

Discovering Golf's Innermost Truths: A New Approach to Teaching the Game

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

In his interesting and thought-provoking article, Peter Lightbown advocates an alternative approach to teaching the golf swing based on the development of what he termed the “innermost building blocks of effective movement” (p. 77) – balance, relaxation and rhythm. As acknowledged, his approach is strongly influenced by the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Sensory Awareness, yoga and Tai chi, but like many approaches in science and medicine that could be described as being ‘New Age’ or Eastern, the supposed performance benefits afforded by this approach need to be empirically, rather than anecdotally, verified before it can be fully accepted. Only then can it challenge existing approaches to teaching the golf swing and become more commonplace in golf coaching.

FOCUS OF ATTENTION

A potential issue with this instructional approach is that it appears to be concerned with principles not methods – it suggests that a proficient golf swing should be well-balanced, relaxed and have good rhythm, but does not provide (seemingly intentionally) any technical information about how these key characteristics might be achieved. In fact, Lightbown suggests that ‘good’ technique will spontaneously emerge through the enhancement of sensory awareness, which can apparently be facilitated by the use of a more internal focus of attention and through the execution of drills with closed eyes, partial swings, slow-motion exercises, and simple breathing strategies. Although Lightbown reports some success using this so-called ‘awareness approach’, the published literature seems to suggest that an external focus of attention (focusing on the effect of a movement), not an internal focus of attention (focusing on the movement itself), might be superior at enhancing the learning, retention and performance of golf strokes [1]. Indeed, it has been argued that an internal focus of attention may interfere with ubiquitous self-organising processes that underpin emergent patterns of coordination and control during goal-directed

action [2]. Again, further experimental studies are required to confirm the effectiveness of Lightbown's approach to teaching the golf swing, particularly in light of these and other recent developments in the focus of attention literature (see [3] for a comprehensive review).

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND THE MYTH OF THE 'IDEAL SWING'

Lightbown's claim that existing methods of teaching the golf swing are "destructive of natural talent" (p. 77) is interesting but rather contentious. Although I agree with his sentiment, I would suggest that any perceived destruction of natural talent is more likely to be attributable to the inappropriate or poor application of existing methods rather than these methods themselves being incorrect or erroneous. Far too often golf instructors attempt to apply or enforce the 'ideal' golf swing advocated in the coaching manual or the technique of a champion performer on their students irrespective of individual differences, for example, in physical, physiological, morphological and psychological makeup. From an evolutionary perspective, we are more alike than we are different so golf swings used by different golfers will look broadly similar. However, owing to differences in the internal and external constraints impinging on individual golfers [4, 5], there will invariably be qualitative and quantitative differences in movement patterns both within and between golfers (see [6] for a full discussion of the role of constraints in shaping the golf swing). The unique confluence of constraints on individual golfers explains why many golfers have their own unique 'signature' and indicates why the 'one-size-fits-all' approach might be an ineffective instructional strategy. As Lightbown implies, golf instructors need to be much more tolerant of, and even embrace, idiosyncrasies and individualities in technique, not coach them out. However, this does present a dilemma for coaches: if golfers can swing the club differently - yet still perform proficiently - how do we assess technique and identify faults in order to improve it? I believe this is *the* main issue in golf instruction, especially at the elite level.

CONCLUSION

The awareness approach outlined by Peter Lightbown contrasts with more traditional approaches to teaching the golf swing that might be considered too mechanistic. Although the basis of this alternative approach appears to be somewhat at odds with current knowledge on motor skill acquisition, this does not mean it should be discarded without consideration. Before this approach can be fully accepted, however, a systematic programme of experimental research work is required to empirically verify these alleged performance benefits.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Paul Glazier is a consultant sport and human movement scientist with over a decade of experience. He has over thirty research publications and has serviced numerous sports organisations and professional athletes, including a gold-medal winning Olympian. Paul is also a long-drive golf professional. He has had several victories on the European Long-Driving Tour and has competed in the RE/MAX World Long Drive Championship Finals in Las Vegas, Nevada.