

Diary of a Reformed Duffer

TURNAROUND LESSONS LEARNED AT A GOLFING BOOT CAMP

By David K. Hurst

*"If you watch a game, it's fun. If you play it, it's recreation.
If you WORK at it, it's golf."*

BOB HOPE

When it comes to performance improvement, golf and management share a deep affinity. Put a copy of *Fortune* next to an issue of *Golf Digest* and the similar missions of the cover stories, images, and headlines are striking. Whether the challenge is avoiding bogeys or cajoling boards, both publications strive to make us feel we are playing at the top of our game and "in the zone." But magazines' ability to transfer the secrets and skills of success in business or golf is limited. I've played golf since age 12 and have been in business management — doing it and studying it — nearly all my working life, and I can't recall an instance of the "secrets" of Sam (Snead or Walton) or Jack (Nicklaus or Welch) being successfully transplanted whole, either in me or in others. Behavior in golf and in management is transformed by experience, not by the impact of other people's ideas alone. General Electric's rigorous Work-Out program demanded changes in the habitual behaviors of its fast track executives; in golf, our habits must be replaced the same way — through our own hard work. Once the correct movements are discovered, they must be drilled into place until they are second nature; quick fixes imposed from outside don't last.

Good coaches can help by supplying feedback and imposing discipline. And so on a harsh winter morning last January, I found myself boarding a plane from Toronto to Tampa. I was headed to golfing boot camp, a program that replicates the long hours and grinding discipline of military boot camps where new recruits are broken in. This five-day workout was led by my Ontario-based golf pro, John E.S. Cochrane, who runs his winter program at the River Hills Golf and Country Club in Valrico, Florida. John is 40-something, six-foot-plus, and super-fit, a man who looks every inch a professional golfer, sporting knife-edge creased linen pants, shiny leather belt, wire-rimmed dark glasses, and an impossibly glossy golf shirt. With his tanned face and clipped ginger moustache, he'd need only to switch his black Titleist cap for a Smokey Bear campaign hat to morph instantly into a Marine drill sergeant.

The catalyst for subjecting myself to John's toughlove training regimen is an invitation to play in the Pro-Am competition that takes place on the sidelines of the Booz Allen Classic in June. The Classic, a PGA Tour event, will be held at the Tournament Players

Club in Potomac, Maryland. With my handicap hovering around nine and my scores headed the wrong way, I can't postpone real change any longer: I've got to get my game in gear.

Day 1: Learning to Walk, All Over Again

We gather in the lobby of the Hampton Inn at 5:45 A.M. before heading to a local bagel shop for breakfast. In addition to John and me, there are three others: Thomas and Claudia from Austria, and Brian, a hospital administrator from Toronto. This is the Austrian couple's seventh camp and the hospital administrator's fifth. I am the lone rookie. Over breakfast the pro asks each of us what our objective is for the day. I say that I "want to get better." "Everybody wants to get better," replies John. "But few people want to change. By tomorrow you will have some specific goals for improvement."

By 7:00 A.M., we are bundled up in our rain suits at the bottom of the practice range. It's damp and chilly with a heavy, cold wind blowing straight into our faces. The golf school has all the amenities, including full-length mirrors, swing plane guides, video replay, and a variety of weighted clubs and medicine balls. We stretch for an hour and a half in front of the mirrors. The idea is to separate your upper and lower body so that you can create torque on the downswing, twisting the hips through, while holding the shoulders back. "You feel as though you are making a large change," John says. "But actually, it's quite small. By putting your body into extreme poses in front of the mirror, you are much more likely to get close to where you need to be in the full swing."

For me, it feels like learning to walk again. I am wobbling all over the place, and feel incredibly weak. From the looks on my colleagues' faces, I gather they feel the same way. On the practice tee, stretched into my new extreme posture, I'm helpless, too. Believing I can get the club back to the ball requires an act of faith. Walking by each one of us and correcting our technique, John says, "The only way to know where the club head is, is to put it there. So put it there!"

After sessions of chipping and putting, it's time for lunch. During the brief meal in the clubhouse we share our reviews of the morning, then head back to the range to hit full shots to targets. It's very structured practice — five shots to different targets with each club, working our way up to the driver. Then John tells us we are going out to the course. "At last," I think, "we are going to play some golf!" I am briefly paired with Brian, who shares the same sentiment. "For heaven's sake," he says in a low voice to me as we head out on the cart, "focus on what you are doing; if John thinks we have lost our concentration we'll all be back in front of those damn mirrors!" Out on the course, when my mind wanders for an instant, my body defaults to its old habits. The results are horrible scuffs, hosel-rockets, and a few near-whiffs. "When you lose focus on what you have to do," John says, "you start to teach your mind the wrong things. You have to get that focus back before either practicing or playing again."

So it's back to the mirrors, back to the practice tee, and then back to the mirrors again. By the end of the day, after 11 hours of concentrated effort, I feel completely drained. I have

been so wound up in my own struggle that I have barely noticed what the others have been doing. Annealed by hot towels and relaxed by a few beers at a Japanese restaurant, we have our chance to share what we are learning. Each has been working hard on something. Afterward, I take a hot bath and down some aspirin, and am fast asleep by 8:30 P.M.

Day 2: Do, See, Fix, Feel, Redo

The forecast is for several hours of frost in the morning, but that's no problem: John sends us to Gold's Gym at 6:00 A.M. for a two-hour workout. (He greets us there brimming with energy. He's already been at the gym for an hour, pumping iron.) Our exercise regime is based on research from the Titleist Performance Institute that shows that most recreational golfers can't play the game effectively because their bodies are not flexible enough. Even if they knew what to do, they couldn't do it. It's the same in business; if you don't have flexible people, they can't work together, and that means your organization will never be able to make strong, coordinated moves.

After a short warm-up session we start doing guided stretching in the mirrors. The sequence goes like this: DO (produce what you think is the position); SEE (see the position in the mirror and compare it with where you should be); FIX (assume the right position); FEEL (feel the right position); REDO (produce the right position using the feelings you just created). It reminds me a lot of the famous Deming/Shewhart Plan-Do-Check-Act quality model. Like the stages of any other process, the swing positions are done one by one and then repeated in slow motion. Once we are doing them correctly, John adds weights to us, to help us "burn" the feelings in. At the end of the session I'm exhausted and my muscles are burning, but a reward of carbs and coffee helps.

At 8:45 A.M. we are back on the range again. The day consists of a mix of stretching, drills, ball striking, and course play. The new positions, which I grope for on the practice tee, once again elude me out on the course. Any hint of focusing on either the ball or the result of a shot creates an immediate disaster. Focus on the process," John reiterates. "Getting emotional about results gets in the way of understanding what you have to do." (I wish he'd been there to explain that to some of my former bosses.) But it's easy for him to say; his results are great. When I contrast my miserable new outcomes with my semi-competent, precamp swing, my frustration turns to anger. I am not mad at John, just mad at myself — why can't I do what I have to do? I know the answer, too: "Change," I mutter, "begins with a crisis, and a loss of competence, and the failure of old habits to produce the right results. Only when those things happen are you compelled to change."

Even after another long, mentally draining day, I notice that my body is not quite as tired as it was on Day 1. We ease into another pleasant dinner, and another excellent discussion. The boot-campers all go for a hot bath, aspirin, and bed. Not our leader, though. After dinner John goes back to the gym. His work habits remind me of the behaviors of Type A personalities I've known, especially those of some of my old bosses.

Day 3: I Thought I Made the Right Moves

On the range today I am paying better attention to the moves I have to make. Out on the course, though, my old preoccupation with the destination of the ball returns with a vengeance. I hit one good drive but the very next one I skank into a lake. “Why was that shot bad? What changed?” asks John. “I am not sure,” I reply. “I thought I made the right moves.” “When you say ‘thought,’ it means you don’t know,” says John. “You have to put your hands and the club where you want them to be throughout the swing. That first good drive switched your focus from internal to external — what changed between the two shots was your mind.”

As John puts me into new positions and removes the primary faults, I feel stripped of all my strengths. But what I think are strengths are actually bad habits, feeding a false sense of competence, which is now impeding my ability to improve. It’s just like organizational behavior: Former strengths gradually become weaknesses. Yet they are so hard to let go! I do notice, however, that I am not scoring badly. The ball is usually near the fairway or the green, and my chipping and putting are getting better. At dinner we share stories of our progress and a running joke about another golfer who was on the greens with us this week. Later, we all head off for our hot bath, aspirin, and early bed. John, of course, is back in the gym. Does the guy have a stunt double?

Day 4: I Know What I Have to Do

Another early start, but the weather is warmer, and we can take off our rain gear. (Back in Toronto it’s still freezing, with flurries of snow. The courses won’t open for two more months.) We start with the chipping green, and I am feeling more competent, for the first time in a few days. I hear a new mantra: Know what you have to do, see what you have to do, feel what you have to do, and then do what you have to do. We take two practice swings looking at the hole, then one swing looking at the spot where we plan to land the ball. And then we chip, making the same movement with a flat left wrist. And if you do it like that, you get exactly what you practice! At the range, my pitching is starting to come together. On the course, I am still struggling with the full swing — but with my chipping and putting much improved, I can usually get up and down around the green in three shots or less.

Day 5: Only Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

Although I’m tired, my body is starting to feel more limber and I can get into the positions more easily. I still have trouble with the full swing, but on the video I can see the change in my lower body torque; my moves are much better than they were only four days ago. Sure I have more to do, but I have new feedback to guide me. I can set myself up in front of a mirror so that I can practice the right poses and put the club in position. My arms are gaining strength and I am better at holding the weighted club in the proper positions. My ball striking still isn’t what it should be, but amazingly, I am scoring much better. Put me within 80 yards of the green and I now feel that I should get on, and even have a chance of getting up and down. We go to an excellent local steakhouse, with a fine

wine list, for our last dinner. For this, John has given himself the night off from the gym. Round the table, the talk and toasts are all about golf and the camp: Claudia, Thomas, Brian, and I are fast friends. It's amazing that after five solid days of golf we are still talking about the game. But we have also shared a great deal about discipline — setting clear goals for improvement, staying focused on the process, and learning through feedback. There's a real feeling that, as golfers, we have all grown and changed.

The boot camp really taught me how to practice effectively by creating timely, specific, visceral feedback on my actions. I reflect, again, on how this process of change — learning — applies in golf and management. It also helps greatly to be with a small group of fellow learners who have a sense of humor and who celebrate successes and commiserate in failures. The truth is that only perfect practice makes perfect, so first one has to learn how to practice perfectly.

Once you can do this, however, in golf as in management, the harder you work, the luckier you get. So, with a little luck, and my scoring headed the right way, I'm aiming to be at the top of my game when it's time to play with the pros at the Booz Allen Classic!

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Postscript: The Booz-Allen Classic was held at Avenel, MD during the week June 15-June 29 2006. Unfortunately I had to fly back from China on the 17th and was severely jet-lagged on the 19th when the pro-am was held. Our pro was Nicholas Thompson, whose sister, Lexi Thompson, is now tearing up the LPGA tour. He was very pleasant and hit the ball a prodigious distance. I played OK but was still struggling with my swing. Then it started to rain and eventually we got in only 14 holes in two sessions. The tournament itself did not finish until June 27 because of all the rain. It was won by Ben Curtis. It was the last year that Booz-Allen sponsored the tournament.