthrough came when players learned to apply their club distances logically on the course. Many admitted they grabbed their longest club after their tee shot even when they had 165+ yards left and no club for that distance. They were swinging “for distance,” often straight into hazards.

We identified each player's “happy place,” their favorite approach distance, and worked backward. Instead of forcing a long club, they chose the club that would reliably get them to that comfortable yardage. That one adjustment gave them more control and better scores.

One husband even stopped me on the range to say thank you. His wife now wanted to practice, and they were having fun doing it together.

A Rain Delay, a Pamphlet, and a Breakthrough

For years, my own practice routine was a mix of tee shots, chipping, and putting with the occasional bunker session or

HEADWAY

late day on course practice. The return on investment was... fine. But not great.

Then, during a rain delay at the Florida State Amateur, I found a small, old pamphlet in the ladies' locker room: "Improve Your Golf...with This New Golf Analyzer." The publication was compliments of The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States. My initial thought was that it was either a gift to insurance clients or a tee gift for a golf tournament. Whatever the reason I was intrigued.

The pamphlet had sections and tips from famous golfers of the era:

- John Battini, Olympic Country Club in San Francisco offered advice on "Planning the Round," what we now call "Course Management."
- Chuck Harbert, Meadowbrook Country Club, Northville, MI shared tips on driving distance.
- Byron Nelson, Roanoke, TX presented tips on hitting your long irons.
- Cary Middlecoff, Kiamesha Lake, NY talked about hitting greens.
- Julious Boros, Mid-Pines Club, Southern Pines, NC shared achieving backspin.
- Sam Snead, Greenbrier Country Club, White Sulphur Springs, WV talked about chipping from the fringe.
- Gene Littler, Palm Springs, CA suggested that players wait for the club head in putting.
- Babe Zaharias shared his insights on The Enjoyment of Golf.

The tips came from some of the greatest golfers of that era. Today, you'd find similar wisdom in *Golf Digest* or other major golf publications. The advice was timeless.

But the real treasure in that old pamphlet wasn't the tips—it was the chart tucked right in the middle. It was remarkably detailed, filled with codes for different types of shots, along with yardages and locations. The idea was brilliant: analyze a round by gathering intentional data. The problem was execution. It was anything but simple.

Many golfers take lessons, and the first question a pro or coach usually asks is, “What do you want to work on?” The most common answer: “I don't know, I'm just playing bad.”

I knew most golfers wouldn't complete something that cumbersome during a round. So I went to work creating a streamlined version. I tested it myself, then asked a few students to try it. The feedback was consistent: still too complicated, still too time-consuming. Not the outcome I was hoping for. Back to the drawing board.

As a mental conditioning coach, the last thing I wanted was for players to lose focus by filling out a tedious form. So I trained myself to gather data directly on a regular scorecard. That meant developing a shorthand for the shots that actually happen on the golf course—expanding beyond the usual “fairways hit, greens in regulation, and putts” to include more meaningful process data. And it all had to remain value-neutral. No judgment. No “good” or “bad.” Just information.

The Intentional Practice Process

That's where the Intentional Practice Process was born. The next chapter will show you how to collect the data that will ultimately shape your practice plan.

The next section gives you a tool to answer that question with clarity. You'll learn where to devote your practice time, and you'll begin to feel the control and consistency that build genuine confidence.

And there it is—the full circle back to mental conditioning.