

# An extraordinary Golf school

by David Outerbridge

What's going on? During the wrap-up session at Fred Shoemaker's School for Extraordinary Golf, a woman bursts into tears as she describes what the three-day experience has meant to her. A few minutes later a grown man does the same. Well, any alumnus of this very special golf school will not be surprised by this news. Yes, there are the driving range and practice putting greens and bunkers that adorn any teaching facility. And yes, our swings are videoed. But similarities pretty much end right there. Shoemaker helps his students develop a new relationship with the game. Enjoyment, learning and performance are the three elements that the school addresses. Let's take a look at these, starting with *learning*.

Shoemaker opens each session with this startling assertion: "Everything you need to know, you already have." Huh? Then why do I have a 20 handicap? Why are my shots so erratic? The answer, he says, is that when we think we are paying attention to our swing, in fact we really are not. In an effort to "do it right," to avoid mishitting the ball, we take our attention away from what we are trying to do.

All students are videoed at the beginning of the school. In one recent class the mix included men and women, low handicappers, absolute beginners, a spread of ages. Yet in each case the videos revealed a common problem: In the downswing, the club comes over the top, and in varying degrees

among the group the wrist-cock is lost before the clubhead reaches impact. Okay, perhaps no real surprise there. But Shoemaker also videotapes his students doing something else. He hands each an old club and has them take their normal backswing. But then they are to swing and hurl the club down the range. The tape of each student in this exercise reveals a perfect swing shape, with a late release of the wrists. Fifteen intelligent adults watching the screen are stunned into silence. What is going on?

Back to the range, and the class goes through a drill of alternately hitting a ball and throwing a club. Soon students *feel* the difference in the swing. Shoemaker tells us that we come to the range not to change what we just saw in the video, but first to actually feel what it is that we currently do—the beginning of awareness. Simple awareness of what we do has astonishing curative powers.

Why is it, then, that in throwing the club the swing is what it should be, but we make mistakes in a normal shot? In the answer to this, Shoemaker delivers one of his fundamental precepts: It is a fallacy to think that the golf ball is the target. "The target is out there," he says, pointing down the range. "I want you to be fascinated with the target, not fascinated with the ball." That is why the club is hurled with such freedom, sweeping the golfer's weight toward the target. Shoemaker and his assistants coach their class until everyone *owns* the difference between the two ideas.



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Then it's off to the putting green for a change of pace. Except we are not going to be putting toward the cup. Some white threads have been stretched out on the grass. What's going on now?

**W**e are told to place a golf ball three inches from the thread, close our eyes, and putt to have it stop on the thread. Before we open our eyes, we must say aloud if we think the putt was long or short, and by how much. After a few minutes of this, we set the ball six inches back and repeat the drill. Then a foot, three feet, six feet and finally nine feet, putting a dozen balls from each station. Then we rotate the distances, always with eyes closed and announcing where we believe the ball has stopped. At the conclusion of this exercise, we have begun to have awareness, feel, of the putter, ball and distance. We are on the way to becoming better putters, and have a way to practice.

On the second day, Shoemaker takes the class on a morning walk on three holes and begins to talk about *enjoyment*. He talks a little about the contours, the greenness of the game's environment, the flight of the ball. Then he purposely hits a bad shot, sending a ball into the scrub. "What is your reaction when you hit a bad shot?" he asks. "Why do people get nervous when they step up to the first tee? Because they are fearful they will repeat a bad shot from the past." This is a limited view of the possibilities. The school tries to make us aware that we are letting negative thoughts in. This creates an interference with what we are trying to do, and according to Shoemaker there is no technique that can deal with interference. He believes that if we doubt our ability, then we'll get caught up in paying attention to the doubt. Awareness comes from simply noticing what we pay attention to.

His talk is hypnotic: We are drawn into a softer but richer view of what is going on during a round. Yet we are not hypnotized, only to be awakened into a former reality when the show is over. In this softer view we are part of a beautiful landscape. We are free of the yips, of choking, of tenseness (which shorten muscles, causing mishits). We have learned how to "let go" and are playing with enjoyment and freedom. As any golfer is never more than a

few strokes from a problem, we are learning how to live with them, moving on to enjoy the rest of the round. From introspection to extrospection in one leap. In part, it was this utter freedom from the constrictions of embarrassment and frustration that brought such emotions out in the final session.

But new levels of *performance* are strong medicine, too. "How many of you keep doing the same thing, hoping for a different result?" Shoemaker asks a group of golfers. Everyone raises his hand. "That is the clinical definition of insanity," he says drolly.

**A**t the school, performance changes because there is learning. Learning as solid and permanent as mastering a bicycle. For players at different levels it comes in different ways. Want to produce more distance? Take some practice swings and listen to where the *whoosh* is. If you hear it from your right ear, it means the clubhead has reached maximum speed before impact, giving less distance. Practice swinging until you hear the noise just to the left of the ball. Now hit a few. They go further.

Has a tendency to slice been a perennial problem? It takes Shoemaker not more than two minutes to have players sending the ball left or right at will. While the coaching is key to learning all this, the feeling that approximates what will produce a hook instead of a slice is this: Imagine turning a key in a lock counterclockwise with the left hand. That action applied to the club as the hands swing through impact will produce a shot to the left.

Although some of the breakthroughs happen in minutes, it takes three days for the effect of what has changed to become fully integrated. Yes, everything we need for this game we already have, but it has taken Fred Shoemaker to bring us back to our instincts, to be open to the sounds, the feelings, the shape of a swing that is aimed toward a target, not the ball. To be rid of those unspoken thoughts in the head that ruin concentration. To develop an awareness of the body, the terrain and the club—an awareness that all great players have.

What's going on? The answer is that people are crying because this school has opened them to a rare level of happiness. It is tied to their golf game, but probably even more profound than that. ●