

## Fixing Your Swing, and So Much More

by Josh Dean  
The New York Times

I am a better putter than Vijay Singh.



This is not entirely true; in fact, I'm pretty sure it would be patently false in practice. But according to the stats spit out by Mike Shannon's computerized putting-analysis gizmo, I am technically PGA Tour-caliber with my putter. After aligning a ball atop a small white dot on the floor, Shannon aimed a laser at the ball and had me putt five times at a cup. All but one tumbled into the hole. Afterward, his computer churned out a sheet of numbers measuring aim, angle, acceleration, speed of stroke and the squareness of the putter face at impact. Shannon laid the sheet next to those of four of the 69 PGA Tour pros - including Singh - who have come through this very school for help. I was as good or better in every category save rhythm, which means I was slower in my backswing than in the follow-through. Otherwise, I'm a darn fine putter. A small consolation.

The rest of my golf game is in shambles. Which is what brought me to Shannon, perhaps the country's foremost putting expert and an instructor behind the Golf Improvement Plan, an innovative program that approaches instruction from a holistic perspective. Great golf, the theory goes, is about so much more than just a perfect swing. Along with Shannon, there are two of Golf Digest's "50 Greatest Teachers", Jack Lumpkin and Todd Anderson; Randy Myers, a progenitor of golf-specific fitness programs; and Dr. Mo (aka Morris Pickens), the school's sports psychologist. "It's like the Yankees," Myers says of the group. "We have an all-star at every position."

The Golf Improvement Plan is based at the Sea Island Golf Learning Center on Georgia's idyllic St. Simons Island. A hometown pro, Davis Love III, plays here, and it's the kind of swank place that spares no expense, starting with the equipment doled out to its in-house club fitters. The first morning, two of them parked me in front of a \$32,000 Doppler radar launch monitor, which tracks the speed and flight of your ball, and

watched me hit. They found that my irons were poorly matched to my swing. I knew it had to be the clubs.

Over three broiling June days, the instructors passed me from class to class, focusing on different elements of my game: putting, full swings, the intricacies of chip and pitch shots. I also received coaching in the less commonly taught areas of golf fitness and the mental game. Pickens put on his red baseball cap and took me out on the course, scrawling notes as he observed things like my pre-shot routine and the way in which I dealt with bad shots. Throwing my clubs: not recommended.



While the overall balance that Sea Island seeks to provide is probably better suited to a lower handicapper (I'm about a 28), I found the expertise of the swing coaches incredibly helpful. Lumpkin, for instance, sized me up, harrumphed and filmed my swing. Back in his office, he loaded the DVD player. "Your aim is atrocious," he said, pointing first to where I thought I was aiming (at a pin about 150 yards off the tee) and then to where I was actually aiming (at a clump of trees 45 degrees to the right). "You're aiming at Libya. I need you aiming at France."

Lumpkin is the type of old-timer who is alternately sunny and surly, a veritable textbook on two legs who rarely tells an anecdote that doesn't begin with a legend of the game ("I remember when I was working with Claude Harmon at Winged Foot..."). This is a guy who routinely helps pros, who come in with problems far smaller than aiming at the wrong continent.

How can I even play as well as I do, I asked, if I'm never pointed straight?

"Any good athlete will find a way to hit the ball," he said. "But if you're in the wrong position, your body will do all the wrong things in order to hit the ball."

By that afternoon, my aim and my grip had been fixed. The swing? A work in progress.

## **Where to Go to Get Better Fast**

### **Sea Island Golf Learning Center**

The nationally acclaimed Golf Learning Center has a number of programs, from a \$450 half-day school to the one plus ultra: the three-day Golf Improvement Plan (\$3,300, lodging not included). Students enjoy access to three world-class courses.  
[www.seaisland.com](http://www.seaisland.com)

### **GOLF54®**

Pia Nilsson, Annika Sorenstam's mental coach, co-established this school with Lynn Marriott, an instructor, at Arizona's Legacy Golf Resort. Aimed at players who have a handicap under 18 and are struggling to go lower, their program starts from the belief that it's possible to birdie every hole during a round of golf.  
\$1,695 for three days, lodging not included.

### **Butch Harmon School of Golf**

Tiger Wood's former coach runs this school out of the Rio Secco Golf Club outside Las Vegas and combines cutting-edge technology (for swing analysis and club fitting) with lessons that date back to his father, the legendary Claude Harmon. From \$2,400 for two days with staff instructors (lodging included) to \$5,900 for three days with Harmon himself.  
[www.butchharmongolfschools.com](http://www.butchharmongolfschools.com)