

# UNDER REPAIR

A YEAR AFTER HIS **DREAM MAKEOVER**,  
OUR MAN FIXES SOME GREMLINS **BY DAVID OWEN**



**IT'S BEEN A YEAR SINCE THE EDITORS** of this magazine forced you to look at photographs of me swinging golf clubs. The photographs accompanied an article called "The Dream Makeover," which appeared in the May 2006 issue. It documented my attempt, shortly after I turned 50, to revive my golf game, mainly by taking lessons. →





During my makeover, I spent 4½ days with Shelby Futch, who is a terrific teacher and runs the magazine's golf schools. We devoted virtually all of that time to just one thing, my backswing, which had deteriorated into the kind of powerless coal-shoveling move that you often see in seniors and beginners. Shelby twisted my torso into painfully unfamiliar positions, then taught me how to find those positions on my own by imagining that I was turning "underneath and upside down" as I took back the club.

My improved backswing changed my life. At my home club a few weeks later, I shot the lowest score, by five strokes, that I'd ever shot in a stroke-play tournament (72!), and during the next two golf seasons I played my best, most consistent golf ever. I suffered occasional meltdowns after leaving Shelby's care, but I found that I could rescue myself by going to the range and reviewing the keys that he had planted

in my brain. This was important, because Shelby had declined my invitation to leave his wife and move into my daughter's old bedroom so that he could supervise my golf swing full-time.

I eventually cut my U.S. Golf Association Handicap Index almost in half (from 8.6 to 4.6), and my driver, which had spent most of the previous 15 years in timeout, became my favorite club. There were other effects, too. My godfather, Bill Groner, who once simultaneously held the men's and the senior men's club-championship titles at the Kansas City Country Club, studied the photographs in the magazine and wrote, "I'm glad to see that your anorexia is in remission."

My makeover made me feel 10 years younger, in golf years, and I yearned to repeat the experience. This past January, hoping for further improvements, I went to see Shelby again, and we spent five days working mainly on the other half of my swing—the half in which I actually hit the ball. As a courtesy to readers, the magazine did not send a photographer.

## LEARN FROM A TEACHER WHO LEARNS

If you ever find yourself shopping for a golf teacher, here's a question you should ask each candidate: Have you ever truly sucked? If the answer is no, consider looking elsewhere. Natural-born golfers can be inspiring role models, but they don't know enough about the dark side to be truly helpful as instructors. If you don't believe me, try figuring out how to hit a draw—or, for that matter, a fade—by reading Jack Nicklaus' 1974 instruction book, *Golf My Way*. (Nicklaus apparently had switches in his brain that he could set to "left," "right," "high," "low," whatever. If you're not similarly equipped, your results might differ.)

Shelby, in contrast, has ideal teaching credentials. He taught himself to play by hitting tennis balls in a Texas wheat field with clubs that his father had won in a poker game, and when he attended Oklahoma State University, on a golf scholar-





ship in the early 1960s, a well-meaning coach nearly destroyed his swing by trying to make his flat, homemade motion look more like the motion of the moment, which happened to be Nicklaus'. "Nicklaus took the club up very high, and I couldn't get there," Shelby told me. "I developed sort of a loop at the top, and it was just a car wreck." The experience persuaded him that no single method can be correct for everyone. The ordeal of resurrecting himself as a player became, eventually, the foundation of his teaching.

For Phase II of my makeover, I met Shelby on the driving range at Red Mountain Ranch Country Club, in Mesa, Ariz.—one of several properties owned by his company, Scottsdale Golf Group. He watched me hit a dozen iron shots, most of which were high, to the right, and not very long. This was a problem I'd been having increasingly in recent months. It didn't seem to affect my driver, my 4-wood or my hybrids most of the time, but it had thoroughly contaminated everything else. I had learned to play around it (for

example, by hitting 6-irons from spots where I'd once hit 8-irons), but I knew that something was seriously wrong. I had briefly considered trying to cure myself in the traditional manner, by buying new golf clubs, but in my heart I knew that I needed professional help.

Shelby began by tweaking my backswing. When I first went to see him, in 2005, he moved the handle of the golf club back at address (so that my hands were no longer a foot in front of the ball) and turned my left hand so that fewer knuckles were visible from above—and during the next 18 months I had overdone both corrections, as golf students tend to do. He put me back in the correct position and gave me a new image to think about: "As you take the club back," he said, "you should feel like your left shoulder is going down and over your right heel." This very useful swing thought,

## IT'S POSSIBLE THAT THE CLASSIC **OVER-THE-TOP** MOVE IS AT LEAST PARTLY PSYCHOLOGICAL

incidentally, is one of Annika Sorenstam's keys. (You've heard of her, right? See "How to Play Consistent Golf," in the January 2007 issue of *Golf Digest* at [golfdigest.com/annika](http://golfdigest.com/annika).)

As for my forward swing, Shelby said that he could see from my high-and-to-the-right ball flight that I was hitting my iron shots with the clubface open, and that this was having the effect of adding loft and subtracting distance. I was also swinging across the ball from the outside—the dreaded power-robbing move known as "coming over the top." That is, during my downswing the clubhead was traveling outside the line on which I had taken it back. This caused the clubhead to approach the ball from the far side of the target line—instead of from inside the target line, the way it's supposed to. This is one of my oldest golf afflictions, and it's probably the most common swing malady in the world. After Shelby's explanation, I added an exclamation mark to his diagnosis by hitting a half-dozen shanks with my pitching wedge.

It's possible that the classic over-the-top move is at least partly psychological. As you approach the top of your backswing (with your big muscles straining like the rigging of a storm-tossed ship) you begin

to feel dangerously far from the ball, and the panicky golf-destroying gremlins in your brain decide that they'd better hurry your right shoulder back around in a hurry, before the ball, if not the planet, vanishes from view. This habit is hard to break, partly because it doesn't always lead to disaster. "The most solid shots that most players make," Shelby says, "are shots they hit with an out-to-in path—as long as they release the club, letting the clubface close. Those shots might pull to the left, but they feel solid." Shelby says that Bobby Jones and Sam Snead, to name two pretty good players, both had over-the-top swings, in the sense that they brought the club down outside of the line on which they had taken it back. But he says that Jones and Snead, unlike me, didn't let the clubhead get outside the target line, so that they were still approaching the ball from the

inside. If I wanted to be more like them and less like me, I was going to have to learn to do that, too.

### IN THE DARK, NEEDING A METAPHOR

The best golf instruction, I think, is essentially metaphorical. Your instructor tells you to do something that he doesn't exactly want you to do (turn underneath and upside down) because he thinks that trying to do that might enable you to do the much more difficult thing that he really does want you to do (make a genuine turn). This sort of indirection is necessary, in part, because the golf swing happens too fast for real-time intervention. Shelby told me about an experiment (recounted in *Search for the Perfect Swing*, by Alastair Cochran and John Stobbs, published in 1968) in which golfers were asked to hit balls into a net inside a room that could be darkened at the flick of a switch. The golfers were told that the light would go out occasionally while they were swinging, and they were asked to react when that happened,



always has a massage after a game

has never worn plaid pants in his life

likes to imagine he's on tour when staying at

The Fairmont Scottsdale Princess



CELEBRATING A CENTURY  
OF DISTINCTION

everyone's an original



*Fairmont*  
HOTELS & RESORTS

africa • bermuda • canada • caribbean • europe • united states • mexico • united arab emirates

contact your travel consultant, visit [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com) or call fairmont at 1-800-441-1414



# 4

ACT YOUNG / PLAY YOUNG



bag while doing everything I could do to make sure that my club would strike the bag toe-first (thus making me release the club and counteracting the glancing impact that was causing my shots to go high and to the right), and he had me hit one-handed chip shots with my right hand and then with my left hand (in an effort to cure me of my habit of wrapping the club around myself at the finish), and he had me swing my 9-iron at the ground while consciously trying to make the leading edge dig into the turf (which is impossible to do if the club is fanned open at impact).

Each of these drills was sporadically helpful, and I hit a few good shots, but matching metaphors to golfers isn't easy, and I was pretty sure that we hadn't found the key. We broke for lunch, returned to the range for another hour or so, and then played golf. After a few holes, Shelby pointed out that on the course my good-shot percentage was

thetic to the person who's trying to learn to play golf."

## THE ANSWER IN THE VIDEOTAPE

On my second day at Red Mountain Ranch, Shelby had me join a putting class taught by Mike La Fond, who is a top instructor at the Golf Digest Schools and at John Jacobs' Golf Schools (which Shelby also runs). Mike quickly noticed that I was positioning my eyes inside my target line as I putted, and that I was setting up with my shoulders slightly closed—as though I had turned my upper body a little bit away from the hole. He said that this combination of eye position and shoulder misalignment would tend to make me draw the putter back outside the target line (as my brain attempted to compensate for my body position) and then pull my putts—exactly what I've always tended to do, especially on three-footers with money on the line. (In other words, I was coming over the top with my putter, too.) A couple of easy setup adjustments got everything working in the same direction. Fixed!

After my putting lesson, Shelby videotaped a few of my full swings and studied the pictures through the camera's viewfinder. Then he called me over and had me watch a slow-motion replay. "I think we've found it," he said. "Your backswing looks good, and the downswing starts well." He clicked forward, frame by frame. "But look where your club finishes." My follow-through was cramped and depressingly amateurish-looking: My left elbow jutted out like a chicken wing, and the shaft of the club finished below the level of my shoulder, pointing well to the left. The problem, Shelby said, was my head—not the inside of it (surprisingly) but the position of it: I wasn't letting it move as I swung.

"Keep your head still" might be the oldest injunction in golf, but it's "absolutely the worst thing you can do," Shelby explained. When he was at Oklahoma State, he said, one of the players on the team built a teepee-size tripod with a ski cap

## THIS SUGGESTED A POSSIBLE PATH MIGHT BE FOR ME TO UNDERGO A **RADICAL** BRAINECTOMY

either by stopping their swing, if they could, or by intentionally missing or mis-hitting their shot. "Of all the many golfers tested," the authors wrote, "not one could in any way alter his stroke when the light went off after a point just barely into the downswing." In other words, if your teacher wants to change the angle of your clubface at impact, he can't wait until the club is a foot from the ball and then shout, "Now!"

Shelby had me try several exercises that morning, searching for a metaphor that would enable me to swing the club more effectively. (This is how we had started with my backswing, too—by sort of tiptoeing around the problem, looking for an exploitable crack in the fortress of my muscle memory.) He had me hit shots with my back turned to the target (a position from which it is impossible to get the clubhead outside the target line), and he had me take three-quarter swings at a yellow vinyl bean

higher than it had been on the range—most likely, he said, because on the golf course I wasn't thinking as hard about what I was doing. This suggested that a possible path to improvement might be for me to undergo a radical brainectomy, something I'd often considered before.

Midway through our round, Shelby left to go to a horseback-riding lesson. His wife, Lorie, is an avid rider, and he had decided to surprise her by secretly learning to ride. In doing this, he was putting into practice one of his strongest pedagogical beliefs, which is that every teacher needs to be a student of something else, the better to understand the feelings and frustrations of his pupils. (Shelby also takes flying lessons with an aerobatics team for the same reason.) "I've had five or six riding lessons now," he told me, "and I'll be bouncing along in the saddle and thinking I must be doing something wrong, because nobody could possibly enjoy this. And then my teacher will say, 'Oh, no, you're too tense, you're too tense' and my reaction is, 'Damn right I'm tense—I'm about to fall off this thing.' It makes me very sympa-



hanging from a cord attached to the apex. "He would stand inside that thing and hit balls with the ski cap on his head, and the idea was that if he moved his head at all during his swing the cap would come off. We all tried it. We'd get in there and try to stay so still, and the next thing we knew we'd be hitting shots kind of like the ones you were hitting just now. The best players on the team, the guys who just loved to play and didn't practice much, they'd try it once and say, 'Oh, hell, that doesn't feel right,' and they wouldn't do it anymore. But guys like me would think, *Yéab, well, no pain, no gain*, and we'd keep at it until we were totally screwed up."

Shelby told me to watch a particular golf-school student hitting range balls just then, an older man who was keeping his head so still that he wasn't even looking up between shots. I could easily see that freezing his head was making him shorten his backswing and his follow-through, and I noticed the disturbing resemblance

## GOLF REMISSION

**At lunch the next day**, I asked Shelby how the idea of keeping the head still had gotten to be such a golf cliché. He said, "I think a lot of good players feel that they really do keep their head down for a long time, and in the early days they did do it a lot more than we do now. In old films, you'll see some players actually turning their chin back as their club is coming down to the ball, which is something that Alex Morrison and Henry Picard used to advocate, beginning in the 1930s. But Morrison and Picard also had players grip the club with the left thumb off the shaft, so there was a lot of play in their wrists, and that kind of made up for it." To hit good shots with a stationary head, he said, you have to be flexible enough to fully rotate your torso without taking your chin along with it. Older, less-lithe players—the kind who can't back down a driveway without turning halfway around in the seat—need to be especially lenient

## I NOTICED THE DISTURBING RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN HIS FINISH AND THE ONE I'D JUST WATCHED

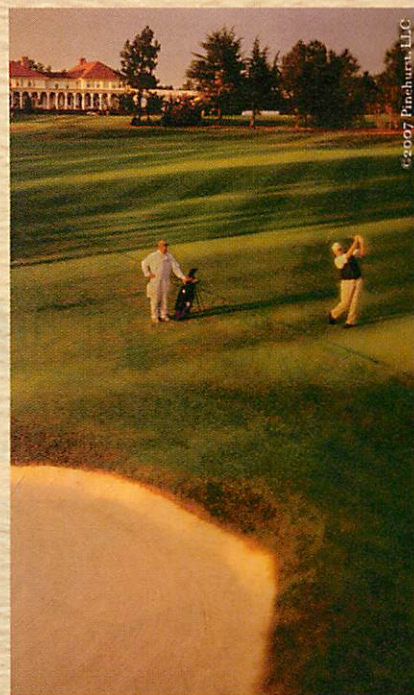
between his finish and the one I'd just watched in the viewfinder.

The fix, Shelby and I discovered that afternoon, was for me to turn my eyes and chin slightly to the left as I swung, a little bit the way Annika Sorenstam does. (Shelby has been my personal god for two years; Sorenstam is now my personal goddess.) This freed my head, and freeing my head freed my entire body. The improvement, amazingly, was close to instantaneous. Within a few dozen swings, I started hitting draws and rediscovered my missing yardage (age-adjusted). Later that day, I also developed my only blister of the week, on the top of the middle toe of my right foot. The explanation? Freeing my head enabled me to fully shift my weight to my left side on the downswing, the way you're supposed to do, with the result that my right foot no longer remained flat on the ground for too much of my swing. I had bought new golf shoes just before my trip to Arizona, and as my right heel began coming up into the proper finish position, for the first time in a long time, the stiff upper rubbed against the top of my toe.

about what their head gets up to when they play golf. For guys like us, immobilizing the chin while swinging is like jamming a stick into the spokes of a turning wheel.

Swing ailments can seldom be cured once and for all, even if the patient is Tiger Woods. Usually, the best that any golfer can hope for is a lengthy period of remission. That's what I got from my first visit to Shelby, and I'm pretty sure it's what I've gotten from my second. I've been back on my own for just a few months now, but all my iron shots are hugely improved. (My putting, chipping and pitching are better, too; fundamental swing flaws tend to run through the set.) On my last day at Red Mountain Ranch, I suddenly banged out half a dozen high draws with my 6-iron, and Shelby said, "I've got some good news and some bad news for you. And the bad news is that you're never going to hit the ball better than that."

*To see David Owen's Dream Makeover from May 2006, which included testing, lessons, new equipment and sport psychology, visit [golfdigest.com/makeover](http://golfdigest.com/makeover).*



now we'd like to host YOU.



Walk in the footsteps of the greatest golfers in the world at Pinehurst Resort with your own caddie to guide you along the way.

No. 2 Centennial Package  
3 Days/2 Nights | \$1235\*

One round on No.2 with caddie  
Two additional rounds • Deluxe accommodations • Golfer's Massage  
Breakfast and dinner daily

Challenge courses as legendary as those who've played them at a resort as timeless as the game itself.

800.804.5231 • [pinehurst.com](http://pinehurst.com)



\*Rate is per person, based on double occupancy. Subject to tax and resort service fee. Limit one round on No.2. Valid 6/3/07-9/5/07.



# TURN BACK THE CLOCK

HOW PRO **BOB FORD** IS KEEPING **JIM HAND'S** SWING FOREVER YOUNG  
BY **MATTHEW GINELLA**



**IF YOU BUY INTO THE NOTION** that an old dog can't learn new tricks, then the question remains, what is old? A famous football coach, George Allen, walked the sidelines until he was 72, and he claimed "age is just a number." Our model and inspiration for anyone who has ever stood over a golf ball is former banker and U.S. Golf Association president Jim Hand. Hand's "number" is 90, and he sets out almost daily to walk 18 holes or carry a large bucket of balls to the back of a driving range. At one point in his golf career he owned a scratch handicap. Time has been good to Hand, but something had to give, and his other number is now near 14. Hand says he has broken his age "maybe over a thousand times," but he doesn't keep records. A highlight was a 69 he shot at Sleepy Hollow Country Club, in Scarborough-on-Hudson, N.Y., when he was 81. Of course, when he came home to tell his

wife, Gussie, who passed away in 2005, she was quick to offer perspective. "What's the big deal?" she told me. "It gets easier to shoot your age every day." That was her way of needling me," Hand says, smiling.

You don't get to be as well-liked and well-respected as Jim Hand without a willingness to listen and learn. Enter Bob Ford, the pro at Seminole Golf Club in Florida and Oakmont Country Club in Pennsylvania and Hand's swing instructor. Hand and Ford, 53, have 143 years of golf knowledge between them, three years more than Tiger, Ernie, Phil and Annika combined.

"We're always trying to get Jim to take a full shoulder turn," says Ford, who adds that the tendency for someone Hand's age who has difficulty making a full turn is to get shorter and quicker. Says Hand: "I try to get back there, make a decent turn, and then feel like I'm pausing at the top before I let it go." He might not actually pause, but the thought helps keep his swing long and slow. Not long ago they had another breakthrough with Jim's swing.

## TURN THOSE SHOULDERS

Ford says flexibility is the key issue as we get older. Here, Ford helps Hand make a full shoulder turn. When Hand gets it back there he says, "It feels like something is going to crack."



### NO

Hand is trying to avoid rolling his wrists through impact, which Ford says causes his club to hit the ground behind the ball.



### YES

By leading longer with the left wrist and staying on top of the ball, Hand is now making consistent contact.

"We have been taught to release or roll our wrists through impact," says Ford. "But when Jim does that now, he tends to hit behind the ball." So instead, Ford has Hand trying to feel as if he's *not* doing that. "Now Bob has me making sure I keep the clubhead on top of the ball leading with the back of the left wrist a little longer through impact. It's still foreign to me," Hand says, "and for now I can only do it right half of the time."

Hand says what really drives him is competition. "If I have a 10-footer on the 18th hole, I'll grind on it and make sure I give it a good run." A good run is something Hand is familiar with. ♣