



TIM WEBB / LAUGHING STOCK

GOLF GURUS

Instructors offer holistic approaches to mastering the game

By Jeff Wallach

On a typical Sunday the average golfer heads for his or her local course filled with optimism and fantasies of shooting an incredible round. Unfortunately the odds are against them—only about 10 percent of golfers break 100 on a regular basis, which suggests that 90 percent could benefit from some good instruction.

If you're anything like me, you'd rather shank a dump truck full of Pro-V1s into a reedy pond than sign up for a traditional golf lesson. Most teaching pros emphasize the mechanical aspects of the golf swing, and most instructional books are plodding manuals full of diagrams, technical terms, and photos of proper grip, stance and alignment.

All important stuff, but consider this, too: On any given day even the most pitiful hacker occasionally executes a flawless shot that flies (or skids) true, plunges onto the green, and bounds toward the pin. So virtually all players possess at least the potential to hit great shots. The fact that most golfers can't execute those shots consistently offers a lesson of its own: Playing well calls for mental proficiency, too. True students of the game recognize this as part of the Zenlike nature of golf. They know that excelling requires not only physical, but psychological, mastery.

In recent years more enlightened (and often downright eccentric) golf instructors have begun teaching this aspect of the game. I've witnessed golf students skipping and shouting like lunatics, throwing clubs, hitting shots while blindfolded and standing on one leg, and otherwise acting in ways that would force you to inquire: What on earth could this possibly have to do with golf?

The following instructors have in common a dedication to using golf as a means, not just an end. They might as well be teaching French cooking classes or surfing or underwater basket making; their focus on golf is almost beside the point. They offer a path to mastery.

Don't be alarmed by the strange sounds emanating from the driving range. It's only Chuck Hogan shouting high-pitched "yippees!" into the air, slapping his students with double high fives, and dancing around on the grass.

Hogan, whose bulldog posture and gentle smile suggest a warmhearted football coach, still teaches golf lessons when he's not otherwise occupied trying to change the world, at least partly through golf. Hogan is an author, educator, mentor to such PGA touring pros as Peter Jacobsen, and—most recently—founder of a nonprofit institute called Athletics and the Intelligence of Play. Not just his

manner, but his ideas, set Hogan apart.

Hogan espouses two main concepts in his teaching: We must use our brains better in learning golf and everything else; and many of us experience mental problems on and off the links because as children we frequently didn't feel free to just play.

Golf lessons with Hogan are not exactly standard. For example, you might not touch a golf club or see a ball. Hogan calls his teaching philosophy "a humanities approach" that draws on such diverse disciplines as neurolinguistic programming, kinesiology, education, exercise physiology, quantum physics, and other modern and ancient traditions.

During my own "lessons" Hogan talked a lot about how my brain developed and how it works. Then he sent me off to do some homework—an 11-step process in which I was to list my golfing goals, priori-

tize them, visualize reaching them, develop a timeline, identify barriers to and resources supporting

my goals, create an action plan, set sub-goals, perform several other tasks, and then repeat the whole process. He also had me fill out several questionnaires meant to determine my hobbies, golf history and ayurvedic body type.

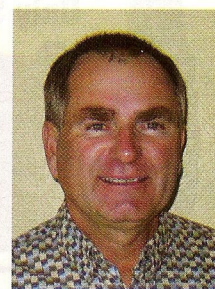
Even when we met on the driving range the next day, Hogan talked. He explained the importance of finding a model to imprint (such as the swing motion of Greg Norman), and insisted that I learn to associate with and celebrate my good shots (hence his yelling, "Yippee skippee"), and lend no emotional weight to my bad ones. Most important, Hogan said I must learn simply to play.

At the end of our time together (we did eventually hit golf balls), he offered some final words explaining what "golf lessons" are really about:

"The whole thing is to live in joy. Golf instructors keep talking about how it's hard work. It's not. It's deep play, but it takes discipline because the entire adult community refuses to do it. And this applies to everything.

"Golf is not like life. Golf is life."

At the beginning of one of his "Extraordinary Golf" workshops, Fred Shoemaker—a modest wizard in khaki pants—tells a group of golf



Showing golfers the path to enlightenment: From left, Ed LeBeau, Fred Shoemaker, and Chuck Hogan.

we've been told by other people, parental or societal voices that try to insist we do things in a certain way even when we know how to do these things better or more naturally. As an instructor, one of Shoemaker's goals is to help us remove interference and restore our Original Swings.

In his book *Extraordinary Golf*, he writes: "In the same way that looking for the perfect golf swing outside ourselves is inconsistent and frustrating, so too is seeking an identity from the outside world, and these things are connected in meaningful ways. Our identity is vitally important to us—it's our uniqueness, our individuality—and the quest for self identity extends to games, as well.

"Your thoughts, attitudes and emotions may change when you hit a bad golf shot, but there is a part of you that doesn't change. That is the deepest part of you, and when you can experience it, and play golf from it, you will have tapped into the source of consistency. Your golf will no longer be a search for who you are; it will be an expression of who you are."

At a time when many golf instructors employ video cameras, computer modeling and radar guns to analyze and correct swing mechanics, Ed LeBeau, founder of the Heartland Golf Schools, takes a different tack. He employs creative visualization, among other techniques, to treat the golfing ills of his students.

Although LeBeau's notion of the "Authentic Swing" is borrowed from the book *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, and he shares characteristics of Fred Shoemaker's concept of the Original Swing, it's how LeBeau helps golfers find this elusive motion that is unique. LeBeau believes the best way to uncover this swing is by exploring our interior rather than fixating on the swing's exterior manifestation.

LeBeau explains that the Chinese Taoist concept of Wu Wei suggests that visualization can produce a desired result more easily and reliably than consciously trying to execute a new swing technique. Much of the inner guided imagery practiced at Heartland is aimed at honing students' abilities to visualize not only the effective movement of the golf club, but also aspects of their own character that could help make an effective swing possible.

In a soft radio voice, LeBeau relaxes students into an almost pre-hypnotic state before encouraging them to commit all of their attention to their inner visualization, versus the external actions of club and ball. He guides students through

Finding a golf instructor who can teach you the mechanical fundamentals of golf—which, after all, are based on physics—is like finding a good tailor: Make certain that his or her teaching fits, or you may look and feel awkward sporting your swing on the golf course. Here are a few tips for finding the right teaching pro/physicist/tailor.

- Find a pro who can communicate technical information in a way that you understand. Just because an instructor is a great player doesn't mean he or she will be able to explain what makes his or her own game so good. Chat with the pro up front. Observe one of the pro's lessons at the driving range.
- A pro should be responsive to your own needs and develop lessons that work for you. Such a pro might alter his or her methods depending on whether you're tall and lanky or short and stocky. Although the fundamentals of golf are ironclad (swinging outside in will always produce a slice, for example), there are different ways of executing the fundamentals.
- Talk to golfers you know who have shown dramatic improvement in their games. Unless you play against them for money, they'll be happy to share their mentor.
- Consider investing some quality time in your game. Resorts throughout the West offer golf-school packages that range from several hours to several days, on some of the country's best courses. Explore your golf package options with **Alaska Airlines Vacations** on the Web at alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.

visualizing golf courses that exist only in their own imaginations. He talks them through visualizing golf shots.

If trouble arises along the way, LeBeau might encourage a golfer/traveler to consult his inner golf pro for advice—whether on how to hit a flop shot, or for a suggestion as to why he feels afraid when standing over a two-foot putt.

LeBeau's evolving approach to golf improvement encompasses wide-ranging philosophies and activities. In summing it all up, he says, "As you change your approach to the game of golf, you begin to attend. But you cannot and will not confine your learning to the golf course. Soon, you'll find that you're beginning to change your approach and are better attending to the rest of your life. Improved patience, creative vision, and personal reflection can and will show up at home and in your career. By changing your golf you put yourself on the road to changing your life. How's that for a reason to get rid of your slice?" ○

Jeff Wallach's most recent book, Best Places to Golf in the Northwest, will be published by Sasquatch Books in May.

Alternative golf instructors can be as hard to find as inner peace. Here are several resources that can help put you on the path:

Shivas Irons Society, Carmel, CA: 831-899-8441, www.shivas.org

Chuck Hogan, Wichita, KS and Redmond, OR: 316-686-1127, www.chuckhogan.com

Ed LeBeau, Heartland Golf Schools, St. Louis, MO: 314-453-0705, www.heartlandgolfschools.com

Fred Shoemaker, The School for Extraordinary Golf, Carmel, CA: 800-541-2444, www.extraordinarygolf.com