



“The best way to make what you learn on the practice area carry over to the golf course is to bring the golf course to the range,” say coaches Lynn Marriott (left) and Pia Nilsson (right).

Practice Made Perfect

Most golfers waste their time mindlessly beating balls on the range. In *The Game Before the Game*, coaches Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott offer an innovative—and fun—approach to improving your game.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DOM FURORE

THE FASCINATING THING about Ben Hogan, the guy who pretty much invented practice, is that the stories about him don't need to be true to be accurate. Hogan stories are really parables: The point is they make a point. Take, for instance, the one about Hogan on the range, back when caddies shagged balls for players. According to legend, old Ben hit his caddie with a laserlike 1-iron shot, then hit the poor guy three more times before he got to his feet. Probably not true, but the point is this: Hogan was extremely accurate with that 1-iron, and he was extremely focused on what he was doing. He was so committed to practice he was unaware of the poor fellow shagging balls—except as a target!

Hogan transferred that intensity to the golf course. But more than that, he understand why and how practice helped his game. Unfortunately, many of us don't realize that practice needs to equate to the game, not just to the swing. The experience of practice must simulate golf as it is played on the golf course, and it is most successful when it is joyful.

The purpose of practice routines is to provide pleasurable learning. If you enjoy practice it will become a part of your life, and that will make you a better player. It's when you merge golf and practice that you will see real progress in the development of your game. You'll learn how to stop wasting time on the range and instead play better by preparing better. You'll remember the reason you play is because you love golf, not because you love swing theory.

The first notion you need in order to get the most out of your practice—in order to maximize the return on investment for the time and energy you are putting into the process—is that practice *is* golf. Separating the two is a mistake made by the beginner right up to touring professionals. Hitting golf balls is not practice. It is merely hitting golf balls. For practice to be beneficial it needs to have a purpose, just like a round of golf.

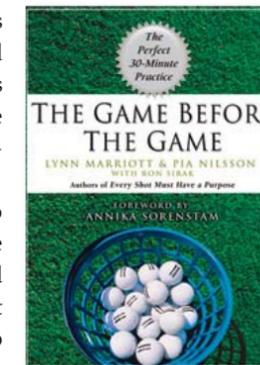
The best way to make what you learn on the practice area carry over to the golf course is to bring the golf course to the range. Change targets when you practice. Change clubs often. Think. All you do when you mindlessly hit balls is groove a sloppy swing and ingrain sloppy thinking.

There are three types of practice that will make you a better player and lower your score: warm-up practice, maintenance practice and preparation practice. Warm-up practice is what you do before you play a round of golf. And whether it is a fun round with friends or a club championship, it is important to remember that rarely during warm-up does a player suddenly learn something they didn't already know. The main objective of warm-up practice is exactly that—to warm up the muscles, engage the mind and create confidence. Maintenance practice is about maintaining your skills; it's what you do between rounds to keep your swing and your game performing

efficiently. Preparation practice is about preparing for the future. It could be getting ready for a certain type of course, it could be adding a specific shot or it could be a more drastic overhaul of your game. Our suggestion is to spend at least half your practice time in some sort of simulated situation. This can involve creative exercises in the practice area, or it can mean taking the practice area to the golf course. Ever watch a basketball team or football team practice? One thing they do is spend time scrimmaging. They practice as if they are playing.

There are endless fun and imaginative ways you can simulate golf in practice. On the following pages, we give you just a few. This is a road map to get the most from practice, and thereby, the most from your game.

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Practice As You Play

Make the golf course your learning ground.

Golf is virtually unique among sports in that we create practice areas that are not only separate from the playing area, but also radically different in their conceptual challenges. Driving ranges and practice facilities can be very useful if you learn how to make practice like you're playing golf for real. But the best place to learn golf is on the golf course.

The shots that cost us the most strokes are shots you only confront on the course. There is no out-of-bounds on the practice area. Or intimidating water hazards. Or delicate chips over a bunker to a nearside pin. Or fairways that absolutely must be hit. Or putts that absolutely must be made. These challenges all come in the course of a round of golf.

1 Analysis

TAKE STOCK OF YOUR SHORT GAME

Play a round and miss all the greens on purpose. Your ball can be long, short, in a bunker, in the rough. Anywhere. Keep score. How close can you still play to your handicap without hitting a green? What percentage of the time did you chip, pitch or hit a bunker shot close enough to one-putt? These are the kind of spontaneous shots that are difficult to reproduce in the practice area.



PIA NILSSON: POLO AND PANTS BY TALBOTS; VEST BY BROOKS BROTHERS; SHOES BY FOOTJOY. LYNN MARRIOTT: POLO BY ELLEN TRACY; PANTS BY SPORT HALEY; SHOES BY NEBULONI. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY JOY ROSS



2 Confidence

PLAY A ONE-PERSON SCRAMBLE

Play with two balls from the tee. Pick the best shot and hit two shots from there. Pick the best again and play two shots. Keep doing this until you finish the hole. Keep score and see how low you can go. Can you detect anything you do differently when you hit the better shots?

Play another one-person scramble with two balls from the tee. This time pick the one you like the least and play two shots from there. Again, pick the worst outcome of the two and continue until you hole out. Keep score. This exercise can get very difficult. How can you coach yourself to stay neutral or happy and to keep on making clear and committed decisions? Can you keep anger and frustration out of your game?

3 Strategy

PLAY A PAR 3 FROM 100 YARDS

Chipping, putting, pitching and bunker play make up the crucial part of the game. This is where golf gets down to its essence—putting the ball in the hole. Those shots from 100 yards in are the scoring shots, the place you really save strokes. One way to practice these shots is to impress upon yourself how many strokes you are leaving on the golf course. Next time you play a round of golf, keep track of how many times you have a shot from 100 yards in. Each time you are in that situation, consider it a par-3 hole. Calculate how many such par 3s you played and how many strokes over or under par you played them. You likely will be startled at the number of strokes you squandered. This is turning the golf course into a valuable practice area.



4 Attitude

EXPLORE YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Most players perform a lot better in a more positive state, but that is not true for everyone. We knew one professional who played better when he was a little negative. That revelation was a key for him. Some players can better tap into their adrenaline when they are negative. They need to learn to unleash more of it while maintaining a positive attitude. Pursuing both negative and positive attitudes will teach you a lot about yourself.

Alternate playing holes with different attitudes. On one hole be extremely positive. If you were the most confident player ever, how would you walk? How would you get ready for a shot? How

would you talk to yourself and to others? What would your body language be like?

Play the next hole as the ultimate pessimist. If you were the most negative player and had absolutely no confidence how would you talk to yourself and others? How would you prepare for the shot? What would your body language be like?

What did you learn? What do you want to do more of while playing? What do you want to do less of or even stop doing? Did you see that attitude is one of those aspects of the game that is controllable?

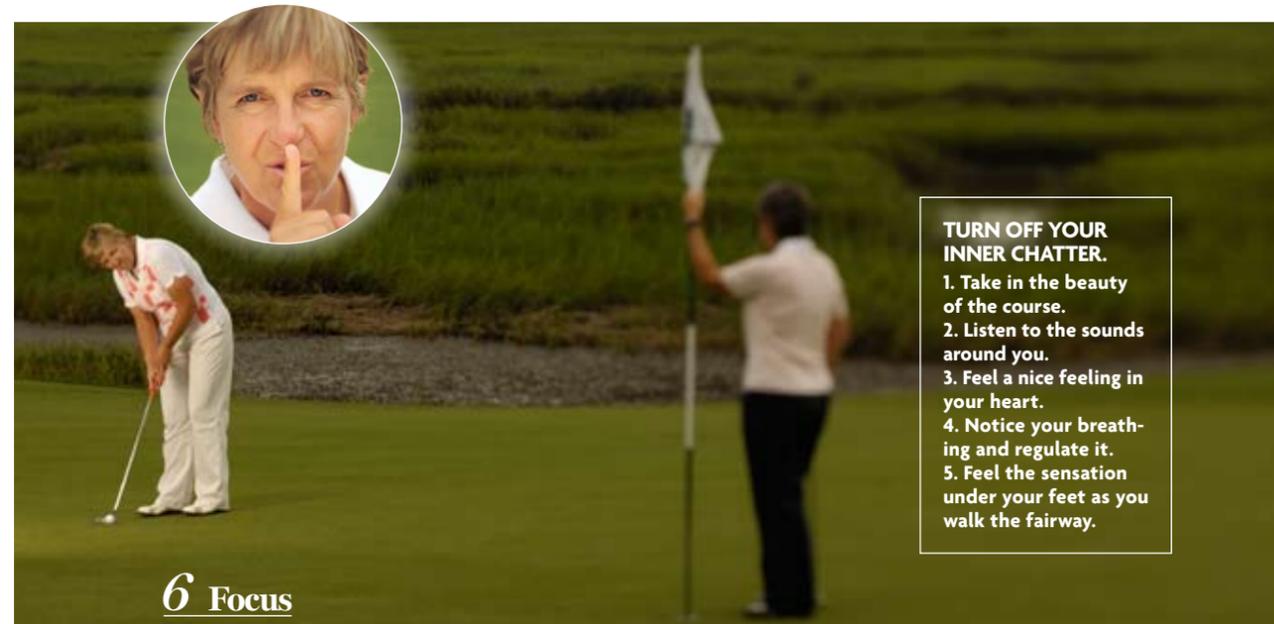


5 Creativity

ADAPT YOUR GAME

Play nine holes with only one club. Which one do you choose? Can you adapt the club, your swing and your thinking process to all the shots you have to hit with that one club?

Then play with three clubs. Which ones do you choose? Is part of your decision making trying to leave yourself a shot that is perfect for one of the three clubs you have? Perhaps you want to hit a wedge so the next shot can be a full 8-iron. Be free to experiment.



TURN OFF YOUR INNER CHATTER.

1. Take in the beauty of the course.
2. Listen to the sounds around you.
3. Feel a nice feeling in your heart.
4. Notice your breathing and regulate it.
5. Feel the sensation under your feet as you walk the fairway.

6 Focus

TURN DOWN THE VOLUME

Play a few holes in silence. That means externally and internally. No talking to others and no talking to yourself. When you notice your internal chatter start, can you get back to being present and be quieter in your head? Was it easy or hard to create silence in your head? How could this skill of being quieter in your mind help your game? ●