By David Owen Illustration by Chris O'Riley

# The dream makeover

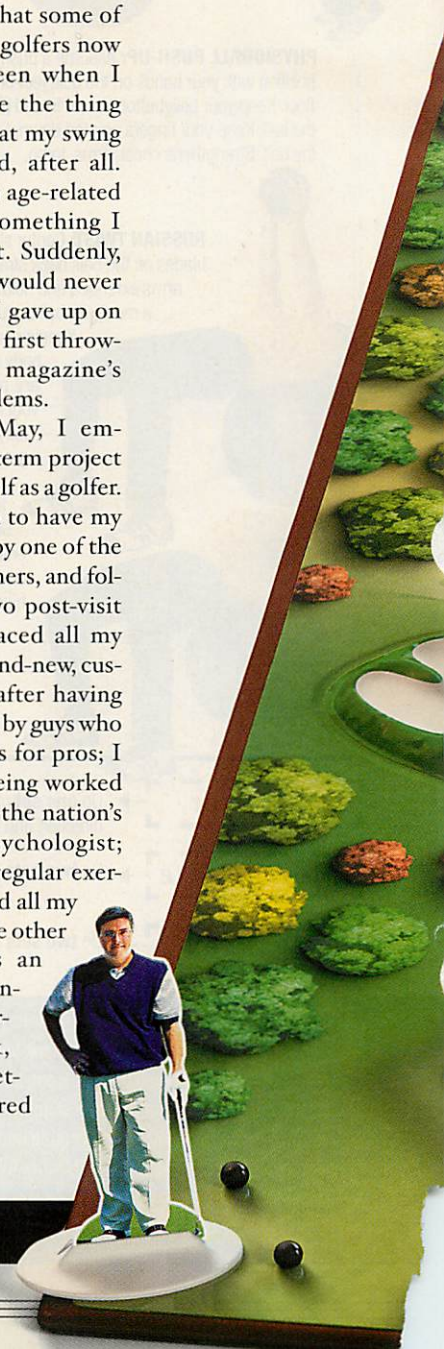
You've always wondered what would happen if you had the time and money to overhaul your game. As he faced a mid-life golf crisis, we gave our man the works. OK, Owen: Show us what you've got

ONE OF THE OLDER GUYS at my club was struggling. He had lost yardage off the tee, and too many of his drives were finding the trees, and his iron shots had morphed into feeble leakers. He still played pretty well, in streaks—if you hit lots of bad tee shots, you eventually learn to get up and down from 50 yards—but his handicap was creeping upward. On a good day, he could sink enough 10-foot putts to compete with decent players, but his game had deteriorated, and he knew it.

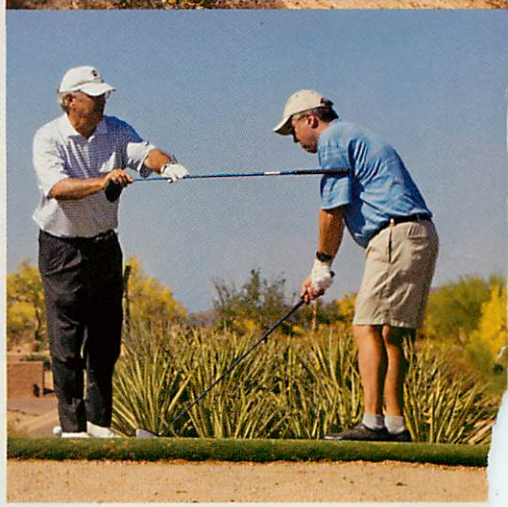
The struggling older guy was me. I'm actually just 51, and I usually think of myself less as an incipient senior citizen than as a graying adolescent with dorky clothes, but at my most recent physical I had a long talk about prostate trouble with my doctor (who is my age and is one of my semi-regular golf buddies), and he concluded by saying, "This is really an ailment of old age, but guess what?" I resigned myself to slipping helplessly into the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns—the country of whippy shafts and ball retrievers and 15.5-degree drivers.

Back at the club, though, I noticed that most of the guys who were beating me were my age or older, and that some of them were better golfers now than they had been when I met them. Maybe the thing that was gnawing at my swing wasn't age-related, after all. And even if it was age-related there might be something I could do about it. Suddenly, I realized that I would never forgive myself if I gave up on my game without first throwing a lot of this magazine's money at my problems.

And so, last May, I embarked on a long-term project to rejuvenate myself as a golfer. I went to Arizona to have my swing remodeled by one of the country's top teachers, and followed up with two post-visit checkups; I replaced all my golf clubs with brand-new, custom-fitted ones, after having my swing analyzed by guys who do custom-fittings for pros; I spent a full day being worked over, mentally, by the nation's leading sport psychologist; I started getting regular exercise; and I replaced all my Dockers with some other Dockers. It was an experiment in turning back my personal golf clock, and it worked better than I had dared to hope.




Practice short game
Shoot 72!
Stick with changes
Handicap drops
Meet Bob Rotella
ROAD WORK AHEAD
REBOUND!
It's not a job
Game falls apart
Impress friends
Christmas! New equipment
Get sore following instruction
Meet teacher
STOP
GO TO GOLF SCHOOL
QUIT!
Reach out for help
WALLOW IN MEDIOCRITY
Loss of yards (another birthday)
Loss of yards (back injury)



**It was a year ago that David Owen embarked on his dream makeover, which included hands-on help from Shelby Futch on how to hit it here instead of there. After his video work, do you see the Jack Nicklaus in David's swing?**

### From tennis balls to golf

LIKE MANY RECREATIONAL PLAYERS, I am susceptible to a superstitious fear that fussing with a swing flaw might just make it worse. It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I arrived at the Legend Trail Golf Club, a desert course about 35 miles northeast of downtown Phoenix, to spend most of a week under the supervision of Shelby Futch, who is the chief executive officer of the Golf Digest Schools. Shelby is 63 years old. He grew up in West Texas, won the Illinois PGA Championship in 1975 and made a brief attempt to earn a living as a touring professional. ("After about a year, I decided that if I wanted to live indoors I'd better find something else.") He now runs his own company, called Scottsdale Golf Group, which also owns John Jacobs' Golf Schools, and owns or manages a number of Arizona golf courses, among them Legend Trail.

Shelby learned to play golf the way good players often used to: by reinventing the swing for himself. When he was 10, his father, who was an oil-refinery laborer, won a $25 set of Bobby Jones clubs in a poker game. He knew nothing about golf—his family had been sharecroppers in Louisiana—so he gave the clubs to Shelby, telling him only that they were for "hitting balls."

There was no golf course within 50 miles of the oil-company housing in which the Futch family lived, but there was a tennis court, on which Shelby and the other workers' children spent their summers playing softball. Between games, Shelby would take a few tennis balls into the wheat fields and whack them around, letting the clubs teach him what to do.

A couple of years later, his father was transferred to Oklahoma, and Shelby decided to try out for the golf team at his new middle school. "I went up to the tee and put down a tennis ball, and the coach thought I was being a smartass," he told me. "But I had never actually seen golf played, and I didn't know there was such a thing as a golf ball." The coach eventually determined that Shelby was merely ignorant. "I missed the first golf ball I swung at, because it was so small, but then I hit it, and I couldn't believe how far it went."

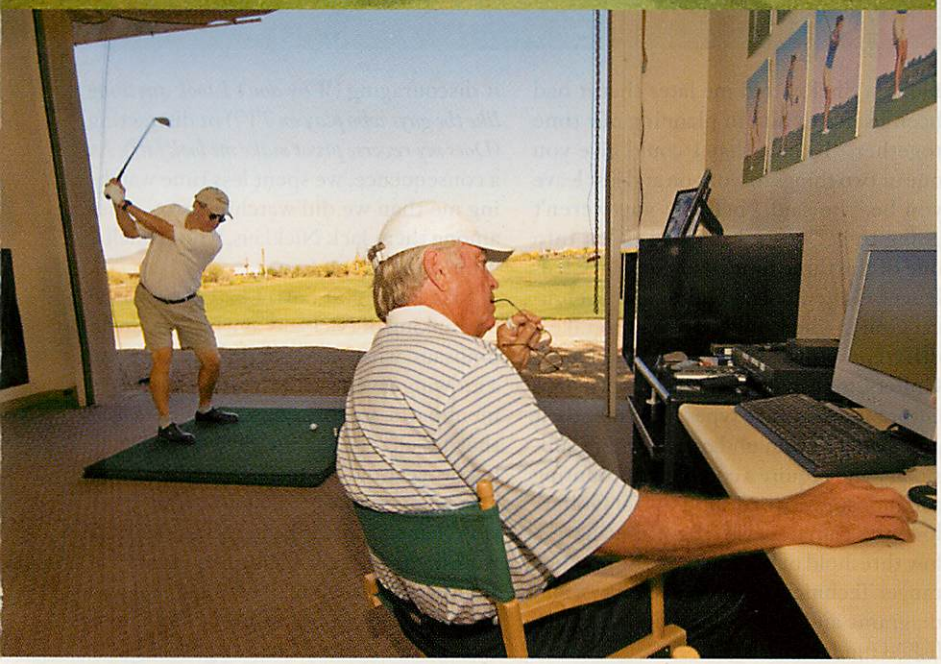
From that moment, Shelby was hooked. He went on to win the state junior championship and to receive a full golf scholarship to Oklahoma State University. The OSU coach didn't like his homemade swing, however, and worked to make it more orthodox—with results that, initially, were disastrous. That experience set Shelby on what he would eventually see as his true career path, by helping to inspire a lifelong fascination with instruction. And, unlike most great teachers, he doesn't work with superstars, but only with ordinary players, like you and me.

"Tell me about your game," he said to me the morning we met, over coffee in the grillroom at Legend Trail. I told him that I had taken up golf late, at the age of 36, and that for half a dozen years I had had the exhilarating experience of improving steadily in every category—largely as the result of attending golf school (twice), taking lots of lessons and filling the trunk of my car with so many old clubs, balls, gloves, shoes, swing aids and other paraphernalia that I stopped needing snow tires during the winter.

At some point in my early 40s, though, I reached what I perceived to be the limit of overachievement, and pretty much stopped working on my game. Any further investment of time, I figured, would be unlikely to yield a significant return, so why not just accept the inevitable? My handicap then began its gradual ascent, and was now 10 at my home club—still a respectable number, but one that owed too much to my putter, my 9-wood, and the fact that the U.S. Golf Association counts only half of your posted scores.

I told Shelby that I felt as though I were sitting at the children's table, in comparison with other players whose handicaps were similar to mine, because I was at least 25 or 30 yards shorter off the tee and one or two clubs shorter with my irons. I also said that I invariably came over the top, even on putts, and that I had noticed recently that I did the same thing in tennis and bowling—suggesting that the underlying fault might be genetic and therefore impervious to correction.

We chatted for a while longer, then went to Legend Trail's huge practice range, one corner of which had been roped off for our exclusive use. Shelby had me warm up, then hit some 5-irons and some drivers. I did so, nervously, and produced a dozen shots that, although they weren't any good, had the unexpected virtue of resembling my own lousy shots, rather than someone else's. Shelby said that my driver swing looked better than my 5-iron



swing—the opposite of what I would have predicted—and we went to work.

"The first thing we are going to do is get you lower," he said. He made me bend more at the waist and hold my hands closer to the ground. Doing this was awkward and uncomfortable: After just a couple of minutes, my lower back throbbed. He also had me move the club into a more neutral position, in relation to my body, so that at address the butt of the handle was pointing toward my belt buckle, rather than toward the mountains off to the left. (Like many shaky players, I had gotten used to positioning my hands far ahead of the ball, as though the top of the shaft were being pulled toward the target by an invisible string.) He then had me begin my backswing by taking the club's grip back sharply to the inside, so that the upper part of my left arm had to scrape across my chest as I turned.

All of this felt extraordinarily strange. Shelby was making me exaggerate some of these positions (at address, the toe of my club was well off the ground, and my hands felt as though they were hanging at my knees) to emphasize what he wanted me to correct, but my main difficulty was that several years had passed since I had made anything close to a good swing. As is often the case with crummy players, and especially with older crummy players, my pivot had degenerated into a lift: Instead of tightly winding my body into a thrumming coil of explosive potential energy, I had gotten used to rocking back on my right foot and then raising the club with my arms—a move that is more evocative of coal-shoveling or square-dancing than of robust athleticism.

I attributed part of my difficulty to a pair of back injuries, which I had sustained in close succession four or five years before, one in a fall on an icy step, the other in a minor car accident. Neither mishap had sent me to the hospital, but both had left my back feeling stiff and inflexible, and the arc of my backswing had contracted.

Every once in a while, Shelby had me stand upright and swing the club horizontally, as though it were a baseball bat. "A golf swing is really a baseball swing executed at an angle," he said—a fact that might explain why former major leaguers often do well in celebrity golf events. He told me that as I made my backswing I should feel as though I were turning "underneath and upside down"—a striking image, because that's exactly how I did feel when I managed to contort myself into what he told me was more or less the right position.

If you're hitting the ball poorly, any corrected motion is likely to feel awkward. I had taken enough golf lessons over the years to accept that idea intellectually, but I still had trouble making myself twist my body to the extent that I was supposed to. Shelby, to make me turn more, often had to place the butt of a club on my left shoulder and push, or stand behind me, reach under my right armpit, grab the left side of my shirt, and pull. I felt like a lobster being cracked open—but I also realized that when I truly did the things he wanted me to do I tended to hit the ball fairly well. He told me that he was trying to get me into a position from which I almost couldn't help but make a swing in which the clubhead approached the ball from the inside, the way it's supposed to, rather than from the vicinity of the home-team dugout, as I had gotten used to doing.

Golf looks like a lazy game to people who don't play it, but reconfiguring a swing is hard work, and Shelby and I had

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK ISAKSON

to be sure to drink plenty of water. The Phoenix area doesn't really have weather, in the sense that people in other parts of the country understand that term; it just has temperature and ultraviolet radiation, and if you don't stay fully hydrated at all times the sun and the desert air will suck the life force out of you.

When I returned to my villa from the 100-plus-degree heat of the practice range that evening, the gas fireplace in my living room was roaring. (The maid had turned it on to welcome me.) I switched off the flames, turned up the air conditioning, and rushed into the bathroom. On the range that morning, I had worried that when playing with other people I might feel too embarrassed to contort my body in the way that Shelby wanted me to, even if doing so made me hit the ball better. To see what I looked like, I took my new stance on the tile floor, dropped my hands low, drew an imaginary club back sharply to the inside, felt my left arm and torso go underneath and upside down, and looked up at my reflection in the huge mirror above the sink. What I expected to see was a comically misshapen tangle of hands, arms, shoulder blades and blubber. What I saw instead—to my considerable surprise—was a red-faced middle-aged guy doing something that looked almost like a golf swing.

### Fitting into a profile

A COUPLE OF WEEKS BEFORE I WENT to Scottsdale, Shelby's office faxed me a questionnaire, which asked me to rate 30 adjectives, on a scale of 1 to 5, according to how accurately they matched my feelings about myself, and 30 other adjectives according to how accurately they matched what I believed to be other people's feelings about me. The adjectives included "organized," "demanding," "understanding" and "conventional," and the form looked like an SAT answer sheet. Shortly after I had filled it out and faxed it back, Golf Digest Schools sent me my "EagleVision Neuro Golf Profile," a lengthy document that identified me as a "Traditional Golfer," whose "central trait" was "patience."

I wasn't sure what to make of my profile, but Shelby told me later that it had been useful to him in planning our time together. "I knew that I could give you one or two things to work on and just leave you be," he said, "because you weren't going to get cross." If I had fallen into one of the three other categories—Challenger Golfer, Social Golfer and Technical Golfer—he would have had to take a different approach, he said. Challenger Golfers, for example, are results-oriented corporate-executive types who treat their golf swing like an underperforming subsidiary and require a complete accounting for almost every bad shot; Social Golfers love the camaraderie of golf but have a low threshold of boredom on the practice range; Technical Golfers like charts and diagrams and close adherence to established fundamentals.

Sure enough, toward the end of our first day, Shelby told me not to expect a lot of novelty in my lessons from that point forward, and that we were pretty much going to keep doing the same thing over and over. And we did. I gradually got used to making my backswing with his golf club pressing against my shoulder or with his hand pulling on my shirt, and little by little I improved at getting myself properly underneath and upside down.

Occasionally, we would visit the indoor teaching facility, at the other end of the range. The building has two garage-size hitting bays, which are equipped with arrays of video cameras. Shelby said that videotape isn't always a useful teaching tool for average golfers, who tend to find it discouraging (*Why don't I look anything like the guys who play on TV?*) or distracting (*Does my reverse pivot make me look fat?*). As a consequence, we spent less time watching me than we did watching pros, chief among them Jack Nicklaus, whom Shelby wanted me to emulate.

Like many golf fans, I had gotten used to thinking of Nicklaus as a broken-down dinosaur, with creaky arthritic joints and a growing inventory of high-tech replacement parts, so it was unsettling to realize that he clearly has no difficulty placing his 66-year-old carapace in an even more extreme version of the backswing position that was making me feel as though I were being filleted. Shelby printed several frames from the Nicklaus video and told me to pin them up over my bed. (He also told me not to sleep on my right side.)

After lunch each day, Shelby and I played golf. We had the course—which I liked very much—virtually to ourselves, and I used it as a personal swing laboratory, scattering brand-new Pro V1s around the desert as though they were X-outs. And it was during our first round together that I really began to understand what Shelby was teaching me. We were playing the 12th hole, a big, downhill par 3, which that day measured about 240 yards from the back tee. I hit an over-the-top 3-wood, and my ball started out low and left of the target, then ended up left of the green and short—a shot that felt like home to me as soon as it left the club. Shelby had me take my stance again, then used his club to give my shoulder a major shove. I teed up

**Coaching and prodding is only part of an improvement plan. Some of the really fun stuff is taking advantage of science to find out what you're doing wrong (and what kind of equipment will help).**

another ball and thought, *All right, Pal, I'll show you*. I took the club back as sharply to the inside as I could and made such an exaggerated turn that I briefly lost sight of the ball. As I reached the top of my backswing, Shelby, who was standing behind me, said, "Great!" I let my body go. My arms came down, the club unloaded, and the ball took off high and to the right of the flag. It soared for what seemed like several minutes, turned gently back to the left, floated over a greenside bunker and landed on the back of the green, about 10 feet beyond the pin.

"Holy cow," I said.

I still think about that swing. Shelby knew that my shot was going to be good just by looking at the position of my body at a moment when I wasn't completely convinced that I would be able to find my ball again. If I could learn to Rolf my torso into that position at will, I could apparently hit good golf shots simply by allowing my (painfully) wound-up mainspring to launch my clubhead into the back of the ball.

Shelby and I spent three full days together. We would hit balls in the morning and play in the afternoon, and after nine or 18 holes he would go to his office and I would keep playing until dark. We hardly ever did drills or (except when the photographer was hanging around) used any of the training gizmos that you see in the infomercials on The Golf Channel. Shelby told me that he doesn't think drills are very useful, because most golfers hate doing them and don't keep up with them at home, and that most training gizmos just end up gathering dust in people's garages. We didn't even hit that many balls, in comparison with my earlier experiences at golf school. At the end of our first day together, I asked Shelby if it would be OK if I hung out on the range for a while, and he said that if I felt like continuing he would prefer that I go out and play. On the golf course, he said, I would be less likely to work myself into a corner, undermining our hard-won improvements.

## All-new stuff

ON THE FOURTH DAY, SHELBY AND I didn't meet at all in the morning. Instead, I drove into town, to Hot Stix Golf, where I had an appointment to be fitted for new clubs. Hot Stix is the creation of Mark Timms, who began making golf clubs for friends as a hobby, in the 1980s; cofounded a company called Custom Golf of Connecticut in 1990 and moved to Scottsdale in 2000. His customers include many tour pros, along with guys like you and me. The fitters at Hot Stix are often booked for weeks in advance.

My fitters, Allen Gobeski and Jeremy Champoux, began by checking the specs on my golf clubs, all of which (except the putter) had graphite shafts: 10.5-degree Titleist 983K driver; Great Big Bertha Hawk Eye 3-wood and 5-wood; Big Bertha Warbird metal 9-wood; 12-year-old Ping Zing irons, 4-LW; and an Odyssey 2-Ball putter. They then had me hit balls into a screen off a rubber tee while a battery of sensors measured my clubhead speed, ball speed, launch angle and, for all I could tell, the assessed value of my house.

I felt nervous about using my new swing in front of strangers, and I've always hated hitting into nets. All my shots—half a dozen each with my 6-iron and my driver—were sucky, although they probably weren't all that much suckier, statistically, than my good shots would have been. Based on the readings, Gobeski determined that the shaft in my driver was way too stiff, that the shafts in my irons were not quite stiff enough, and that the shafts in my wedges and 9-wood were way too soft.

Then came Christmas: I got to pick new irons. I looked at Mizuno MX-23s, Callaway Big Bertha Fusions, TaylorMade rac CGBs and Ping G2s. Timms told me that it didn't really matter which ones I picked. "It's whatever you like to look at, really," he said. "It's kind of an odd thing to say, but the clubhead doesn't matter very much, as long as it's a decent one. The shaft is what gets the club back square to the ball. If the shaft is right, and if the lie angle is right, the rest doesn't really matter."

We chose the Fusions, for no particular reason, although Timms did say that he had received phone calls from customers who loved them. For the shafts, we

switched me from graphite to lightweight steel, made by Nippon. Gobeski said, "Steel shafts tend to be more symmetrical and therefore more consistent. Whenever possible, we try to put people into steel for their irons, unless they have arthritis or tendinitis and need graphite to dampen the vibration." We also selected 52- and 56-degree Cleveland CG10 wedges, two TaylorMade Rescue Mid hybrids (the 3 and 4, to which I later added the 5) and a TaylorMade V Steel 4-wood. (The wedges have the same steel shafts the irons do. All the TaylorMade clubs have "S-flex" Fujikura graphite shafts.)

During most of my visit to Hot Stix, I had no idea what anyone was talking about, and just nodded thoughtfully whenever someone mentioned CPMs, FM numbers, pured shafts, flex points, load symmetry and other mysteries. When we moved to the putting lab, though, I found equipment I could understand. I climbed onto an elevated platform and putted balls toward a hole in the floor while cameras studied my stroke from above, behind, and directly in front of my shoes, and Gobeski monitored readings on a computer. The array of cameras revealed several hitches—for one thing, I was striking the ball slightly toward the toe—and were as useful as a dozen putting lessons.

After trying many models, I chose a Ping Doc 15, the head of which is a huge aluminum hemisphere that looks like something you might use to shut off the Hoover Dam. (I love my Doc 15, although Ping later had to replace it because its electroless nickel coating kept flaking off even though I was careful about using its briefcase-size headcover—a problem that other users had reported.)

The really crucial fitting for most golfers is for the driver. For that, Timms and Gobeski drove me to the TPC of Scottsdale. We parked next to the Hot Stix Mobile Fitting Center, a 36-foot-long trailer that contains scaled-down versions of the fitting stations back at headquarters, along with a complete club-assembly shop. (The Mobile Fitting Center was about to leave for Colorado, where it would spend two months doing custom-fittings at private clubs; you can reserve it for your club's member-guest if you and your fellow members are pretty rich.)

On the TPC's practice range, I hit balls with several different drivers while a technician tracked my shots on a Vector radar system. My performance-anxiety level was so high that I actually whiffed my first shot—a flub so preposterous that the technician might not have noticed if I hadn't spoken up. All the drives I hit were mediocre—I felt even more nervous than I had felt in the hitting booth—but one driver nevertheless stood out above the others: a Cleveland Launcher Comp 10.5-degree, with a Fujikura ZCom MW54 S-flex graphite shaft. So that's the one I got.

The VIP drill at Hot Stix is to spend a half day being fitted and a half day playing golf with your (scratch) fitter, who then makes additional adjustments, to things like the bounce on your lob wedge, based on how you play under non-laboratory conditions. Shelby didn't want anybody else messing with my swing—which, as I had clearly demonstrated, was still in flux—so as soon as Gobeski and Timms had finished with me I loaded my gleaming new clubs into a lightweight Titleist BX56 carry bag (actually manufactured by Sun Mountain, which sells a virtually identical bag under its own name) and went to meet Shelby at Red Mountain Ranch Country Club, a private Pete Dye course, also owned by Scottsdale Golf Group. We made a videotape of me hitting balls—accompanied by Shelby's commentary—to serve as a portable lesson that I could take home with me. Then we played 18.

### Out for the test drive

THE NEXT DAY, FRIDAY, WAS MY LAST day in Arizona, and I was on my own. Shelby had business in Las Vegas (with his old friend Butch Harmon), so I slept in, ate a big breakfast, and then played golf all day at Legend Trail. On the first tee, with no strangers watching me, I had the courage to swing the way Shelby wanted me to, and I hit the ball gratifyingly well—even shockingly well. In fact, almost all my drives that day were long and in the fairway, and most of my iron shots were crisp and high. When I passed the clubhouse after 27 holes, one of the assistant pros told me that Shelby had called from Las Vegas to make sure I hadn't fallen apart, and I said to tell him that I was doing fine. Several times during the day, I joined other players, and felt so comfortable with my swing that I was able to keep using it in their presence.

I ended up playing 2½ rounds, 45 holes, and during my final 18 I didn't hit a single ball into the desert. My bad drives were going 250 yards, and my good ones were high draws. I hit some of the best fairway-wood shots I have ever hit, and twice reached a long par 5 in two. I birdied a par 3 after hitting a 5-iron shot that not only drew but flew higher than I used to hit my lob wedge. My pitch shots checked up. My all-day ringer score—computed by counting just my best score on each hole after playing the front nine twice and the back nine three times—was 68, four under par.

I was ecstatic. But I knew that the real test would come two days later, when I was back at home and playing with my friends, all of whom knew the purpose of my trip to Arizona. And, indeed, my first round with them, in our big regular Sunday-morning game, was very uneven. I hit some unusually good shots, to admiring reviews, but I also hit some real skankers. My friends were supportive, though, and several told me that my swing looked

## What I accomplished

Some of the highlights from my program:

- **Scoring:** My Handicap Index dropped to 6.6, two strokes lower than at the start of the program. My 72 in a tournament qualifying round at my club was five shots better than my previous best score in a stroke-play tournament round.
- **Distance:** Imagine a hole that you play all the time. Now imagine hitting your longest drive ever on that hole.
- **Impressing friends:** Now imagine hitting that drive in front of buddies who have just challenged you to show off your new swing.

D.O.

# Calling Dr. Bob: A makeover for the mind

NOW THAT I HAD NEW CLUBS AND A NEW SWING, I WAS ready to replace my last remaining piece of original golf equipment: my brain. Late in the fall, after my local playing season had ended, I traveled to Charlottesville, Va., to see the sport psychologist Dr. Bob Rotella, who is a professional advisor to this magazine and has worked with hundreds of golfers and other top athletes, plus an assortment of prominent people from outside the world of sports, including Seal and the lead singer of the Goo Goo Dolls, John Rzeznik.

Most of the golfers who visit Rotella are college players or tour pros. They stay in a guest suite in his house for two full days, and their visits usually include at least one round of golf, during which Rotella, who is a very good amateur player, observes them in action. I don't face anything like the same issues those guys do—my ability to earn a living doesn't depend on my scoring average, for example—so Rotella and I spent just one day together, and he modulated his remarks toward the chopper end of the golf spectrum.

It turns out that not-very-good golfers have one huge psychological advantage over the pros: We already view golf the way Rotella often has to teach tour players to view it, as a fun activity that we pursue because we enjoy it. One of our keys to improving, therefore, might be to act more like ourselves, rather than trying to act more like the guys we watch on TV. Other lessons that I took from our conversation:

• **Don't become obsessed with hitting the ball perfectly.** Rotella sometimes does an illuminating exercise with college players. He has them play a round in which they get to see what it would be like to be "the purest ball-striker in the history of the world." On the par 4s, they get to place their tee ball in the middle of the fairway, 10 or 15 yards longer than they currently hit their driver; on the par 5s, they get to place their ball (lying two) in the middle of the fairway at their favorite wedge distance inside 100 yards; on the par 3s, they get to tee up their ball at or inside the distance they hit their 8-iron.

What happens? "Even most good college players won't break par," he says. "A perfect drive every time, and they shoot the number they usually shoot. It's hard for people to comprehend." The most important shots in golf take place inside 120 yards or so.

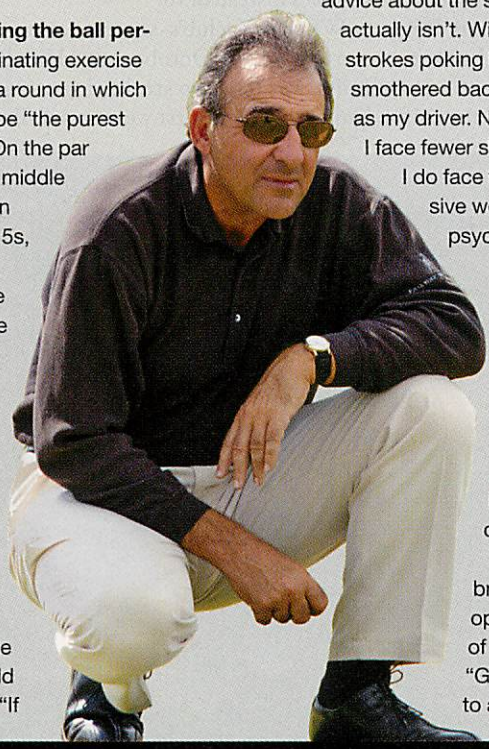
• **Nevertheless, not all short shots are equally important.** "If you asked me how to hit a 50-yard bunker shot, I would say, 'Why do you care?' " Rotella says. "If you have good course management, you might face that shot once a year. Instead of practicing it, learn to avoid it."

According to Rotella, there are two crucial short-game zones: the one between 70 and 120 yards, and the one inside 15 yards. (The best way to handle the middle zone, between 15 and 70 yards, he said, is to stay out of it unless you have lots and lots of time to practice.)

• **Spend most of your short-game practice time on pitching—the shots between five feet and 15 yards off the green.** "From the fringe to a few feet off the green, if you're a bad chipper you can putt the ball or bump it with a fairway wood and do just fine, at least until you get to scratch, so I wouldn't spend any time at all practicing chipping," Rotella says. "Instead, I would go on a mission to become a great pitcher of the ball. Want to be a better putter? Learn to pitch the ball to two feet rather than six feet."

• **Don't treat putting practice like a job.** "The best way to practice putting is to play competitive putting games on the practice green," he says. "That's what kids do. Adults work on their stroke and get worse. Don't fight the putter; let it do what it wants to do. You get better at putting by seeing the ball go in the hole."

My focus on my full swing, and the fact I spent very little time on short shots of any kind, might seem contrary to Rotella's advice about the significance of the short game, but it actually isn't. With my old swing, I wasted far too many strokes poking balls out from under trees, and my smothered backswing affected my wedges as well as my driver. Now that I'm hitting my full shots better, I face fewer short shots than I used to, and when I do face them, I tend to think of them as offensive weapons rather than defensive ones—a psychological improvement.



Late in the afternoon, Rotella left for an emergency session with a struggling NFL quarterback, whose team had sent a plane to pick Bob up. Bad weather delayed his return that night, so his wife, Darlene, had to field phone calls from several journeyman pros, who were calling because they wanted Rotella, in effect, to tuck them in. (Tour qualifying school started the next day.)

I headed home the following morning, brimming with renewed confidence and optimism, and repeating to myself one of the first things Dr. Bob had told me: "Good players with great attitudes adjust to aging." **D.O.**

J.D. CUBAN

significantly more solid than it had before my trip and that I should be patient with the changes.

I went to the range or played almost every afternoon that week, and I discovered that when I got into trouble I could straighten myself out, after a bucket or two, by methodically working through Shelby's swing keys—a very encouraging development. In Scottsdale, Shelby had told me, "Instruction can't be so complex that you can only understand it if your teacher is standing right there next to you." His goal, he said, was to teach me to repair my own problems.

The following Friday, I played in the afternoon with three friends. On the first tee, one of them said, "OK, Owen, let's see one of these super-long drives I've been hearing about," and I stammered something like, "Well, I'm still working on things." My club's first hole is short but tough, a dogleg to the right, with trees and a stone wall on the left, and trees and a lateral hazard on the right. Sensible players often hit an iron off the tee, but if you cut the corner by hammering a high drive over the trees you can sometimes end up within 50 yards of the green. That's what I tried to do. When we got around the corner, though, I didn't see my ball anywhere, and figured it must be in the hazard. But then we found it in a greenside bunker: my longest drive ever on that hole.

Accounts of ordinary people's golf rounds are so tedious that I am beginning to bore even myself. Nevertheless, I have to mention a few more post-instruction experiences. The Governors' Cup, which is my club's handicapped championship, took place two weeks after I returned from Scottsdale. In the qualifying round, I was grouped with three former winners of the regular club championship. Those three shot 73, 73 and 77, while I (after bogeying the first hole and three-putting the final green from 20 feet) shot 72. That made me the medalist in the qualifier, both gross and net. Best of all, my 72 was five shots better than my previous best score ever in a stroke-play tournament round. (In match play, I was beaten in the semifinal.)

My new swing imploded in July—I shot 94-86 in my club's stroke-play championship—but I managed to identify the problem (lifting, again) and to pull myself back together the next week by working on my keys. I had ups and downs after that, but, overall, 2005 was the best, most consistent season I've ever had, and in August I qualified for our men's club championship, won my first match, and would have eliminated the defending champion (and made it to the final) if the format had been 10 holes instead of 18.

When my club's score-posting season ended, in October, my Handicap Index was 6.6, two strokes lower than it had been when I first went to see Shelby. That's an improvement of almost 25 percent—a huge gain from what added up to just four full days of one-on-one instruction. (I saw Shelby two more times after Scottsdale: for a half day in late June, in West Virginia, and for an hour in July, on a driving range in Westchester County, New York.) And I kept things going over the winter and into the current season.

I am now longer and straighter with all my clubs, and substantially longer and straighter off the tee—a change to which Hot Stix also contributed, by switching me to a driver more closely suited to my abilities. I used to hate my driver; now it's my favorite club, and I often can't resist hitting it in situations where laying back would be smarter.

Hitting longer, straighter drives has put me in a better frame of mind about my whole game, because there's a big psychological difference between trying to chip in to save par (because you hit your drive into the trees) and trying to chip in for birdie (because you pulled your approach shot slightly, after hitting your drive into the middle of the fairway). I feel more confident when playing with better players, and when I shoot a decent score I feel that I deserved to shoot it.

Players whose starting handicaps are higher than mine might wonder whether my experience is applicable to them. I think it definitely is, because improvement actually gets easier the farther you go up the handicap scale. For most players in double digits, the quickest gains from instruction come in the short game, an area on which Shelby and I spent almost no time at all (and on which I now intend to focus much of my attention). He showed me a new sand shot and taught me to try to draw most of my pitches, rather than cutting them, but we spent almost all our time together working on my backswing, which had many defects that are virtually universal among not-very-good golfers. I still have most of those defects, but they are far less severe than they used to be.

The biggest change that Shelby made was in my attitude about improvement. One of the least-attractive human traits is the tendency to view surrender and self-

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pity as acceptable strategies for coping with disappointment. Before I went to Scottsdale, I hadn't exactly given up on golf, but I had stopped believing that seriously working on my game could possibly be worth the trouble, or that improving my swing might improve my life. Now I feel as excited about golf as I did when I started playing, and I'm looking forward to wrestling with my remaining swing flaws, of which I, like most golfers, have more than enough to keep me happily occupied for the rest of my life.

**The moral: Don't stop doing it**

SHELBY ONCE RECEIVED A PHONE call from a woman who planned to give her husband a trip to golf school but wanted Shelby to tell the husband that his tuition was nonrefundable. Shelby said he couldn't do that, because the school did, in fact, have a cancellation policy. But the woman was adamant, and she explained why: Although her husband had always loved golf above all other activities, his swing had decayed as he had gotten older, and, in frustration, he had stopped playing altogether. Now he was so miserable that he was making her miserable, too. She was certain that golf school would repair his swing, but she knew that if she signed him up behind his back he would angrily insist that the whole thing was a pointless waste, and would demand a refund. She said, though, that he was such a cheapskate that he would feel compelled to attend if he believed his fee was irretrievable. Shelby reluctantly agreed to the deception. The husband—furious—showed up with his golf clubs. Shelby straightened him out in a couple of days, and the husband went back to playing golf, as happy as if he were mainlining Viagra. A couple of weeks later, the wife sent Shelby a bottle of wine and a note that said, "You saved a marriage."

My father-in-law, Christopher Hodgman, is a semi-retired psychiatrist and medical-school professor. His specialty is childhood and adolescence, but he has a side interest in gerontology, and for a number of years he taught a course on human development, in which he used his father (who got a speeding ticket when he was 83; took painting, computer and French classes when he was in his 90s; and lived to be almost 100) as a lecture prop. Recently, I talked to him about my swing makeover. He said, "A lot of the failing we experience as we age arises because we decide we're too old to do something anymore, and so we stop doing it. And, of course, once we've stopped doing it for long enough, we really can't do it anymore—although even then we can teach ourselves to do it again, if we work at it. There was an important study in which a group of nonagenarian men in a nursing home were able to double the strength of their legs in eight weeks, by doing leg-lifting exercises. That result came as a surprise, because almost everybody had assumed that once you'd lost something at that age you'd lost it for good. I think the message is that, no matter what age you are, the fact that you're still alive is proof that you are a survivor—so you should act like one."

Aging is a bummer, but immortality would be worse: Imagine playing a big-money match against a guy who'd been working on his short game since the Reformation. (Or—worse still—imagine getting the yips at 60 and knowing that you'd be jabbing at short ones until the sun burned out.) The years eventually catch up with all of us, but that doesn't mean we have to capitulate in advance.

Before I left Scottsdale, Shelby told me, "Your best golf is ahead of you." I proved him right almost immediately—and I hope to keep on proving him right for as long as I can lift a club. One of golf's best features, in comparison with other sports, is that it generously rewards experience and mental toughness, the traits that enable wily old guys to pick apart long-hitting whippersnappers in head-to-head matches. Combine those powerful psychological weapons with an improved backswing, a new driver and several hundred dollars' worth of pured graphite shafts, and how can you lose?

*Contributing Editor David Owen chronicles his game monthly in a Golf Digest column. His books include* Hit & Hope: How the Rest of Us Play Golf *and* My Usual Game: Adventures in Golf.