

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR PRACTICE

Are you just beating balls on the range? Here's how to really improve

BY MARK WOOD

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with Cliff Schrock

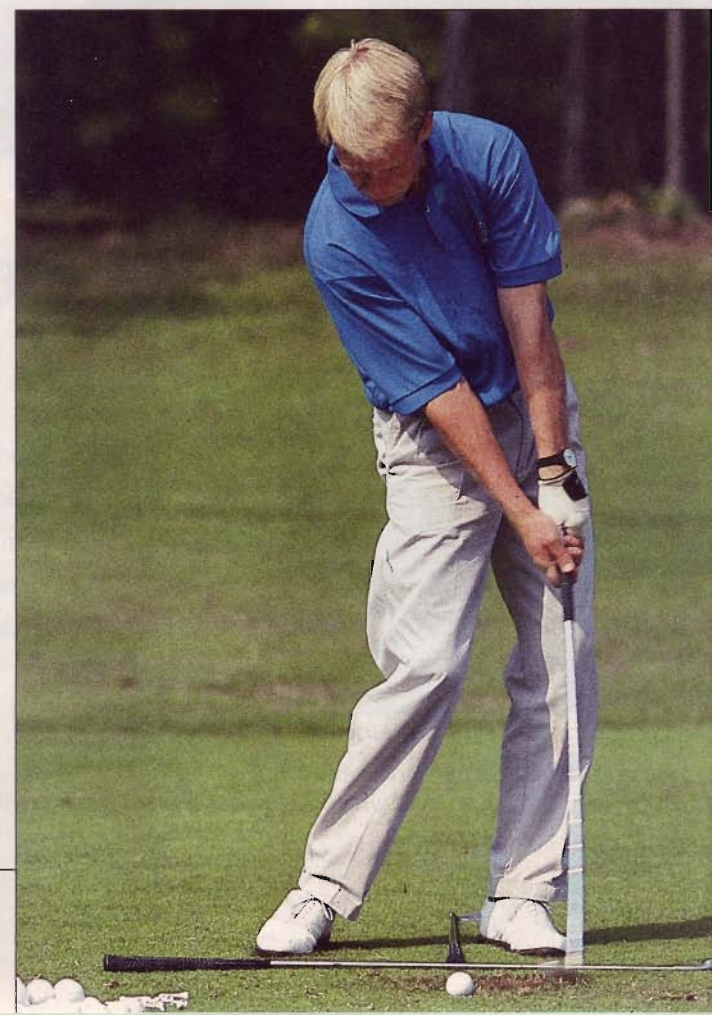


You may be losing money on your golf game even though you're not paying off a \$5 nassau. By that I mean you could be spending a lot of time on the range without getting full value for your practice dollar. You're the victim of poor practice procedures.

But don't feel bad. It's a common ailment and easily diagnosed. If you struggle to make two good swings in a row and are confused about exactly

what you should practice, then your practice routine isn't efficient and is unlikely to eliminate swing problems.

How should you practice? With a work station. That is the first of five rules I learned from the late Davis Love Jr., and the late Jimmy Hodges, who were both excellent—and efficient—teachers. These guidelines prepare you for worthwhile practice sessions, discipline your preshot routine and make time on the range fun. For focused practices, use the round-analysis chart on page 81 to determine which areas of your game need the most work. Make photocopies to use after each round. After tabulating, for example, you might see that you missed a lot of greens from 100 yards in. Thus, you'll know your short irons need some work.



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Rule 1: Practice with a station

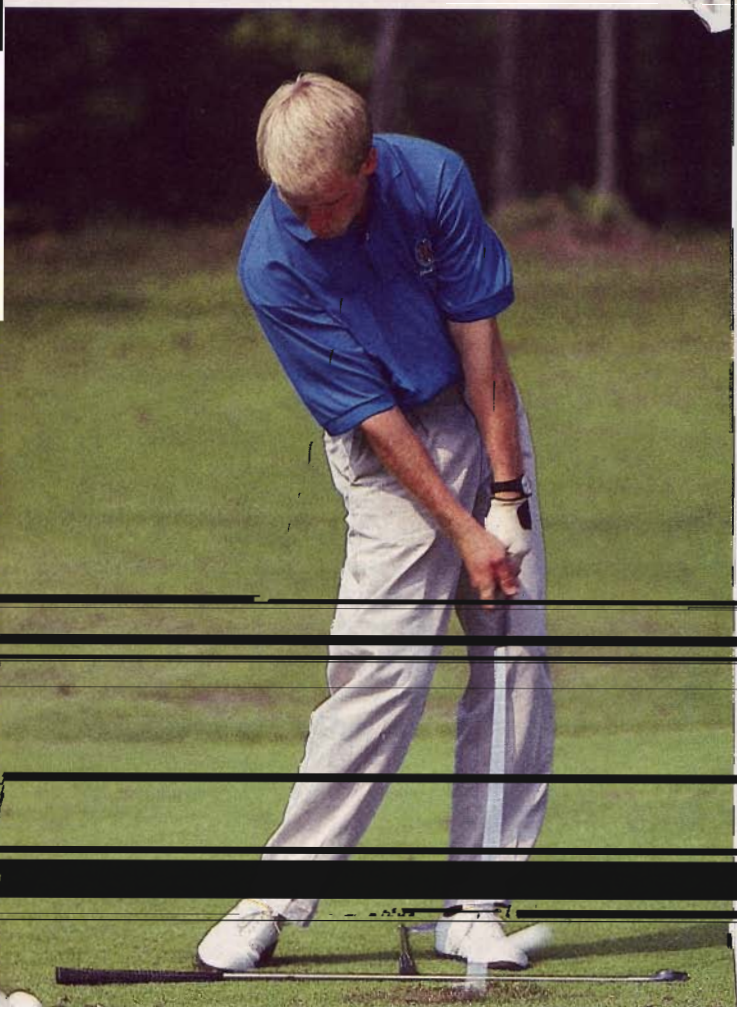
Here's a well-devised work station (**far left**). The top club is simply an aimer, the middle club aligns your feet and should be parallel with the top club. The bottom club runs perpendicular to the middle club, indicating the ball position within your stance. After aligning the clubs from down the target line, step into the station to get a view from overhead. Then, when you are ready to swing, remove the top club.

Follow this routine every time. Never practice without first aligning clubs on the ground toward a specific target, like a distant flag (**near left**). (Such alignment, of course, is not allowed by the Rules of Golf in actual play.)

Rules 2 & 3: Use practice swings, and hit more good than bad shots

Making a swing change or building consistency is never easy, so take as many practice swings as regular swings. In these photos I've made a practice swing then duplicated that feeling in my actual stroke. This is of equal importance to studying ball flight, ingraining how the swing should *feel*, rather than hitting shot after shot and watching the ball fly. This one-for-one method extends the practice time, but will help you improve quicker.

You should hit more good shots than bad shots, using a club that will get the ball in the air. That seems elementary, but look around you at a driving range and see how many people use clubs they have little or no confidence in. For poorer players this is usually a wood or long iron. Pick out the clubs you invariably hit solid (I recommend a 5-, 6- or 7-iron) and swing slower to be sure of good club/ball contact. Use a tee if you have to. The key is to hit good shots and build good habits.



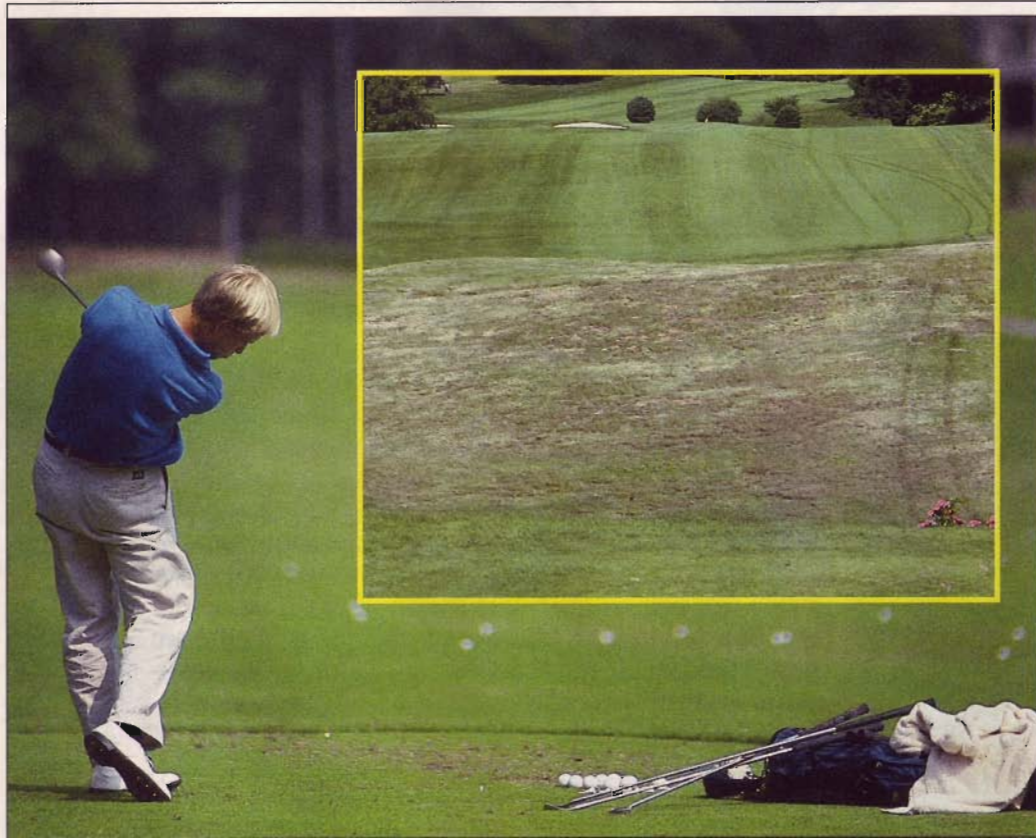
PRACTICE



Rule 4: Practice with a purpose

If your practice simply involves beating balls, stop and reevaluate. You should work on a particular phase of your game. Sure, it's possible that you could hit enough balls with a faulty swing to enjoy some success, but good practice starts with a purpose. You don't run a business without a plan, so don't run your golf game that way, either. In this regard, be orderly in your hit-

ting process. A scattered divot pattern (**above right**) tears up the turf and causes the player to move all over the place. Try, instead, to make a tight pattern (**above center**), always hitting from the back of the divot area. When you hit from the front of a divot (**above left**), you're more likely to scoop or lift the ball when practicing with an iron, rather than create a descending blow.



Rule 5: Make practice enjoyable

I recommend short, frequent practice sessions rather than occasional long ones. The more often you work on something the quicker the change will take effect. Enjoy it. Challenge yourself to figure out how certain swings cause different ball flights. Practice with a partner and have closest-to-the-target competitions. Or "play" your golf course. Visualize the tee shot on a particular hole (as I'm doing here) and play away. Watch the ball flight, imagine where you finished and what yardage you have left to the green, and hit the appropriate club. You'll stay interested *and* learn how your swing might function on the course that day. ■

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