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GOLF JOURNAL | DECEMBER 18, 2009

Mickelson: Don't Try This at Home

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



Phil Shares the Secrets of His Famous Short Game: 'Hinge, Hold and Get It Within 3 Feet'

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Phil Mickelson, the No. 2-ranked golfer in the world behind you-know-who (and comfortably ahead of No. 3, Steve Stricker), has always been most famous for his short game. Invariably it's described as "creative" or "imaginative" for the way he makes chips and short pitches dance, spin, check or roll out as circumstances warrant—and sometimes even when circumstances don't warrant. Once at the AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am, when his ball lay on a downslope above a bunker, he turned to face away from the green and hit the shot backward, over his shoulder, onto the putting surface.



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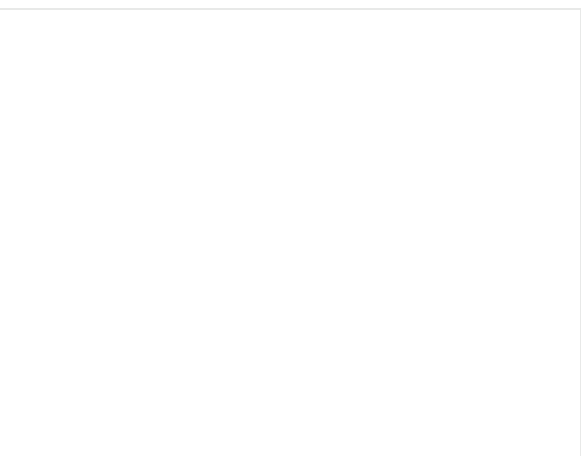
Phil Mickelson gets ready for a birdie putt Sept. 11 at the BMW Championship, at Cog Hill Golf & Country Club in Lemont, Ill.

The standard wisdom in short-game instruction is to chip or pitch the ball so that it lands on the green as close to the edge as possible and runs the rest of the way to the hole. For most players that's a much safer approach than the airborne shots Mr. Mickelson is known for. His signature shot is the flop, which shoots practically straight up off the clubface and lands softly, like a butterfly with sore feet (as they say), but requires a big, scary swing to produce.

Mr. Mickelson acknowledged in a telephone interview that choosing the low, running shots is "not a bad rule of thumb" for most

golfers. But not for him. "I've always had a great deal of confidence in my ability to go through the air, which can take some of the uncertainties about green undulations and so forth out of the equation. I've always practiced those shots a lot, so I feel comfortable relying on them in competition. I've pulled off some very big, important lob shots in tournaments, which is why I've been identified with that shot. Probably rightly so," he said.

Mr. Mickelson demonstrates how to hit his entire repertoire of short-game shots, including that backward circus trick, in his first-ever instructional book and DVD (sold separately), called "Secrets of the Short Game." Naturally, he makes it all look easy, and his explanations are for the most part crystal-clear. But that doesn't mean that everyone will be able to master them, especially people who didn't grow up with a backyard chipping green as Mr. Mickelson did. (For his kids, and himself, he's building a six-hole par-three course, with a 190-yard driving range, at his house near San Diego. It should be finished in two or three months.)



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About John Paul Newport

An avid golfer himself, John Paul Newport has written the weekly Golf Journal column since June 2006. Before joining the Journal, he was executive editor of Travel+Leisure Golf for two years. He previously worked as a widely published freelance writer, and during the 1980s was a staff writer for Fortune. He started his career in Texas at his hometown newspaper, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

Mr. Newport is the author of "The Fine Green Line," an account of his year spent competing on pro golf's mini-tours in an effort to qualify for the PGA Tour, published in 2000 by Broadway Books. He graduated from Harvard.

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The flop shot, in particular, is almost impossible for mere mortals. We learn in the book and DVD that it is not at all the same thing as the much easier lob shot. One hits the latter when the ball is sitting up in the grass; the clubface, opened to create extra loft, slices into the ball directly with only minimal interference from the grass. The flop shot, by contrast, can be used when the ball rests on tightly mown turf. The clubface, also open, smashes into the ground several inches behind the ball, penetrates the turf and "bounces" back upward from beneath the ball, sending it on a very high arch. This is done with a full swing generating clubhead speed of 70 miles per hour or greater, so blading the ball 50 yards over the green is a real possibility. To develop the confidence necessary to deploy this shot in a clutch situation would require, by my estimate, 20 years of constant practice, plus hypnosis.

Mr. Mickelson told me he didn't write this book sooner because he didn't want to give away trade secrets. "I was presented with some opportunities, there was some back and forth, but I said, 'Listen, until I win a major championship, the answer is, emphatically, no.' Until then, I didn't feel like I had the credibility to talk about technique. But even after I won my first major [the Masters in 2004], I refrained from writing an instructional because I knew there was such a lack of information about the short game, especially among my peers, that it would hurt my chances to perform at the highest level because my competition would get better."

Full-swing instruction and technique has advanced so far in the last decade or so, he said, that almost all the top Tour players strike the ball "immaculately." The short game is another matter. "When they get inside 50 yards, their competency level drops off exponentially," he said. Ouch.

So why write the book now? "I feel more comfortable probably in my career, as I get older," he said. He turned 39 in June. "I also feel an obligation to try to help the game of golf, to educate the golfing public and make the game more enjoyable."

Part of the fun of the DVD is getting a taste of Mr. Mickelson's self-assured personality. He declaims on his favorite subject with passion. In reference to two often-taught chipping techniques—one that calls for locking the wrists and another that relates swing positions to a clockface—he says, "What? If anybody tries to teach you one of those two methods..... you've got to run and find somebody [else] who knows what the hell they're talking about."

The core of Mr. Mickelson's short-game approach is, first, to absolutely master making putts inside 3 feet and, second, to reliably park chips and short pitches inside that 3-foot radius. Not 4 feet, from which distance even the Tour pros make only 90%. Not 6 feet, from which the pros miss almost half. But 3 feet. "The key to the short game is not how well you putt, but where you putt from," he said.

He's serious about those 3-foot putts. In season, he said, he practices making 100 3-footers in a row from a circle around the hole. If he misses on the 87th, he starts over, thereby simulating tournament pressure. And he recommends that anyone who is serious about improving his or her short game to do the same, albeit at a level appropriate to an amateur's skill—maybe just 10 in a row to start.

"There are a million good ways to putt," Mr. Mickelson said, and he doesn't insist on any one technique. In fact, he said, the stroke itself is a minor, almost insignificant, part of putting. Much more critical are consistent setup, reading greens and—most important of all—aiming the clubface correctly. "You have to train your eyes," he said. "If you can't aim the clubface correctly, you've got no chance."

With chipping and pitching, however, he's adamant there's only one effective technique: his technique, which he calls "hinge and hold." He cocks his wrists immediately upon taking the club away from the ball, and holds that angle while accelerating the hands toward the target even after impact. "I've studied it, and all the great chippers through history have chipped this way," he said. As for amateurs, of the 200 or so he plays with annually in pro-ams or outings, "maybe only two or three know how to chip correctly," he said. And not one of them can hit a proper flop.

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