

Old Dogs and New Golf Tricks

It is particularly satisfying to teach an old dog a new trick. Some folks say it can't be done, as in "you can't teach old dog new tricks," but I know it can be done. An old dog may not pick up on a new behavior as quickly as a puppy, but when old Bowser finally gets it, the family celebrates! Why am I writing about dogs in a golf magazine? What relevance do old dogs and golfers have in common? Let me explain.

I retired after a forty-three year career and knew that the tennis I had been playing for so many years wouldn't work as my retirement sport since I had already had three knee surgeries. I had always been interested in athletics, playing football (where I first injured my knees), basketball and baseball in high school, and varsity soccer and intramural wrestling at The Ohio State University. I decided, like many other retirees, to take up golf. My other retired friends had all played golf either their entire life or learned in early adulthood.

I had never played golf, unless you count the two or three times I played while in the Navy, even managing to play on sand "greens" while in Japan one time. I decided to approach golf in what many of my friends said was the correct way...getting lessons! My friends recommended this approach, but of course none of them had bothered to take lessons themselves and were "far too along in their golf experience to try something new." Lessons, I have learned, are good for other folks, but not for folks who already "know" how to play the game.

My first teacher was our club professional, and because I was sixty-years old, he recommended that I purchase senior clubs. It made sense to me. I took a lesson a month, practiced once a week and played two or three times a week. The course was quite difficult, but that only made me appreciate the game even more. I remember watching a fellow warm up and imagined that I would be better than him in several weeks. He had a very unorthodox swing, knees low to the ground and an extremely flat swing, almost as if he was going to hit a ball off of a two-foot high wall. What I didn't appreciate was that he had been hitting that same way for forty-years and was a twelve handicapper. I looked better right away but I have never approached his scoring level!

My "first year highlights" occurred in front of groups of people. The first "highlight" occurred while the pro was showing ten prospective members around the course. The last hole on our course was a dogleg left, over water and measured four hundred forty yards...with the midpoint of the fairway being at the highest point. I hit the best drive of my young career, cutting the corner and ending up two hundred yards from the green (I didn't hit a two-hundred forty yard drive, but by cutting the corner had achieved that result).

As I was walking to my ball, I noticed that these prospective members had gather around my ball and were waiting for me to get there. The pro introduced us, told them I was a new golfer, and since I was a member of the membership committee, asked me to tell them my favorite parts about our club. After socializing several minutes, the pro said, "Well,

show them how to hit this shot Glenn.” I wanted to feign injury, or just have them disappear, but had no choice and hit the ball with my three wood, a club I usually sliced into (if I was unlucky) or near the woods (if I was lucky) on this hole. Not this time!

The ball rose like no ball I had ever hit before...not a slice or a draw, but straight to the green. One bounce and my ball rolled on the green, twelve or fifteen feet from the hole. The pro said, “Nice shot,” and drove off with his guests. I am glad they didn’t watch the rest of the hole as I three putted for a bogey. I played at that club for five more years and although I panned that hole several times, never got on that green again in two!

My second “first year high light” occurred on a one hundred seventy-yard par three. I was walking the course alone and a foursome waved me through. The group included the coaches of the local division one football team, and believe it or not, I landed the ball at the three o’clock position, it circled up and then down to within four feet of the hole. I made the putt for my first and only birdie on that hole during the entire time I played that course.

I have continued taking about three or four lessons each year and have slowly improved. My muscle memory just isn’t what it was during the teenage years and I have to visualize what I am to do before each shot. I have now played for twelve years and think golf is the best game I have ever played. I no longer play at a club and enjoy playing different courses each a week. I still practice at least once a week

and play two to four times a week. I now use hybrid irons with regular shafts and have found that to be better for me. I have a USGA handicap of 17.3 and have turned in every card of every round. I stopped taking mulligans two or three years ago and have really tried hard to respect the game.

But what about the Old Dog/New Trick concept? Well, unlike most sports we take up later in life, golf allows one to improve, and even be competitive, at an advanced age. A seventy-three year old man can't take up basketball or baseball or football and legitimately defeat a young man, but that is possible in golf. And, as for your golfing buddies, who have played their entire lives, and are now lamenting that their game is going South, a relatively new (old dog) golfer like me gets to celebrate his improving game.

I say, "Start playing golf at any age if your health permits...and you will be glad you did." Old dogs and old people can learn new tricks...just make sure that your dog learns to stay and sit and roll over and you get off the couch and learn to chip and putt. You will be grateful if you take this advice...you can fall in love with this great game...no matter what your age!

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