

## Lessons in Golf and Life

Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott helped me become my own best coach.

by Annika Sorenstam

Photographed by Stephen Szurlej

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Pia Nilsson, my former Swedish National Team coach, has been my mentor, friend and role model for almost 20 years. She is my mirror, someone I can bounce ideas off at any time. Pia never tells me what to do; on the contrary, she asks questions, lots of questions. Sometimes they're difficult to hear, but after thinking about them, I usually come to the same conclusion: She's right on track. She always helps me see things more clearly.

Here's an example: Early in 2006, I changed my pre-putt routine. Instead of taking my practice strokes behind the ball – facing the hole – as I had done in previous years, I started rehearsing my stroke to the side of the ball. Pia first noticed it watching on TV while I was playing an event in Mexico. By the time I arrived at the Kraft Nabisco Championship two weeks later, she was concerned. I wasn't putting well, and she was sure it was because of my new routine.

“Tell me, why are you doing this?” she asked me after the second round.

As I started to explain, I could hear myself thinking, “Why did I change? It's not working.” On Saturday, I went back to my old routine, and putted much better over the next two rounds to finish in a tie for sixth place.

For me to make a change in the middle of a major championship speaks volumes about my relationship with Pia and how much I trust her opinion.



Pia Nilsson (to my right), Lynn Marriott (to my left) and I share many of the same philosophies.

I first met Lynn Marriott, now Pia's partner in their company, VISION54®, in 1993 at a training camp for the Swedish team in Phoenix. She quickly became a mentor and friend as well. She and Pia have

very similar beliefs to my own, not just in golf, but in life. We share the same vision – that it's possible to birdie every hole and shoot 54, and that there are no limits to what you can achieve. In many ways, I'm the embodiment of their coaching philosophies.

I developed the following core beliefs over the years, and many have taken shape from conversations I've had with Pia and Lynn. They are practical for any golfer, and will simplify the game for you and make you a smarter, more focused player.

### **Lesson 1: Be Open to Feedback**

Pia Nilsson and Annika Sorenstam

After talking with Pia, I went back to my old putting routine. I'm always trying to improve: If I shoot 65, I want to know what I can do to shoot 64. It's important to have a trusted friend or an instructor who will give you feedback – in bad times and good. When Pia sees something that troubles her, or if she thinks my attitude could improve, she'll tell me. Conversely, if she sees something she likes, she lets me know, because when you get positive feedback, it reinforces the good emotions you feel and encourages you to recreate those feelings as much as possible.

Pia and Lynn say...

Most players would have listened to the advice at the Nabisco and made a change six tournaments later or would have waited until the off-season. Annika will interpret information and do something about it immediately. So if this is the year you decide

to improve your short game, don't waste time talking about it. Take action.

## **Lesson 2: Establish a Reliable Pre-Shot Routine**

Pia has taught me to save my energy for things I can control. One of those things is my pre-shot routine. A good routine has two vital purposes, it puts you in the right frame of mind (i.e. the present), so you're less worried about the result and more focused on the shot at hand. It also establishes a positive mind-set for your swing. Because you've performed the routine hundreds of times before, it's familiarity will put you at ease. The swing follows naturally.

### **Annika's preshot routine**

Annika Sorenstam

"I take one practice swing to get loose and find my rhythm." My routine takes about 24 seconds. I start by placing my hand on my bag; that's my cue to begin. Next, I grab the club I'm going to hit, stand a few feet behind the ball and visualize the shot I want to play. I take one practice swing to get loose and find my rhythm, and then walk to the ball, where I set my feet, relax my arms and look at the target one last time. I take just four or five seconds over the ball. This way, there's no time to overthink the shot. I just swing away.

Pia and Lynn say...

Try not to focus on the other players in your group. Very rarely do you see Annika watching her competitors swing while she's waiting to hit. The reason is simple: if she's paying attention to someone else's game, she's not focusing on her own. You can be negatively influenced by another player's swing if they hit the ball farther than you do or if their tempo isn't the same as yours. So only watch them if there's a good reason to (e.g., you like their tempo).

## **Lesson 3: Only Hit When Ready**

Annika Sorenstam with Lynn Marriott always seem to learn a lot at the Kraft Nabisco Championship. During the third round in 1996, I was tied for the lead on the 18th hole. The group in front of us was taking forever to clear the green, and I stood there anxiously, leaning on my sand wedge. Big mistake. When my

time came to hit, I chunked the shot into the water. I scored a double-bogey 7 and lost the tournament by one shot.

I knew I should have put the wedge away while I waited. I never stand there with a club in my hand. My routine starts when I put my hand on my bag. Because I'd changed my routine, I wasn't in the right frame of mind to execute the shot. If you encounter a long delay, wait until it's your turn to hit before preparing for the shot. If the wait is longer than you anticipated, don't stand there holding a club; put it back. Turn your attention away from the green. If you have a tendency to Pia Nilsson get stiff, do some stretching exercises.

Pia and Lynn say...

Manage your routine. As a former rules official in Sweden, I wanted to help my players build time-efficient, productive routines, so I would put them on the clock. The purpose, besides avoiding slow play, was to make them aware of tendencies they might have under pressure. Annika, for example, has a tendency to rush, so it helps her to take several deep breaths and extend her routine. Being too fast or too slow is never good; find the amount of time you need to get in a state of peak performance, and keep that time consistent.

#### **Lesson 4: Play the Percentages**

Annika Sorenstam One common mistake I see among amateurs is that they're not honest with themselves about their ability to hit certain shots. They ignore the percentages and try to play a perfect shot, even if they've never hit it before. Play to your strengths, even though it may mean laying up short of the green with a 7-iron versus going for it with a fairway wood.

Always try to leave yourself in good positions. In this photo, for example, the pin is on the front left portion of a two-tiered green, but there's not much room to the left of the flag. Rather than flirt with the hazard on the left, I'm taking dead aim at the center of the green. If I'm short, I leave myself an easy uphill chip; and if I'm long, I've got a downhill putt.

Pia and Lynn say...

Take a vacation between shots. As you walk to your ball, talk with one of your playing partners about a favorite TV show or nibble on some trail mix. Don't spend that time stressing about

the previous shot or the next one – you’ll just tire yourself out very quickly. Annika doesn’t start preparing for a shot until she gets to her ball. Then she does a quick analysis of the lie, the yardage and the wind. When it’s her turn to play, she goes into her pre-shot routine; then she hits the ball.

## **Lesson 5: Practice with Purpose**

Annika Sorenstam with Lynn Marriott

“You rarely draw perfect lies around the greens, so why practice them?”

The time I’ve spent with Pia and Lynn has shaped many of my habits. One thing they’ve always stressed was practicing with a purpose. During practice rounds, I’ll ask my caddie, Terry McNamara, to toss several balls into the thickest, nastiest rough he can find around the green (Lynn is doing the honors here). The idea is to simulate conditions you’ll encounter during tournament play. You rarely draw perfect Annika Sorenstamlies around the greens, so why practice them?

Pia and Lynn say...

Spend at least half your practice time simulating playing conditions. Change lies, clubs, targets and distances; don’t replay the same shot until you get it right. If you’re practicing around the green, use one ball and play it until you hole out with your putter. Go through your normal routines before each shot as if you were playing for real. If you want to play better golf, you need to practice better golf.

## **Lesson 6: Simplify Your Swing**

Annika Sorenstam One reason I’m able to repeat my swing is because I keep it simple. For me, it always comes down to my backswing. If I make a full turn going back, so that my back faces the target, my body unwinds naturally and the ball just gets in the way of my club. If I start thinking about my impact position or where my hands are at the finish, then I’m tinkering too much. Don’t complicate your swing; keep it simple.

Pia and Lynn say...

Focus on balance and tempo. A good drill is to hit shots with your feet together, then standing on one leg, making sure to

finish in balance. Start with a high-lofted club and smaller half-swings. Practice swinging with different tempos, from slow to fast. Which tempo allows you to swing in balance and yet still create a fair amount of clubhead speed? The more efficient you make your swing, the easier it is to repeat it under pressure.