

# Business and Pleasure

**I**MAGINE YOU are the CEO of a large corporation and you receive the following E-mail from your vice president of marketing: "It's time for our department's annual off-site training retreat. This year our goals are (1) to increase our ability to communicate with each other; (2) to build a more cohesive, committed, and competent team, and (3) to break through to a new level of productivity, performance, and job satisfaction. So, I have enrolled us in a three-day golf school. Results on Monday."

The idea that you can improve your performance at the office by spending more time at the golf course is either a truly revolutionary idea or one of history's biggest boondoggles. But, according to the people who have attended Fred Shoemaker's School for Extraordinary Golf in Carmel, California, the process of working on your swing offers a rare opportunity for a deeper kind of learning than one might expect and, indeed, moments of self-revelation.

Shoemaker and his partner, Gary Lester, approach teaching the game in a style that is very different from other schools. As one participant, a financial planner from Philadelphia, puts it, "I came to Fred's school with the idea that it would be

similar to conventional golf schools, where you would learn about wrist position, weight shift, and other mechanical techniques," he says. "But I found it to be a deeper and more profound experience."

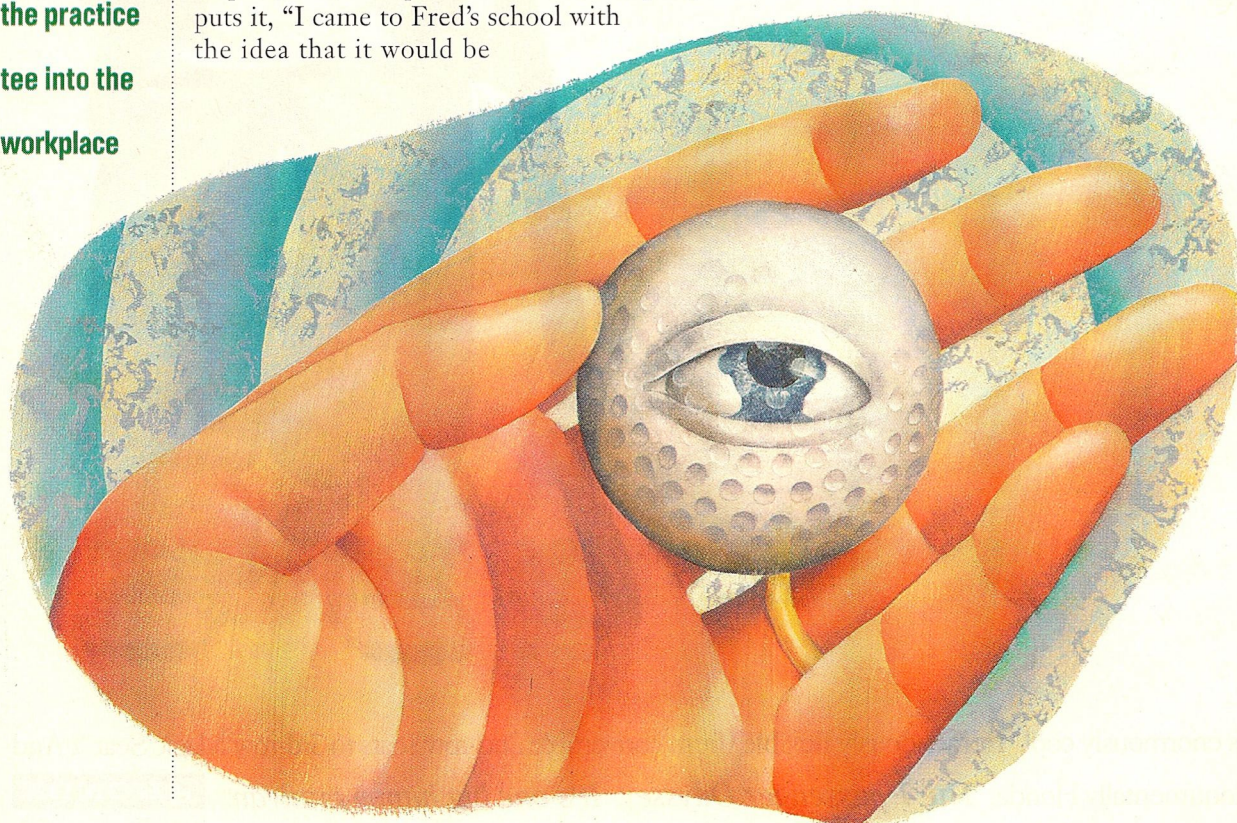
Profound. There's a word you don't hear very often when it comes to learning the game of golf. Rewarding, maybe. Challenging, sure. But profound? Obviously something is going on here. But what, exactly?

Shoemaker explains it this way: "We've designed a program where real learning—not information learning—takes place. It's the difference between looking at the menu and eating the meal, between reading a romance novel and falling in love. Between thinking about where the clubhead is and actually knowing where it is.

"Here's an example: Most people come to us with a problem. They say, 'I slice the ball' or 'I hook the ball' or 'I top the ball' or 'I hit

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it fat.' But that's not the problem; it's the result of the problem. The real problem is something that's happening in their swing. They are blind to what that is. Now, obviously nobody can solve a problem that they can't see. So rather than just prescribing a cure by giving them a tip or a technique, we create an environment in which they can observe what's happening for themselves, without judgment or evaluation, just with curiosity.

"The question we encourage them to ask is not, 'What am I doing wrong?' It's, 'What am I doing?' Period. If you take the evaluation and judgment out of there, what's left is awareness. And when someone actually becomes aware of the genesis of the problem, it changes automatically. The result is always an extraordinary leap in performance and the ongoing ability to self-coach."

Great. But that's golf. We are talking breakthroughs in business performance here—team building, deeper communication, cultural changes. These are things that take sweat, confrontation, and a ropes course or two. Three days on a driving range is not exactly Outward Bound. What makes Shoemaker think his way of coaching can lead people to new levels of performance in the workplace?

"The idea actually came from the students themselves," Shoemaker says. "Lots of business people come to the school and almost all of them bring what they learned into their work."

Students in Shoemaker's school explore subjects that sound like they are out of a business seminar: the nature of effective coaching, how to handle breakdowns, creativity, letting go of formulas, and staying true to your commitments in the midst of a challenging situation.

The results speak for themselves. A month after going through the school, an architect brought his four managing partners along with him. A city manager hired Shoemaker to spend a day coaching his supervisory staff, many of whom don't even play golf. A president of a large California winery started holding his staff meetings on the driving range.

"I found out things at the school I never imagined were available from golf," says Ravi Bhola, an insurance executive from San Diego. "For example, in a business environment, the way to handle mistakes is to avoid them at all costs. And that's what I brought to my game. Once I saw that, I realized I could include the mistakes

and learn from them. This not only produced a breakthrough in my golf game, but it was also directly applicable to my business life."

Golf is not a metaphor to Shoemaker. "The way we are on the golf course is the way we are in life," he says. "Golf is a practical, pragmatic game that gives instant feedback. We provide a unique environment in which people are able to observe that feedback to become aware of things they were not conscious of before. That awareness opens up a whole new set of possibilities for learning."

Says Richard Stone, a business consultant from Tucson, "I discovered the things that keep me from getting into the zone when I play golf are the same things that keep me from getting into the zone in my business or personal life. On the golf course, it might show up as fear and loathing of the six-foot putt. In my business, as fear and loathing of negotiating a tough contract; or in my personal relationships, as fear and loathing of telling someone the truth about how I feel."

On the second day of the school, students and coaches (Shoemaker prefers to call them "coaches" instead of "teachers") are standing on the putting green. Shoemaker takes a ball and places it two inches from the hole. "Is there any conversation in your head about making this putt?" he asks.

"Of course not," replies one of the students. "It's a tap-in."

Shoemaker moves it to six inches. "How about now?" "Nope."

Again, he moves it, this time to about a foot-and-a-half. "Here?"

"Not yet."

He moves the ball 2 1/2 feet away. Someone says, "I just heard a voice in my head say, 'Uh oh, I could miss this.' And there is a slight tightening in my stomach."

"Exactly," Shoemaker says. "That's self-interference, the voice in your head that interferes with what you intend to accomplish. It causes us to move from the free expression of our ability, to the need to not make a mistake."

Everyone agrees that this is more than just golf instruction. This is learning that translates from the golf course to the office and beyond. ●

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