

Smashing Balls Golf

This article is from 2010 on fitness and golf.

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4 Weeks to a Super Golf Game

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“**What** if I told you that you could hit a golf ball as far as Tiger Woods?” Dave Phillips asks. We are standing on a practice range at the Titleist Performance Institute, an elite training facility in Oceanside, Calif., that caters to many top professional golfers. Phillips, a TPI co-founder and a highly respected instructor, is watching a high-tech radar device called TrackMan capture data about my swing and ball flight. I’m feeling a little self-conscious, especially after learning that Camilo Villegas, one of the PGA Tour’s fittest players, flexed his biceps on this very spot the day before. But Phillips assures me that my technique is not the problem. “An instructor can show you how to swing like Tiger. But if you don’t have the physical ability to get your body in the same positions, it won’t help you. Improve your fitness, and you will hit the ball farther.”

Gaining distance off the tee is golf’s Holy Grail, yet most golf instruction continues to focus on improving a player’s technique rather than his physique. After all, the thinking goes, how fit do you really need to be to drive around in a cart with a cold beer in one hand and a hot dog in the other? In golf, you don’t even need to chase the ball; it just lies there placidly, waiting for you to hit it. Among professional golfers, however, the attitude toward working out has shifted significantly over the past decade. Despite his recent struggles, no one can deny that Woods ushered in a new era of athleticism, replacing the image of the flabby, pear-shaped tour pro with that of an imposing, muscular athlete who would not look out of place on the basketball court or a football field. Even pros who still carry a layer of extra padding beneath their golf shirts, like long-driving two-time Major-winner Angel Cabrera, now possess the strength and flexibility of a teenage gymnast.

“**Fitness** is a huge part of every tour player’s routine,” says Greg Rose, who co-founded TPI with Phillips in 2004, “especially the younger players who grew up watching Tiger.” Witness the lineup for the upcoming Ryder Cup, the biennial team competition between the U.S. and Europe. With first-timers like Rickie Fowler and Dustin Johnson joining Woods on the U.S. side, conclaves are more likely to take place in the fitness trailer than around the dining

table.

In March, Phillips and Rose invited me to TPI's 33-acre golf geek's paradise 40 miles north of San Diego to demonstrate the impact a golf-specific fitness regimen could have on my game. Phillips assessed my swing and Rose evaluated my strength, balance, and flexibility. While I work out regularly with weights and run 15 miles a week, I quickly learned that there is an enormous difference between general fitness and golf fitness.

Rose discovered I had limited mobility in my hips and ankles, causing me to lose power in my swing and placing undue pressure on my knees and lower back, which could someday lead to injury. He tailored a series of 21 stretches and strengthening exercises—a 30-minute routine I was to follow four times a week—and assigned me an account on the TPI website, where I could log in to watch videos of each exercise and chart my progress. Until recently, TPI's customized fitness coaching was reserved mainly for golf professionals and a handful of well-heeled amateurs who paid \$6650 for the star treatment. But lately Phillips and Rose have been spreading the gospel on their Golf Channel series, *Golf Fitness Academy*, and TPI has also trained and certified over 4000 golf instructors and personal trainers in their techniques.

After following my regimen for a month, I visited Henry Brunton, the coach of Canada's national golf team, in my hometown of Toronto to measure my progress. The results were astonishing. With an 8-iron, for example, my ball speed increased from 104 mph to 111 mph, only 4 mph less than the average PGA tour player's. As a result, my shots now carry 150 yards, a full 10 yards farther than they did before. As a final test, I headed to my home course. On the 8th hole, a challenging 455-yard uphill par 4, my best drives typically leave me 200 yards from the hole, with a harrowing approach to a small, heavily protected green. Today my drive carried to the end of the fairway, just 150 yards from the green. Emboldened, I eschewed my usual 7-iron for a more lofted 8-iron. The ball soared through the air and landed softly, just five feet from the hole. Now if I could only find an exercise to help me with my putting.

