



TARGET ENGAGED

In an instruction special with an unusual twist, Premium Golf's Alex Nicolson joins up with the Royal Navy golf team on board HMS Duncan to reveal how you can unleash your true power potential with missile-like effect. Take aim and fire...

I recently joined up with the Royal Navy golf team, helping them prepare for the Inter-Services Golf Championships. The team is made up of some fine players, with the highest handicap being five. Like most of my regular pupils, the Royal Navy team have less opportunity to practise than they would like, and due to service commitments are often away from the game for weeks at a time.

With our association came the opportunity to visit a new Type 45 destroyer, HMS Duncan – a truly magnificent feat of engineering. While being given a tour of the ship, two of her many capabilities stood out eye-catching ways of explaining some extremely valuable assets you could deploy for your own golf game.

The large rotating sphere on top of the mast houses a state-of-the-art radar tracking system called SAMPSON, which can detect incoming threats within a 400km range. If required to defend itself, the ship can track its target and strike with breathtaking accuracy using its Sea Viper surface-to-air missile system. “If only I had such capability in my golf swing,” you might be saying to yourself.

Most golfers I speak to see their swing fault as both randomly acquired and extremely difficult to change. However, consider the possibility that the fault is not an accident – it's what your brain thinks you need. Our bodies are capable of adapting to the task presented to them and you are not, as it might sometimes feel, shackled to a repeating bad swing.

Like the ship's radar, our brain is constantly scanning the environment around us for anything of interest. When we focus on something in particular, our attention can lock on to it, and the body responds accordingly.

To illustrate how this works, let's take two of the most common swing faults. Firstly, 'casting' the clubhead on the way down and, secondly, falling on to the back foot through impact (turn over for illustration). Both result in thin or fat shots as well as a loss of power.

Many golfers looking to rid themselves of these faults might use swing thoughts such as “keep the lag in my wrists” or “get my weight on the front foot”. While technically these are desirable traits, thinking about them is not actually dealing with the true source of the problem. →

What is your target?

In the first lesson with a pupil displaying these faults, I would ask the above question. What I commonly discover is that while the flag or green may have started off as their target, there is an 'Argh!' moment as they start the downswing. They notice the ball again and, in a split second, the target of their swing switches to the ball. If you find the smoothness of your practice swing disappears when there's a ball in the way, perhaps this is happening in your swing, but you've never noticed it before.

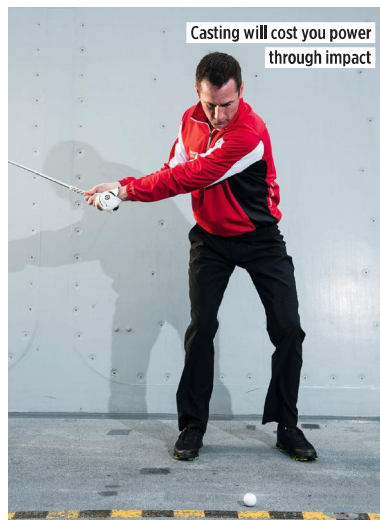
If you look at your swing in this context, the downswing faults no longer seem so random. Falling backwards through the shot or casting the clubhead make much more sense – they are symptoms of the anticipation of impact.

Your most effortless golf is possible if you see the purpose of the swing as the target (i.e the flag), and on its journey it collects the ball. Have you noticed how much time the best players spend looking 'out there' rather than 'down there?' Note, this is not something to start doing after you've solved the swing, it's something that can heal the swing itself.

CLUB THROWING

What we often do in our coaching to help golfers experience the difference between a tension-filled, impact-anticipating hit, and a free-flowing swing to a target is, believe it or not, throw clubs. We find a spot with plenty of space (in every direction), take some old clubs, and ask the golfer to take a regular address position, focusing their attention on a target 10 to 15 yards in front of them. Without worrying about technique, the trick is to just eye up the target and let it go.

What happens is genuinely remarkable, impact-anticipating faults, such as casting



the clubhead and falling on to the back foot, disappear. When we video new (often disbelieving) pupils, their throwing swing looks like the one they always aspired to: athletic, efficient, free-flowing, with wonderful extension of the arms into the follow-through. This drill shows that your body employs different techniques depending on the target. Club-throwing swings work because the brain is in no doubt that the target is 'out there', not 'down there', and produces different mechanics accordingly.

PICTURE THE TARGET

If you don't have the space to practise your own club-missile system, you can get a feel for it without actually letting go of the club. When you're next at the range, start off with some small pitch shots. Without a ball, stand in the set-up position, and take a really good look at the flag. Burn that image into your brain, so that when your eyes return to the ground, you can still picture the flag. How long can you hold that image for?

Now, make some practice swings feeling as if the flag is drawing the clubhead towards it. Your body will subconsciously make little adjustments towards this new goal. It's a swing change, but without really trying.

STRIKE POINT

Before you introduce the ball, you need to make sure you can strike the turf after where the ball would be – in a real shot with an iron, the lowest point of your swing should be about three inches after the ball. The majority of golfers may find they strike the turf too early at first, but if the flag consistently remains the target of the swing, your ability to make turf contact later will improve.

The trick is to keep your attention on the flag during the swing. No swing thoughts, no instructions to yourself, simply an image of the flag. This is an exercise in concentration that will have mechanical benefits. The reward will be more clubhead speed without tension, a better ball-turf contact and a wonderful sense of freedom in the swing.



Your radar tracking system

The Type 45 destroyer is a standard-setting feat of engineering. With stealth technology and one of the most advanced radar tracking systems in the world, its effectiveness in battle is as much to do with what you can't see as what you can. I'd now like to champion an invisible hero of swing improvement, which could be your best weapon against unenjoyable golf.

The human brain has a radar-like capability, which is responsible for some of sport's most dazzling performances. It's often referred to as awareness. Just as a footballer needs to sense where he is in relation to the ball, his team-mates and the goal, it is a vital skill for a golfer to have a sense of where the target, the ball and the club are during a shot.

Have you ever seen your swing on video and been surprised at what you saw? Was your swing longer than you imagined, or was the plane different from how it felt? If so, you witnessed an awareness gap.

AWARENESS GAP

The problem is that trying to fix something because it 'looked' wrong, is not how we learnt other physical skills when we grew up, and this can lead to a very frustrating relationship with golf.

Whereas many adult golfers' minds become cluttered with theory, as children they were able to rapidly learn complex skills such as walking, throwing, and hitting. These came not from an instruction manual, but from pure awareness of what was happening, and making subtle, instinctive adjustments. Understanding or deducing that something went wrong in your swing is not the same as the experience – being aware, in the moment, that it's happening. I find many golfers during their swing are so busy talking to themselves, or telling a body part to move in a certain way – "turn the shoulders, keep the head down" – that they lose sense of what is actually happening. If this isn't producing consistently enjoyable golf, there's another approach.

In the first section, we talked about placing awareness on the target. An alternative is to focus on the clubhead. After all, it's the thing that's going to hit the ball. Take a mid-iron and, without a ball, make some really slow swings with your eyes closed. See if you can track the clubhead with your mind for the full journey of the swing. If you manage that, try doing it with your eyes open, and then progress to hitting balls.



"Focus on the clubhead. After all, it's the thing that's going to hit the ball"

Occasionally, I coach golfers who can do this straight away, but normally it takes a few goes to get the idea, because other thoughts are dying to pop into your head.

BLIND SPOTS

When you hit balls, are there any parts of the swing where you lose track of the clubhead? – i.e. where you simply don't know where it is or what it's doing. When coaching, I'm particularly interested in these 'blind spots', as these are where the swing faults normally hide. By playing around with the path the clubhead follows and how the clubface behaves, however, you can develop a feel for what is actually happening in your regular swing. Again, this is an instinctive approach that's likely to improve the mechanics of your swing.

You can view a series of video exercises on the Premium Golf website (premiumgolf.co.uk) which show you how to use a clubhead

focus to straighten out kinks in your swing instinctively. For players searching for a clear direction on how to improve and enjoy their golf, the area to turn your attention to is the swing path and clubface.

CHECKLIST

Before you can improve, you need to be aware of what's currently happening. Sources of feedback that can help refine your natural instincts include:

- The starting direction and curvature of the ball, and the divot direction.
- Slow-motion video of the club's journey through the swing.
- Launch monitor data of the path and face angle of the club.

Golfers who have poor awareness of their own swing tend to move from one swing thought to the next, rarely finding consistency. If you find you rarely play to the level you know you're capable of, then I would strongly recommend you pursue developing awareness as a skill. It will help you tap into reserves of potential, where your best golf resides. **GM**