

Fit for golf

Top golf physiotherapist Ramsay McMaster reveals how there are other ways to improve your game besides working on technique.

INTERVIEW BY ROBBIE GREENFIELD PHOTOS BY CHRIS MANSON, GETTY IMAGES

Next time you've got a spare moment (and nobody is looking), try conducting the following experiment. Try standing on your right leg with your left knee bent for 30 seconds without wobbling or collapsing, then switch over and try the same exercise on the other leg.

You will probably discover two things. Firstly, that you are unable to stand on either leg for anywhere close to 30 seconds, and secondly that you will invariably be able to stand on one leg (probably your right) for considerably longer than the other.

Now if you happened to be a tour pro, this exercise would be no trouble whatsoever. One of the fundamental attributes of a good golf swing is symmetrical balance and core strength, plus the ability to transfer your weight from one side to the other both effectively and powerfully.

Professional golf used to be the domain of the unfit, out-of-shape player who relied far more on great coordination than basic fitness. This player is a dying breed. Now the interest in developing a golfing physique, which started with Tiger, has transcended the sport at the top level.

The majority of professional golfers work closely with physios, and last month the man who started the world's first ever golf injury clinic in Australia came to Dubai to help teaching professionals incorporate elements of physiotherapy into their coaching routines. Ramsay McMaster has helped countless top professionals improve their physical capabilities, most recently the runner-up in the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship — the prodigious hitting Swede Henrik Stenson.

While physio is fairly well established on the professional circuit, it has barely scratched the surface when it comes to club golf. But like the onset of 3D teaching, mental coaching and the now commonplace service of custom-fit clubs, things are changing fast. *Middle East Golfer* spoke to

Ramsay to find out more about golf-related physiotherapy and how it can help the club golfer make vast improvements to their game.

What is your background, and how did you get involved in golf physio?

I was a regular physio and played golf a lot when I was younger. Like every other physio I start working in hospitals — I had a very busy practice in Melbourne. What amazed me is that when I got back into golf I still had the same bad patterns of movement despite all my training. I started to study physio in direct relation to the golf swing and realised that there was just no information out there for the club golfer. I worked with a few trainees, realised there was really something in it and got a chance to set up a program with the Australian Institute of Sport. I set up the Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic — the first injury clinic that catered specifically for golfers. We now do over 10,000 treatments of golfers per year.

What do you find is the most common complaint?

Well, it depends who the patient is. For women it's tennis elbow, shoulder and neck. The golf swing puts a lot of strain on the small arm muscles, especially if you're not particularly strong. Men get back and hip problems, and tour players get stiff backs and a lot of wrist problems because they delay impact. With the power that they have, they can do themselves a lot of damage. We've expanded the practice recently to include the ladies' European Tour and we opened up in Hong Kong. We're working very closely with tour players all over, including right here in Dubai.

When did you first start working with pros?

About 12 years ago we started working at the Australian tournaments. We soon realised that most players were completely golf-training illiterate outside the institute, and we've probably



Henrik Stenson is just one player benefitting from golf physio.

seen over 300 tour players now from all over the world. About 50 of those have been top grade players. They come in for postural screenings and programs on the road to help with the constant rigours of life on tour. We help them with the 'traffic light planner' — a coded chart that helps them map out their schedule and define performance zones. Working with Henrik Stenson recently, he's in the red zone now where he's doing a lot of work on his body, coming into yellow and then green where he's playing a lot of tournaments.

Do tour players always tend to exhibit the same symptoms when it comes to posture problems?

People like Stuart Appleby and Henrik are pretty well balanced. The guys who don't have a program usually get out of sync — it's a bit like if you don't work on your swing with a coach then you

pick up bad habits. What you think you're doing and what you're actually doing are two completely different things. Putting undue stress on certain parts of the body can be OK, but only for short periods of time.

You see all levels of players from tour pros to club seniors. How do you make a swift assessment on their body and what they are capable of when it comes to the golf swing?

You look at the three body segments individually. What is the lower body doing, is it strong enough, is it balanced? Then the core, which is the trunk from about hip to nipple. We see if that's working and what kind of stability and rotation is being maintained. Then we look at the neck and the arms — usually they are the last point of reference in a golf swing, because often these ▶



Emirates Golf Club, January 2006. From left to right: Ramsay McMaster, Henrik Stenson and Pete Cowan.

parts are forced to compensate for what the rest of the body is not doing properly. The thing is, we can only improve tour players by minute percentages. We can improve club golfers by hundreds of per cent because if they're playing off 25, they've got a higher scale to get down to 15 or whatever. The potential is much greater because pros are already operating at very near their top level of capability. People often make the mistake of doing the wrong thing in the gym, like pec deck, bicep curls and sit-ups, without paying attention to what they are trying to achieve.

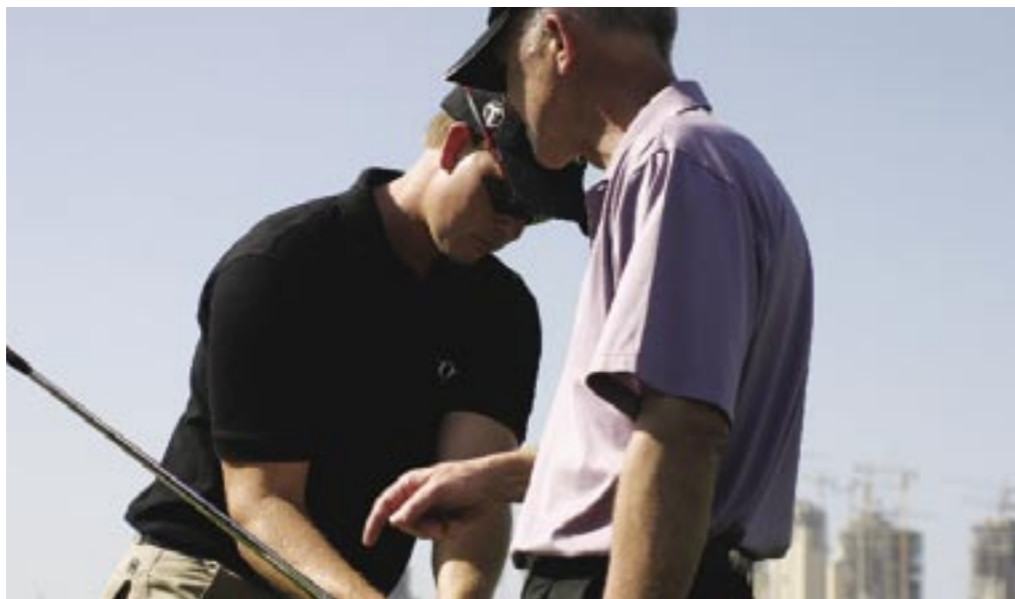
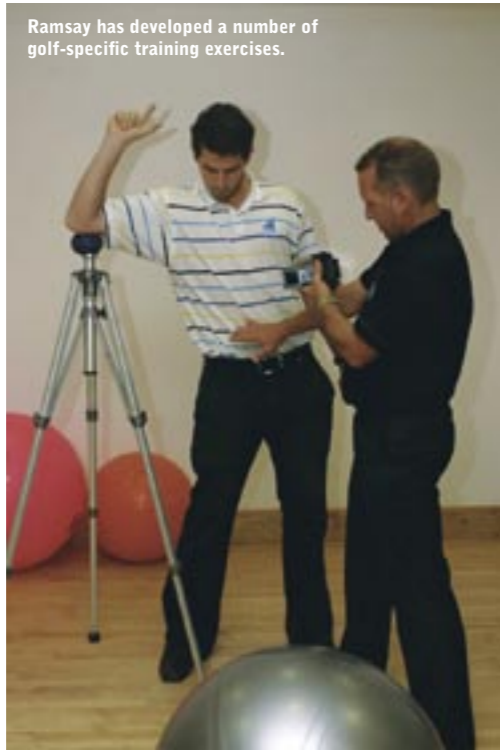
You explain how a lot of good golfers suffer from scoliosis (a tilted spine angle) and a strong left side. What problems does that lead to in the long run?

If players have a strong left side, they tend to continue using it more and more until the right becomes a lot weaker. If your left side is excessively strong it can eventually get damaged too because it's doing too much work. The body has to be symmetrical and plum-line. It's a bit like baggage handlers who have to keep swapping the loads from side to side because eventually the strain on one side is too much. It's about corrective exercises rather than generic workouts. There's no point bulking up for golf — what does that achieve? Similarly, if you do a lot of swimming, front crawl is a bad stroke for golf because it strengthens all the wrong muscles. The way forward is to get properly screened by a physiotherapist, and work with golf teaching professionals to get a better understanding of the functions of the golf swing. Everyone has their clubs custom-fitted these days, now you can custom-fit your body as well.

When people work out they usually do an even number of repetitions for any given exercise. Would you encourage people to do more reps on the side that needs strengthening?

If people have a weakness on one side I will get them first to exercise the stronger side, to feel how it is more developed. If it is, say, 20 per cent stronger, then it would be necessary to then work 20 per cent more on the less-developed side. So uneven reps can eventually balance the body out. When someone undertakes a program, they first work on flexibility, go on to feel and balance, core stability

Ramsay has developed a number of golf-specific training exercises.



and then dynamic work. You wouldn't just jump in a car and put it straight into fifth — you would go up through the gears first and it's the same with the body.

What other sports go well with golf?

Fencing is very good. It involves a lot of balance, poise and posture. Horse riding is also good for the balance aspect. Baseball is very good too, especially for women who want to achieve more power and sequencing. If you look at a lot of these 'long drive' guys in America, many are ex-baseball professionals. Swimming and cycling are both good if you do them the right way. When you find the right balance, it's all about training values, not volume.

Jack Nicklaus once said, 'every ball counts, including the practice ones', and that's a lesson to all the guys who bash balls. The crux of the golf swing is being able to repeat the same quality pattern of movement under pressure, every time. If you go out there and bash balls and the ball flight changes, the divots get bigger or whatever, all you're doing is giving different information to your brain.

What percentage of club golfers are 'ball-bashers'?

All of them! More or less everybody goes straight to the long clubs and just starts whacking balls. They're not going to get better this way. They'd be far better off working on the short game and getting some lessons. You have to

warm up properly, otherwise you will only get injured. People in their 30s who work sedentary jobs often find this when they take up an energetic sport like soccer. Making the transition from the office to the golf course is as much mental as physical. That is what's so good about a five-minute warm-up. This is crucial — it's the least you can do to prevent injury.

There's a lot of excitement surrounding the evolution of golf teaching to incorporate new technology like 3D analysis to improve a player's technique. What role will golf physio play in the future of golf teaching?

I see the golf physiotherapist as being actually on the range and having a room there. I see golf

coaches being involved in rehabilitating the injured golfer, because at the end of the day the guy wants to swing a golf club. The pro will become part of the team that gets him doing this after a hip replacement, spinal injury or recovery from a bad back.

And what level does overall fitness play in golf? It's well documented that players like Tiger Woods have raised the bar in terms of physique, strength and fitness — but you still get tour pros who are out of shape. How do you explain this?

Well, they're becoming dinosaurs, aren't they? There's not many of them now. There are always the one-offs like John Daly. You've got those guys in every sport that's like golf — guys who have amazing hand-eye-ball coordination. Look at Shane Warne in cricket, or any number of American league baseball players.

Can Tiger Woods legitimately be classed as an athlete? There are many people who would argue that golf is not an athletic sport. Some people have even compared it to darts...

The golf club is travelling at 150 km/h, the compression force at impact is eight times that of your body weight, going through your spine — this applies to regular golfers as well as tour players. I don't think there's any doubt that the golf swing is an athletic movement. There's finesse as well as power and control. Golf was a social game — now it's a sport where the participants are athletes. Golf has undergone more changes in the past 20 years than most other sports out there. Things are going to get a lot more sophisticated too.

Are the programs you lay out all of a similar length?

They're different lengths. When Henrik comes back from a tournament, he needs time to recover, with stretching, massage, hydration and general relaxation — so that he can work well over the next few days. You've got what we call 'toothbrush exercises', things that you can incorporate into your daily routine and only take a few minutes. This would be things like stretching and balance exercises. It's amazing how things done little and often like this, just taking a few minutes at a time, can produce drastic results.

You've done screenings on a lot of people of different nationalities,

from all walks of life. Do various patterns emerge?

Yes, definitely. Without stereotyping too much, Asians tend to have great flexibility, but not too much stability. Caucasians tend to be stronger but stiffer. Tiger Woods' hyper-mobility comes from his Asian roots — so he does a different program to a lot of other people. Woods does pec deck and bicep curls to reduce his flexibility.

How much physiotherapy do the likes of Butch Harmon and David Leadbetter use in their coaching?

More and more. It might have been 10-20 per cent about 10 years ago, but people all around the world are realising the importance of it. You could attribute four separate boxes to golf teaching — technical, mental, physical and life skills, which is a relatively new one. Traditionally, the technical side of the game has always taken up the vast majority of what coaches do.

Is the technical box now becoming smaller?

I think the other boxes are becoming bigger. Golfers are still largely preoccupied with the technical aspects of the swing. If you ask me, this often leads to paralysis by analysis. In 10 years, when someone goes somewhere and they have a problem, the diagnosis in all aspects will be that much quicker and more effective. The cure will subsequently be more exact.

Do you have any examples of real success stories — people who have achieved so much more than what they normally could if they had simply gone down the regular channels?

Players like Henrik Stenson, who has taken on board fitness with his coach Pete Cowan. There was one guy, Andrew Martin, an amateur player in Australia who had some horrible injuries — a ganglion on his wrist. The guy had a bone transplant in his wrist and came back after a period of intense rehabilitation to win the Australian Amateur Championship. You have to admit, that's pretty amazing.

Despite all these improvements to coaching, average golf handicaps have remained unchanged for the past 10 years. Why do you think this is?

It's not so much that the developments aren't working,



In a nutshell...

THE BODY VS THE GOLF SWING

- If you do something for more than two hours every day it can permanently affect your posture. This includes slumping in a chair, using a mouse and driving a car.
- One of the common posture symptoms of keen golfers is scoliosis — a curvature in the spine with a longer left side, caused by repeatedly hitting balls on the driving range from the standard set-up position.
- Tiger Woods is hyper-mobile. This means the work he does in the gym is often geared towards making him less flexible, not the reverse.
- When hitting a golf ball, the compression force at impact is up to eight times the individual's body weight.
- Men and women tend to suffer from different golf-related injuries. Women are prone to 'golf elbow' and neck problems, while men regularly suffer from bad backs and hip trouble.

more that they haven't been fully meshed together yet. We have seen in Australia how the multi-disciplinary approach has a profound effect on the average golfer. There's nothing we can do if someone is lazy and doesn't want to exercise or practice. If they don't work on getting better, then they're never going to.

What are your thoughts on yoga and pilates used in a golf context?

I think they're great tools. You've got to be careful, because if someone is hyper-mobile they don't necessarily benefit from yoga. It's a great thing to do if you spend all day sitting in an office because it helps your breathing and opening up your body. Ultimately you've got to be a little bit tight for golf to increase the torque you can generate.

What can an average player who doesn't have time for a full program do to improve?

They must get a postural assessment; you can do that at the Emirates Golf Club or just get in touch with us. There's no point getting to the age of 60 then finding you can't move. So get a screening, find out what shape your muscles are in, what's tight, what's stiff, what imbalances do you have in your body and so on. Additionally, our five-step warm-up guide is functional as well as good for stretching — it develops golf 'feels'. It's great for getting into a golf zone after you've rushed around all day.

For more information on Ramsay McMaster, golf physiotherapy and his Five-Minute Warm-Up, visit www.golfmed.net.