

# LETTER FROM GOLF CAMP: DAVID OWEN

## Gotta Move Your Hips



**I** TOOK UP GOLF at the age of eleven or so, but I played it miserably and I hated it, and after a couple of years I gave it up. Then, roughly twenty-five years later, a friend invited me to play, and something clicked in my head. I spent five hundred dollars on equipment at Nevada Bob's, took some lessons, and joined the little nine-hole golf club in my town. Almost immediately, I found myself addicted to the point where I now think the greenhouse effect is good (it has extended the golf season).

I like to start out as soon as it's light enough to see. At that time of day, I'm almost always the only person on the course, except for the groundkeeper, who lives in a small house just behind the pro shop. Even when I don't see him, I find his spoor: the meandering tracks of his golf cart, his footprints near the sprinkler controls, a pocket of his cigar smoke suspended in the damp air under the trees behind the fourth green. Visible or not, he makes me nervous. He has the third lowest handicap at the club, and he always seems to turn up just before I have to hit a difficult shot. Sitting stiffly in his cart, he looks like an alarmed librarian watching a reader bend back the pages of a book. Sometimes, though, he nods or makes a slight waving motion with a hose or offers a curt observation about the weather. One morning, near a patch of rough that he was watering by hand, I came within a few inches of sinking a tricky thirty-five-foot putt. "That was a good putt, that," he said without taking the cigar out of his mouth—a comment I view as my highest achievement in the game to date.

When I play early in the morning, the greens are so wet that from a distance they look almost white. A rolling ball kicks up a plume of spray, like a car driving through a flooded parking lot. Greens that in the afternoon will be as hard and fast as bowling lanes are so slow now that I have to muscle the ball to get it near the hole. When I am finished, I can look at the ground and see an exact diagram of my putts preserved in the dew. When I have badly misread a putt, I will sometimes walk back over the line to conceal the evidence with

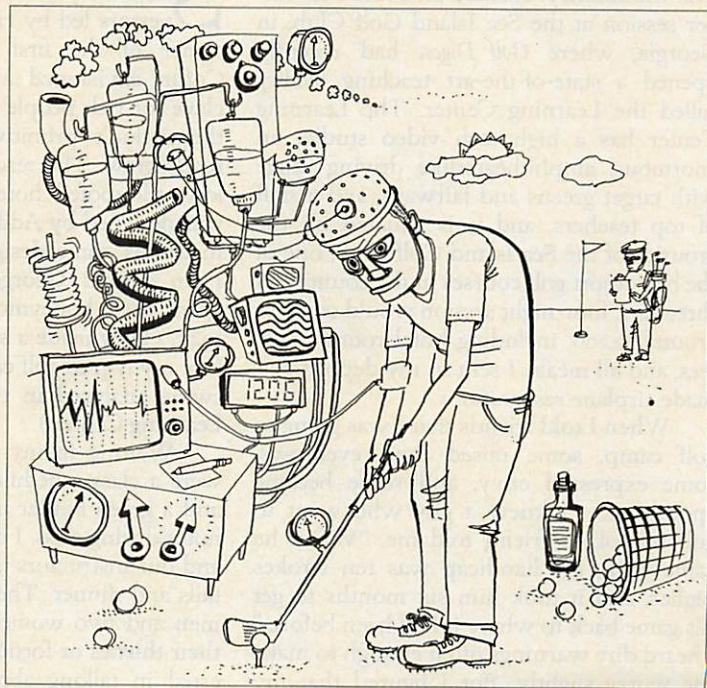
footprints. The diagrams last until the groundkeeper's sleepy teenage assistants arrive with their mowers and their Walkmans. Eyes half-closed—with steps as slow as elephants'—they erase the sad history of my putting one broad stripe at a time, clearing my account.

One of the things I like best about golf is the powerful sense of possibility. Even a lousy golfer will accidentally hit a great shot once or twice in a round. Every so often, I'll sink a long chip, drop my tee shot a foot from the pin on a par three, or hit a three wood onto a green that I normally can't reach. Other sports are different; I could swing at major-league pitches for the rest of my life and never come close to hitting a home run. But in golf there

How I  
found my  
inner child  
and turned  
my slice  
into a draw

is always the chance that the next shot, or the one after that, will be a great one. And if it can happen once, why not again? Golf lends itself to compulsion because it is whimsical. Like a pigeon pecking at a colored disk in a psychology experiment, I keep playing because every so often I am rewarded.

But not rewarded often enough, I decided last year. My game had



improved during my first season as a born-again golfer, but it seldom rose above frustrating mediocrity. I had developed a booming slice that had begun to seem indestructible, and to compensate for it I had begun to set up virtually perpendicular to the direction of the fairway. My occasional good shots were almost invariably followed by twenty-yard skulls or snap hooks out of bounds. I took lessons as often as I could, but thirty minutes never seemed like enough time to learn very much, and almost everything I did learn evaporated back on the course. I found myself wishing that I had studied golf in college, instead of wasting my physical peak on beer and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

Then, one day, as I sat in my office pretending to work, I found myself gazing dreamily at an advertisement for *Golf Digest* Instruction Schools, a sister company to the well-known magazine.

The best way to beef up my game, I immediately realized, would be to do what the touring pros do: place myself in the hands of a highly skilled teacher who would rebuild my swing from scratch. *Golf Digest* conducts roughly 150 three- and five-day schools each year at resorts and golf clubs all over the country. I settled on a mid-November session at the Sea Island Golf Club, in Georgia, where *Golf Digest* had recently opened a state-of-the-art teaching facility called the Learning Center. The Learning Center has a high tech video studio, an enormous, amphitheaterlike driving range with target greens and fairways, and a staff of top teachers, and it is situated on the grounds of the Sea Island Golf Club, one of the best resort golf courses in the country. A three-day, four-night session would come to around \$2,200, including hotel room, green fees, and all meals. I sent in my deposit and made airplane reservations.

When I told friends that I was going to golf camp, some raised their eyebrows, some expressed envy, and some became apocalyptic. "I knew a guy who went to golf school," a friend told me. "When he came back, his handicap was ten strokes higher, and it took him six months to get his game back to where it had been before." I heard dire warnings often enough to make me worry slightly. But I figured that my

game was already so lousy that the downside risk was fairly low.

During the weeks before my departure, the mail brought several packages from *Golf Digest*. One contained special scorecards that I was supposed to fill out and send in for computer analysis. (I eagerly did.) Another contained a list of the names, occupations, addresses, and handicaps of my eleven fellow students. (My handicap at the time, twenty-four, placed me roughly in the middle of the class.) Another contained a questionnaire concerning my goals as a golfer. (I said I wanted to become "consistent," even though my real goal is to qualify for the Senior Tour when I turn fifty in thirteen years.) I packed my suitcase two days early. I scrubbed the heads of my golf clubs with steel wool and dishwashing detergent. I filled the ball pocket of my golf bag with balls that cost twice as much as the kind I

usually play with. The night before I left for golf camp, I lay awake for hours, waiting for my alarm to go off. I felt as excited as if I were fifteen years old and on my way to screwing school.

SEA ISLAND was founded a little more than sixty years ago by a group of investors led by Howard Coffin, the designer of the first Hudson automobile. Coffin envisioned a secluded coastal enclave for rich people that would prosper as the nation's primitive network of paved roads grew. The resort opened in 1928. Its low, tile-roofed hotel, called the Cloister, was designed by Addison Mizner, who had made his name designing fancy houses in Palm Beach. George and Barbara Bush spent their honeymoon at the Cloister, in 1945. (They made a second visit shortly before my trip to golf camp, and Bush had his swing analyzed in the video room at the Learning Center.)

Waiting in my room when I arrived were a class schedule, a group assignment, and a green binder in which I was to take notes during class. I met my fellow students and our instructors that evening over cocktails and dinner. The class consisted of ten men and two women. Nearly all were in their thirties or forties, and none was interested in talking about anything but golf.

The instructors were Jack Lumpkin and Scott Davenport. Jack is in his fifties and looks like the good kind of high school football coach. He has a compact build and reddish-blond hair, and there is a sort of elfin twinkle in his eyes that is probably the remnant of a once-fierce competitive fire. He played on the PGA Tour in 1958 and part of 1959, but he and his wife had a baby, and there wasn't much money on the tour for him, so he turned to teaching. He has worked with a number of touring pros, including Davis Love III, whose home course is Sea Island and whose father was Jack's best friend. (Davis Love Jr. helped conceive the Learning Center; he and two other *Golf Digest* instructors died in an airplane crash four years ago.)

Davenport, who is in his midthirties, never played on the tour, although he has the look: skinny as a finger, permanently tanned. He has been with *Golf Digest* since 1981, and he lives near Sea Island with his wife and their two young children. He has worked with Tom Kite, Tom Purtzer, and several other prominent touring pros. Scott and Jack both contribute regularly to *Golf Digest*. Indeed, the faces of both were familiar to me from the hours of feverish study I had devoted to that magazine. The last time I read more than a few pages of any text that did not have something to do with golf was April of 1991.

Class began the following morning at 8:30. Our golf bags had materialized on the driving range sometime before, and each was leaning in its own stand beside a folding chair that had a towel draped over its back and a white *Golf Digest* hat sitting on its seat. Hanging from the handle of my bag was a *Golf Digest* tag with my name on it. Pinned to my sweater was a *Golf Digest* pin. How could I help but improve?

Jack told us to warm up by hitting a few short irons. Then, one by one, we went to the far end of the tee to be videotaped from two angles while hitting two shots with a five iron and two shots with whatever club we usually used off the tee. These shots would give Scott and Jack the basis for an initial diagnosis, and they would provide a base line against which we would later be able to measure our progress.

When I stepped in front of the camera to hit my first shot, I felt as nervous as if I were teeing off on national television. I topped the first ball, and it trickled over the front edge of the practice tee. Jack rewound the tape and told me to try again. I managed

"I could do this for the rest of my life," Bill, a fellow camper, said, and we all agreed.

to get the next four shots into the air, but all of them sliced to varying degrees. That is, they curved to the right. (For a left-handed golfer, a slice curves to the left.) Every golf swing imparts spin to the ball, and the nature of that spin determines the path of the ball's flight. Slicing spin generally happens when the club head sweeps across the ball from outside to inside as it strikes it. A moderate, controlled slice is called a fade. All good golfers intentionally hit fades at least occasionally, and quite a few good golfers—Curtis Strange and Bruce Lietzke, for example—hit fades most of the time. But fading and slicing are different things, and my characteristic shot—like the characteristic shot of most crummy golfers—was definitely a slice. One of Jack's goals during school, he told me later, would be to turn my slice into a draw, which is a shot that starts out slightly to the right of the target and bends back toward it to the left. A draw is the opposite of a fade. It is the moderate, controlled version of a hook, which is a shot that curves powerfully and hopelessly to the left.

After the taping, Jack and Scott conducted a joint session on grip, setup, and other fundamentals, and then we broke into two groups. My group, the high handicappers, went with Scott for a lesson in the short game. The low handicappers stayed with Jack to work on full swings. Scott checked our grips, then set about teaching us to chip. At one point, to demonstrate what he wanted us not to do, he tried to skull a shot—to mis-hit the ball in a way that would send it rocketing out of control across the large practice green. Scott's swing is so pure that he couldn't hit the ball as poorly as he wanted to. Doug, a neurosurgeon with a twenty-five handicap, said, "Want me to show you?" (Doug had the most equipment of anyone in our group. He even had little protective covers for the heads of his irons.)

I had always felt that chipping was the one semirespectable part of my game. Short shots around the green were something I had always been comfortable with, and I figured that golf school would merely add some polish to a skill I had already begun to grasp. But Scott had something more dramatic in mind. He wanted us to learn a chipping stroke that was quite a bit different from anything that any of us was currently doing. He wanted us to learn to swing our wedges mainly with our legs and hips rather than with our hands and arms.

In virtually all good golf swings, Scott told us, the body does most of the work. In

the backswing, the golfer's upper body coils against a firmly anchored lower body. In the swing itself, the body powerfully unwinds, taking the arms, hands, and golf club with it. Nearly every healthy body contains more than enough strength to send a golf ball flying a very long way, but most crummy golfers seldom tap more than a fraction of this strength, usually because they rely excessively on their arms and hands in making their swings. Scott told us that the chipping stroke he wanted us to learn was simply a truncated version of a properly executed full swing. He had us set up with our hands slightly ahead of the ball; take the club back mainly by turning our shoulders, rather than by cocking our wrists or lifting our arms; and swing the club primarily by turning our shoulders and hips back toward the target, generating force with our bodies. In addition, he wanted us not to scoop the ball, as I was used to doing, but to strike it with a sharp, descending blow, so that the club head would hit the ball first and then the ground, taking a small divot slightly ahead of where the ball had been sitting.

Learning to chip the ball Scott's way was difficult for everyone, and Scott set up a number of drills to help us learn. In one drill, we practiced the correct swing with a string mop rather than a wedge to give us the feeling of leading with our hands and dragging the club head through the ball. In another drill, we did our chipping with a golf club that had a six-foot shaft, which would bonk us in the side if we swung it improperly. At one point, Scott held my hips to keep me from turning them on the backswing. Another time, he had me press my right elbow against my side, hold my right hand straight out from my body, and slap his own hand, which he held waist-high in front of me. "Keep your arm still and move your hand by turning your body only," Scott said. "That's the motion I want you to make when you hit the ball." When I began to get the hang of it, I realized that Scott's chipping method required far less effort than my own scooping technique. It was also easier to control, because it had fewer moving parts.

We broke for lunch at around noon, by which time everyone had hit three or four hundred balls. (An attendant refilled the

enormous ball baskets whenever they got low.) We ate lunch in the clubhouse, where each of us had been given a locker. The shoes I had left in my locker that morning had been shined in my absence, and they would be shined again in the afternoon, to undo any damage I might have done to them during

She had taken up golf at the urging of her first husband. Soon she was better than he. They divorced.

my hundred-foot round trip between the locker room and dining room.

After lunch my group moved to the practice tee, where our golf bags had once again materialized. (All of our strength, apparently, was to be preserved for golf.) Jack took me to an enormous mirror and made several changes in my setup. My right shoulder was too high, he said, and it should not be pressing forward. He told me to bend my knees as I would if I

were a quarterback preparing to receive a snap from a center, and to keep some tension in my legs. He told me to coil my body against my bent right leg on my backswing, and to encourage this he told me to grip the ground with both feet, not letting my left heel lift off the ground on my backswing. I should feel most of my weight on my right heel at the top of my backswing, he said, and I should feel virtually all of my weight on my left heel at the end of my swing. Then I went back to my hitting station, and Jack put a big yellow bag between my feet and told me to try to grip it with my ankles as I swung.

Everything Jack had told me to do felt extremely peculiar, but I did my best to follow his instructions as I hit teed-up balls with my five iron. Every once in a while I would hit a good shot, but I also hit a lot of bad ones. Feeling discouraged after hitting about a hundred balls, I went over to a covered hitting station and got a Coke from a basket containing soft drinks and fruit juice. We had been encouraged to take frequent breaks, to keep us from burning out. Revived by corn syrup and carbon dioxide, I took a deep breath and went back to work.

A little later, Jack took us into the video room three at a time. In the middle of the room was an Astroturf mat with a big net in front of it. Four video cameras were trained on the mat from different angles, and there were at least as many video monitors, including one mounted in the floor just ahead of the tee. (You could set up over a ball on

the tee and, without moving your head from the proper position, look at yourself from four different angles on the monitor in the floor.) Through a big glass window in one wall was a control room filled with computer and video equipment. Hanging on the walls were series of photographs depicting the swings of Seve Ballesteros, Nick Faldo, Payne Stewart, and others. Jack showed us a tape of Tom Kite hitting balls. Using a big knob on the front of the VCR, he could move the tape one frame at a time in either direction. He made lines on the screen with a felt-tip marker, and he pointed out various elements of Kite's swing. Then he loaded our own tapes from the morning session.

On the tape, Jack showed me the principal source of my slice. I was turning my hips too far back on the backswing and then not getting them around again as I swung. As a result, I was swinging almost entirely from the waist up, and my lagging rear end was causing me to "come over the top"—to swipe at the ball from above on the dreaded slice-producing outside-to-inside path. Every now and then, my hands or my arms would accidentally compensate for this strangled motion, and I would hit a seemingly terrific

shot, but I couldn't do it consistently. In addition, because my hips were turning too much on my backswing, my lower body wasn't providing any resistance, and I wasn't developing much power. That's why Jack had told me to grip the ground with my feet: Keeping my left foot anchored would prevent me from turning my hips too far on the backswing and give my upper body something to coil against. In addition, Jack said, I needed to learn to get my hips around in the other direction as I swung—to really come through the ball with my body as I hit it. He showed us a photograph of Sam Snead hitting a ball. The picture had been snapped just as the ball was leaving the face of the club, at which point Snead had already turned his hips so far that his belt buckle was pointing more or less directly at his target. At the comparable point in my own swing, I saw, my belt buckle was pointing at the spot where I had teed up the ball.

Back on the practice tee, I returned to my bottomless ball basket with renewed vigor. At first, gripping the ground with my feet made my swing feel small and awkward. Still, as I gradually got used to that feeling, I realized that I was hitting the ball pretty

well. My shots were somewhat longer than usual, and every once in a while, one of them would bend slightly to the left: a draw! When class ended at 4:30, I jumped in a cart with one of my classmates, and we went out to see if we could squeeze in nine holes before the sun disappeared entirely. On the first tee, I dug my spikes into the ground, held on with my toes, and smacked a long, straight drive down a part of the golf course that for me was pretty much alien territory: the left side of the fairway.

THAT EVENING, I ate dinner in the Cloister's main dining room with three classmates. My dinner companions were Bill, a surgeon whose handicap was eight; Joe, a physician friend of Bill's whose handicap was twelve; and Peter, a writer whose handicap was eighteen. All three were very enthusiastic about what they had learned that day, and all three felt that their games had already improved. We spent virtually the entire meal talking about golf, with a few digressions about the food, which was very good, and our hands, which were sore. "I could do this for the rest of my life," Bill said at one point, and we all agreed.

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The next morning, virtually the entire class arrived at the practice tee early, the sooner to begin hitting balls. I saw Band-Aids on many fingers, and my own hands throbbled as I hit my first few tentative shots. I had bought a new white golf glove in the pro shop the day before, and it was already worn and scuffed and nearly black. I wished that I had bought a glove for my right hand as well. I dug around in my bag and found a pair of neoprene gloves, which I had bought

for playing in cold weather. They were thick and spongy, and they made my aching fingers feel much better, although they were so hot that in a little while I had to take them off. What I really needed was a glove for my entire body, which felt old and abused. But Jack told us that sore muscles were a good sign: Absence of pain would have meant we hadn't given up our old bad habits yet.

As we went back to work that morning, I noticed that Jack had given different drills

to different students. Hitting balls directly in front of me was Valerie, a meeting planner from Michigan whose handicap was twenty-six and who was in her midforties. She had come to golf camp primarily because she didn't hit the ball very far. She would take a tremendous backswing with her driver but then pop the ball just 150 yards or so. With the help of the VCR, Jack showed her that in her backswing she didn't so much cock the club as wrap it loosely around her neck: She wasn't storing any energy to release in her swing. "I'll bet somebody once told you not to move your head during your swing," Jack said, and Valerie laughed and said that was true. Using the photographs in the video room, Jack showed her that all good golfers move their heads back as they coil their bodies in their backswings. Attempting to freeze the head in its address position forces a golfer to rely too heavily on arms and hands and not enough on shoulders, hips, and legs. Jack gave Valerie a drill in which she would make three partial feints at the ball before striking it. Within an hour, she was hitting her driver close to two hundred yards. (When Valerie checked her phone messages later, she found just one, from her husband: "Don't move your head.")

Working just behind me was John, my golf partner from the evening before. John was about my age, and he owned a computer company in Atlanta. He was a member of the Sea Island Golf Club, and he had taken individual lessons from Jack before. John's handicap when school began was twenty-two, but Jack told me that John had the swing of a golfer with a handicap half as high. With John, Jack's efforts were focused on tightening a swing that was already basically sound. "When I first saw John," Jack told me, "he would hit one ball 250 yards and the next ball 50 yards. Now the mis-hits are going 190."

Up at the far end of the line was George, whose handicap, thirty-six, was the highest in the group. George was working on his grip and his stance, and he was taking slow swings at the same kind of big yellow bag that I was attempting to grip with my ankles. George's wife, Maxine, who had a seventeen handicap, was in the other group. She had taken up golf at the urging of her first husband, a golf enthusiast. Somewhat to her surprise, she had found that she liked the game. She also found that she was good at it. Soon, she was better than her husband. Tensions arose. Her husband didn't like being beaten by his wife. They were divorced. Then Maxine met George, who didn't mind

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being clobbered, and now both had come to Sea Island to get better.

A little later, I asked Jack why we didn't all do the same drills. "You all have different problems," he said, "so you all need different remedies. But there is a common goal: a repeating golf swing based on good, sound, solid fundamentals. And as the course has gone on, you've all begun to look more the same. We're all trying to get to Atlanta. Some of us started out in Columbus, and some of us started out in Macon. But we're all trying to get to the same place."

AT SOME POINT during every class, we would put down our clubs, pull our chairs into a circle, and listen to a lecture. On the second morning, Jack gave us a talk in which he stressed the importance of practice, saying that making or breaking a motor-skill habit required patience, determination, and hundreds of repetitions. "I can't tell you how many hours I have spent making golf swings in front of mirrors," he said. "I can hardly pass a mirror without making a swing. My wife and I almost didn't get married because of it. On one of our first dates, we went to a movie in Athens, Georgia, and had to wait in line for fifteen minutes. We were standing in front of a men's clothing store, and there was a big, dark window, so I spent the time making about a hundred golf swings and looking at my reflection. That just about did it." Jack said the most important thing was not to become discouraged. "The pros have problems that are just as severe to them as yours are to you," he told us. "That's why people say that golf is a game for a lifetime."

On the third morning, I wrapped my swollen hands around my five wood and began popping feeble slices down the range. Shortly afterward, Jack came over to me and knelt down behind me. He held a towel between my legs. With what I interpreted as a note of exasperation in his voice, he said, "When you finish your swing, I want this towel to be pinched between your thighs." To do that, I realized after making a couple of unsuccessful tries, I would have to have turned almost completely toward my target by the end of my swing—exactly what Jack and Scott had been trying to get me to do, not only with my driver but also with my sand wedge. I tried again and caught the towel. I nearly fell down as I did, but my shot was long and it was a draw. "That's it," Jack said. "Now do it again." He stayed on the ground behind me for quite a while, as I

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learned to catch the towel every time and, in doing so, began to understand what it feels like to swing all the way through the ball. Then Jack moved down the line.

I went back to work with renewed enthusiasm. I would work with my five wood until I had hit three or four draws or mild fades in a row; then I would move to my three wood and then to my driver. Every so often I would abandon my woods and chip ten or twenty balls with my eight iron, partly to ingrain the feeling of turning my hips and partly to assure myself that I could put away my woods for a few minutes without losing my draw. In a short time, I found that I could pound out long, straight drives more or less at will. Suddenly, I was hitting my driver 250 yards or more—about 40 yards longer than I usually do—and I wasn't slicing. I picked out a skinny, imaginary fairway at the far end of the driving range (it was bounded on the left by a big tree and on the right by a target green) and hit ball after ball more or less down the middle of it. Jack was up the line somewhere, working with someone else. I wished desperately that he would look over and see what I was doing. All of a sudden I heard his voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please," Jack boomed. "At exactly 10:44 on the last day of golf school, David Owen got his belt buckle turned to the target."

**A**T LUNCH THAT DAY, I asked Jack how good a golfer he thought I could become if I continued to work hard. "I don't think there's any limit," he said. "Competing professionally is a distinct possibility. The raw talent is there."

Oh, wait, what he really said was, "You can be a good player. If you have the opportunity and you keep working on the right things, you could certainly play good golf in the 80s in a year or two without any trouble. Now, those wood shots you were hitting this morning were shots that a person could shoot in the 70s with. If you could do that from the tee on every hole, I could play from those drives and shoot par. But I'm trying to be realistic. I think you can get to the point where you would be unhappy to shoot more than 42 or 43 or 44 for nine holes. You build golf like anything else, with plateaus and stairs. Once you move to a certain level, you may fall back, but you don't fall all the way back to the bottom. So if you can get to where you can comfortably shoot in the mid-80s, then it doesn't take very long for

you to have a good day and shoot in the low-80s, and then maybe you have a great day and shoot in the high-70s. And once you do that, the mid-80s don't excite you anymore, so you set another target and start working toward that."

I told Jack that some of my friends had warned me that golf school would ruin my game. "Some people say you should never take lessons, for the same reason," he said. "But correct technique can't hurt you. If I change your grip, you may play worse for a while, but that doesn't make the new grip wrong. You just haven't learned the moves that the new grip causes or creates. Sometimes people are unwilling to change, or they take just a few of the things you teach them and build a sort of hybrid swing. They have a Ford front end and a Chevy back end and a Plymouth door, and it doesn't go together. Those people may get worse. But good instruction can't mess you up. Now, there are some people who manage to get pretty good doing things the wrong way. Those people are very hard to teach, and I'm not sure they always should change, because unraveling all their compensations may take more time than they have to spend. Learning to do it the right way might not be worth it to them, even though they might not be able to improve without doing it."

On the golf course that evening, I found to my surprise that I was still able to hit my drives more or less the way I had during my euphoric session on the practice tee that morning. Even better, when I found my swing slipping away, I discovered that I knew how to get it back. Feet grip the ground, weight to the right heel, then to the left heel, belt buckle to the target, boom, boom, boom. I didn't score very well, in part because I was still working out the bugs in my new chip. But the big shots were inebriating. On the ninth hole, a par five, I hit the longest, straightest drive I have ever hit in my life, then stroked an easy five wood to the edge of the green. Putting for eagle! Me!

Well, I didn't get my eagle. For that matter, I didn't get my birdie. For that matter, I didn't get my par. But it was almost too dark to see, and the green had some kind of grainy fertilizer on it, and I was too excited to line up my putts, and so forth. Still, I felt as happy as I have ever felt on a golf course. For the first time in my mostly inglorious golfing career, I believed that I had a fighting chance. Jack and Scott had proven to me that improvement is possible. As soon as I can scrape together the money, I'm going back. ■