



## Practice makes perfect for Brunswick golfers

By Elsa Bonstein, Golf Gab

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The long hot summer is drawing to a close and it's time to work on your game.

I don't care whether you play the piano or bowl. I don't care whether you paint portraits or play tennis, practice will help.

With practice, your fingers will move with confidence over the keyboard; your brush strokes will coax out that hint of a smile you are trying to capture on the face of a child. Practice in bowling will bring more strikes your way; in tennis, you will score more aces.

Golfers will get more birdies, better scores and a growing enjoyment in their game.

On Monday, I met with Tina Teipel and R.J. McCord at the Holden Beach Driving Range and Golf School to talk about the art of practicing golf. Both gals are teaching pros (certified by the United States Golf Teachers Federation). They each have a steady stream of students of all ages coming to the range they own and operate. Some are beginners; others are experienced golfers who want to hone a specific part of their game. Some are senior golfers who want to keep their handicap from ballooning.

"When we schedule a series of lessons with a student, we always include a playing lesson at the end where we go out on a course and play a round with the student," said Tina. "That's particularly important with a beginning golfer. They've practiced, they've had lessons and now it's time to tee it up and pull the trigger."

"Sometimes, there's a fear factor with new golfers," R.J. said. "It's fine to take lessons and hit balls on the range, but it's difficult to summon the courage to go out and actually play a course. The playing lesson is very important. Students learn the rules of golf, the etiquette and the pace of play. If they learn those things, they can go out and play with anyone."

In talking with Tina and R.J., I learned that golfers should not just pound balls on the range.

"Seventy or 80 percent of our customers come out with their driver and hit a bucket of balls with that one club," R.J. said. "When you consider that in an 18-hole round, the golfer will only use his driver about 14 times, that makes no sense at all."

I thought about that. There are 18 tees on each golf course, but for most of the par-3 holes, I will use some other club. Why should I pound 100 shots with my driver, when I will use that club only 14 or 15 times each time I play?

OK, OK, I see your point. But what should a golfer practice?

"Putting and the short game," R.J. said. "If you two-putt every green, that's 36 shots or half of an even-par score of 72. To lower your scores, practice those putts. In fact, practice all the shots around the green, the chips, and pitches, the bump-and-run shots. Even the touring pros don't get on the green in regulation on every hole, and learning to execute those small shots will quickly lower your score."

Aiming at targets is important when you go to the range, Tina explained. "Pick a flag or a clump of grass and try to hit it close."

Tina uses a "pie" approach to teach golfers how to make a half-shot, arguably, the most difficult shot to execute.

"Think of a pie that is divided into segments," she explained. "Your golf swing is the pie. Bring the club back to one-quarter of the pie and hit some shots, making sure you accelerate through the ball and follow through. Hit half shots, then three-quarter shots. Aim at targets and you will figure out how far a half-wedge or three-quarter wedge will go."

One of R.J. and Tina's customers actually practiced an 18-hole round each time he hit balls at their range.

"This gentleman would come and pretend he was on a golf course," explained R.J. "He would imagine the first hole was a par 4. He would hit his drive, then a 5-wood, perhaps a chip, then a putt or two. He did this for weeks before he went to a real course to play. It was a good workout for him because he did not just pound his driver, he practiced a variety of shots."

A good way to hone your golf skills is to practice on a real golf course.

"Go out on a course with a friend or even by yourself and just practice," Tina said. "Hit two or three balls, or pretend you're in a tournament and when you miss a shot, do it over. You obviously cannot do this in the middle of a full field on a Saturday morning, but many golf courses will accommodate this kind of workout if you go out late in the afternoon when the course is not busy."

"There are no uphill or downhill lies on a practice range," Tina said. "There is no rough or ponds to carry, that's why practicing on a real golf course can be useful."

"Making bets with your practice partner can help," Tina explained. "If you're both just off the green, bet a quarter on who can get closest to the pin or down in two. That adds a fun dimension to your practice round."

Tina explained that having a set routine takes the tension out of the swing when the golfer is playing for score.

"Find a routine that is comfortable, practice it on the range and then carry that routine onto the course," she said. "The routine becomes habit and tension goes away. Stand behind the ball and pick out a defining target in the distance. Take your stance, then sight your target

and hit the ball. Sometimes it's helpful to find one thing in your swing to focus on. I need to stand tall when I swing the club, so that's all I think about as I begin my swing."

Instead of a practice swing, R.J. likes to take her stance and hold the club waist-high then do a baseball swing.

"That action loosens me up and lets my wrists come through. Once I do that, I'm ready to strike the ball."

Always hold your pose after the ball is struck.

"When you see the pros on TV, they always hold that pose in the follow-through for several seconds. We jokingly call it the 'Hollywood pose', but it really helps. Holding the pose allows you to see where and how the ball goes, and builds balance in your swing," said Tina. "Always hold the pose, whether it's on the range or on the course."

"You should even hold the pose when putting," R.J. added. "You can see if your clubface went toward the cup and again, it helps with balance which is an important factor, even when putting."

So, with the weather turning cooler, there is really no reason to whine about your game. It will get better if you get out there and practice. A lesson or two won't hurt, either.

There are lots of teaching pros in Brunswick County who would be more than happy to work with you. Give one of them a call.

#### GOLF GAB GROANER

Golf student to pro: "Let me get this straight: the less I hit the ball, the better I am doing."

Golf pro: "That's correct."

Student: "Then why do it at all?"