

Chapter 1

Sharpening Your Approach

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining the short game through statistics
- ▶ Establishing your short-game repertoire
- ▶ Using the ground to your advantage
- ▶ Clearing your schedule for practice
- ▶ Sidestepping common short-game sins

Golf is a journey with no final destination — a series of trips up and down hills — but if you play long enough, you'll come to enjoy the ride. You discover nuances of the game as you go along, and sometimes you learn important lessons the hard way.

Players who seek improvement — and who tire of seeing three-digit numbers on their scorecards at the end of a round — often just want to have some consistency in their game. Who can blame them? What's worse than swinging a golf club and wondering where the ball will go or even worrying about making contact? Nothing we know of. Well, maybe swinging with these thoughts while wearing a Jesper Parnevik outfit.

Precision is never more important than when you get the ball close to the green or the hole, and as we convey in this opening chapter, the short game is the most complex and varied aspect of the game of golf. But lucky for you, the short game is also the area in which you can make the most immediate and significant improvement.

In this chapter, we take a look at the importance of the short game, the best way to approach it, and how to prepare yourself to hit the shots that can improve your scores. Improved scores give you a greater sense of enjoyment — and who could ask for more?

Approaching the Short Game Statistically

According to the National Golf Foundation, a fine group of folks who make it their business to study the business side of golf, as many as 36.7 million people play golf in the United States. (Of those 36 million golfers, about 45 percent are between the ages of 18 and 39, and 22 percent of all golfers are female.) In a year's time, these golfers spend about \$25 billion on golf equipment and fees. That's *billion*, with a *B*.

But like the old saying goes, money can't buy you love. And it can't buy you a 72 either. Even with all the cash players currently spend, average scores have changed very little over the years. Only 22 percent of all golfers regularly score better than 90 for 18 holes. For females, who shoot an average score of 114, the number is just 7 percent; for males, who manage to shoot an average score of 97, 25 percent break 90. The overall average is an even 100.

But par, on almost all golf courses, is 72.

When asked what they want to shoot, most golfers say they'd be satisfied shooting 85.

Although critics and the media place a great deal of emphasis on how long a player can hit a golf ball, you use driver from the tee only 14 times on a golf course. By contrast, you use the putter and short irons for as many as 50 percent of the total strokes.



The secret of golf satisfaction is in the short game. No matter what your score is, half your strokes come from the short game. Statistics prove that 50 percent of your score comes from shots within 75 yards of the green — whether you shoot 120 or you shoot 67. The percentage includes your putts, your chips, your pitches, and your bunker shots.

For instance, say you go out and shoot that 67. You hit all 18 greens in regulation. You make five birdies with five one-putts to shoot 5-under. That means you hit 31 putts out of 67 shots. And to sink some of those one-putts, you had to hit the ball close to the hole. You probably had a wedge or some type of short iron in your hand to do that. You didn't miss any greens, because you used your short game to get into position. Adding six more strokes to the putts, you have half your strokes accounted for.

If you shoot 110, you surely didn't hit all the greens in regulation, because if you did, you would have used 70 putts (or four putts per

hole) to shoot that 110 — a dismal result for even the worst of putters. More likely you missed some greens and needed to hit some short-game shots — all the more reason to improve your short game.

Approaching the Short Game Athletically

The short game, by definition, covers short shots. You hit short-game shots from 75 yards and in — which is also known as the *scoring distance*. The short game requires a shorter swing. A 100-yard shot, by contrast, is a full-swing shot.



The short game is all about scoring and precision — not distance and strength. You want to get the ball onto the green with a single approach shot and into the hole with two strokes. (See Chapter 2 to help set your goals and expectations for the short game.)

The short game is the great equalizer. Unlike in many other sports, and even in other aspects of golf, scoring doesn't rely on power. In golf, you need to hit the ball straight and with the proper distance. Success means making good decisions and doing your homework.

With this in mind, you can see why golfers use the term *approach shots* — and not *bang it over the hole* shots. Think of an aircraft on approach to its final destination. To hit the runway and land safely, the plane has to travel at the right speed and at the proper angle of descent. It can't be short, and it can't be long. It has to, through a carefully made plan and proper execution, glide perfectly onto the runway and roll to a stop.

Your short-game swing options typically include a

- ✓ **Chip shot:** A low running shot, measured in feet, that flies only a small percentage of its life before landing on the green or in front of the green and rolling toward the hole (see Chapter 4).
- ✓ **Pitch shot:** A shot that remains the air for about 70 percent of its life before hitting the green and rolling to the hole. You often use a pitch shot when you have an obstacle to fly over, such as a bunker, creek, or hill (see Chapter 5).
- ✓ **Bunker shot:** A shot needed to extract a ball from a bunker. You normally hit bunker shots with a sand wedge, which splashes through the bunker and sends the ball floating out on a pillow of sand. Bunker shots fly high and land softly near the hole (see Chapter 6).

- ✓ **Putt:** Putting the ball into the hole may seem like a simple act, and the good news is: it can be! Finding a way to roll the ball into the hole after you land the green is a matter of feel and preference, but good putters seem to have a bit of magic with the flatstick (see Chapter 7).
- ✓ **Flop shot:** A high-flying, soft shot that lands near the hole and stops instead of rolling to the hole (see Chapter 11).

Giving Yourself the Best Shot

The short game, and all its variables, offers golfers a multitude of options for playable shots. Although you hit some of your short game shots from distances as far as 75 yards from the hole, you hit others from as close as a pace or two off the green. The variables include not only the distances of the shots, but also the club you use, the terrain, the weather, the locale, and the competitive situation. We cover many of the variables you must consider in Chapter 2 and in the individual technique chapters in Part II, but one piece of advice cuts through all the uncertainty:



If you want to play the percentages and improve your chances of having good results, you need to get the ball rolling. Get the ball on the ground as quickly as possible so that you max out the amount of time it spends traveling on the ground.

Trying to fly a ball to the hole invites too much possibility for error. For example, chipping and running the ball gives you more accuracy than sending the ball soaring through the air toward the hole.

Think about it this way: If you have to hit a shot from 50 feet away from the hole, and you have an opportunity to putt the ball, you should choose to putt it most every time. When you putt,

- ✓ You stand directly over the *target line* (where the ball needs to roll to go in).
- ✓ Your eyes are over the line.
- ✓ You have an opportunity to make a simple backswing and followthrough.

So the only real challenge you have is judging your distance and speed. But if you line up for that 50-foot shot and put a 60-degree wedge in your hand, you allow additional variables in, such as:

- ✓ How far the ball has to carry in the air
- ✓ The spin you generate by hitting behind or right on the ball

- ✓ The effect of the wind blowing the ball left or right, holding it up in mid-flight, or sending it soaring over the green
- ✓ Where you have to land the ball to stop it close

Do you really want to have to factor in all this technical stuff? Probably not. These variables make it much more difficult to get the ball into or near the hole if you play the ball in the air. You have a much better chance of getting it close if you get the ball on the ground and moving.

Naturally, you face times when you need to hit a high-flying shot, such as when you need the ball to carry over a bunker, creek, or hill before landing on or near the green or when you don't have much room on the green for the ball to roll. These situations occur, but the more you can avoid them through careful course management, the simpler you make your short game. And a simple short game makes for lower scores.

Making Practice a Priority

Although you can learn certain techniques and styles from watching the likes of Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, and Annika Sorenstam (and we point them out in Chapter 16), it isn't wise to try to copy all their techniques. Face it: The people that play competitive golf for a living are in a very, very small percentage. They don't show up on television for nothing.

They work at golf because it's their job. Their "office" is the golf course, the practice range, the practice green, or the practice bunker eight to ten hours each day. They play and they practice, and they practice by playing. You don't have that kind of practice luxury (we assume), because golf isn't your job. Lofting a ball in the air and stopping it within three feet of the cup is a shot best left to the professionals.



You can't spend eight hours each day practicing like the pros do, but you can, with whatever time you have, practice in a professional manner. People don't like to practice the short game, but the value of doing so is something you can learn from the professional golfers.

Recognizing the importance of practice

What makes you go to the range and bang a driver? Sometimes you slice it. Sometimes it goes straight. But the results always intrigue

us at some level. And what do you hear in television commercials about golf equipment? You hear about hitting the ball a long way — almost exclusively!

Most of us are competitive enough that we want to play golf to the best of our abilities. We want to realize our potential. We want to have our best score. We forget sometimes that golf is a game that starts at the tee markers and ends at that little hole. If you don't care how many strokes it takes you, and you go out to the links for the enjoyment, that's great. Why bother to practice at all? But the point is that most golfers don't feel that way. And because you're reading this book, we assume you don't either.

Some people may really get a thrill out of banging the driver a long, long way, and they go out and hit all these prodigious, long drives, but when they look down at their scorecard after a round and see a big 100, they aren't so pumped anymore.



Maybe your goal is to shoot 90. Maybe you want to crack 80. You can shoot 80 or 90 consistently if you start spending half your practice time working on your short game.

Golf shots have much more value around the green, and the precision you need to display is much greater than on a drive or even an approach shot. A hole may be 400 yards, and you may be able to drive the ball 250 yards. You cover more ground, but your target, the fairway, is 35 yards wide. Your 150-yard approach shot is to a green that may be 60 feet wide. Your target when you chip, pitch, flop, or putt the ball is the hole — only a few inches wide — or a small circle around it.

If you shave five putts off your score because of improved chipping, or if you cut down on three-putts by five a round, your handicap starts to reduce dramatically. Just these improvements take scores from 100 to 95 or from 85 to 80.

Developing a practice plan

Practice should be an overview to everything. If you have 30 minutes in your busy schedule to run over to the practice range, you do yourself a huge disservice if you spend that entire half-hour hitting drivers and 5-iron shots. Every practice session, whether you take five minutes or five hours, needs to have a choreographed plan. Always include a specific amount of time that you devote to the short game: pitching, chipping, putting, bunker shots, and 50- to 75-yard shots.

Don't try this at home

Ben Crenshaw, a two-time Masters winner and one of the best putters ever, once had the honor of golfing with Ben Hogan late in Hogan's life. On one hole, Crenshaw found himself in a pickle and wanted to hit a low shot around a tree from a tangled, troubled lie. Crenshaw stood behind the ball contemplating the shot.

"What are you doing?" Hogan asked him.

"I'm going to hook this ball low around the tree to the green," said Crenshaw.

Hogan asked, "Have you ever played that shot before?"

"No," Crenshaw answered.

"Then why the hell are you trying to play it now? Chip the ball out."

The point is, whether you're a 30-handicap, a 15-handicap, or a scratch player, why would you try to attempt a shot that you've never practiced and expect it to work?

You can't punch and run a ball or play any kind of shot effectively without knowing how, and knowing how comes with practice. When you assess different shots, you have more options in your repertoire. (To take a look at some of these options, including the punch shot, check out Chapter 8.)



Because 50 percent of your score comes from strokes taken from 75 yards or closer to the hole, you should devote 50 percent of your practice time to the short game.

If you have two hours to practice, spend an hour of it on the short game. And make a plan to break down the hour. Divide the time however you feel comfortable, based on what part of your game needs the most work or on a new shot you want to practice. How much time will you spend chipping balls at a target? How many shots will you hit from the practice bunker? How many putts will you hit? From how many distance? How long will you try hitting flop shots over a bunker? In Chapter 13, we help you answer these questions by customizing practice and pre-round warm-up routines to fit your needs.

Keeping practice fun

It's an unfortunate and unfair use of verbs to say that people "play" golf and "practice" golf. "Playing" anything is fun. "Practicing" anything is a drag. All work and no play makes golf a dull sport. So our goal with this book is to show you how to be "at play" while you practice. In Chapters 14 and 15, in particular, we give you some ways to have fun while you improve your short game.

When you start hitting really nice short-game shots and taking pride in the improvement you make, practicing becomes more fun and rewarding.

Avoiding Common Misfires

Hitting the ball from the tee is easy compared to the short game. Heck, the ball sits up on a tee, you hit it with the same club most every time, and you can swing away and hit it as far as you want. The short game, however, presents you with shots of different lengths and shapes from different lies. More possible shots mean more possible miscues. Don't be daunted, though: Every short-game shot has a common denominator of acceleration and simple mechanics. The shot isn't as difficult as it seems.



You can start improving your game this very minute simply by identifying and avoiding the common miscues that we cover in the following sections. And be sure to check out Parts III and IV of this book, which offer concrete advice about how you can correct mistakes.

Playing without purpose

Despite what you see on television, you should golf at a brisk pace and not deliberately. Touring professionals play for hundreds of thousands of dollars and do so on closed golf courses in front of T.V. cameras. Although you should try to emulate their play, you shouldn't try to emulate their pace of play.

Without slowing up play, be sure to take the time to adequately check your lie, read the green, and clearly visualize a shot before you play it. Prepare for your shot while you walk to your ball or while other players hit their shots.

No matter what, don't hit a shot without having a crystal clear vision of it and deciding on a specific target. Play quickly, but don't just smack the ball around.

Being under-prepared

Practice the various techniques and types of shots before you confront them on the golf course. Practice helps you build confidence and widen your array of options. Your self-confidence tells you when you're ready to try a certain shot on the golf course.

Sometimes, just like with a rookie quarterback, you have to press a certain technique into service. Pressure presents the truest test, and you have to perform under fire — but make sure you prepare the shot enough times in practice to build up your confidence.

Using the wrong club

You can have a better short game, lower your score, and have more fun if you play shots you're comfortable hitting. If from 30 yards and in you feel comfortable hitting a 7-iron for every shot, and it works, do it. Tell yourself, "I'm comfortable doing this. I love hitting this club."

Tiger Woods uses a 60-degree wedge for every shot around the greens. He doesn't change. He doesn't punch 7-irons. He hits bunker shots with his 60-degree wedge. He doesn't need to use a bunch of wedges, because he has one wedge that he likes to hit every shot with. He hits an amazing flop shot with a full swing where the ball only goes 20 feet, and he hits a shot that goes 50 feet by skipping along the ground knee high. But he does it all with one wedge that he feels very comfortable with.

Comfort and confidence contribute as much to short-game success as practice. After you get comfortable with a particular club, and make it your go-to club, you can focus your practice sessions around shots hit with the club. Chapter 3 has more about stocking your bag for short-game success.

Maintaining unreasonable expectations

If you play with the reasonable expectation that from 30 yards and in all you want to do is get on the green and two-putt, you can be a better player! Problems arise when players think they have to get it close to the hole. They over-analyze, psyche themselves out, and end up missing the green; now they have to chip it on or play a bunker shot and drill an eight-footer for par.

Relax and play within your abilities. Have a clear, concise, reasonable expectation of what you want to do. From 30 yards away, Tiger Woods can reasonably expect to get the ball up and in, but it may not be a realistic expectation for you. You should make getting up and down your goal, but your reasonable expectation is to get it on the green and two-putt. See Chapter 2 for more information on developing realistic expectations and goals.

Over-thinking

The whole object of golf is to be comfortable, confident, and to play in the subconscious. Let it happen by letting the game come to you. Trust the lessons you've taken, trust the skills that you've developed on the conscious side, and just make the swing. All you can do is practice to develop a consistent swing and become confident with it. From there, golf is a matter of hitting a ball and walking after it. If you prepare yourself and don't take every second so seriously, you can enjoy the walk. Check out Chapter 2 for more information on playing in the subconscious and Chapter 12 for all things mental.

Aiming to displease

Short-game shots are all straight shots. Unlike other shots in golf, you don't hit short-game shots with the intention of curving the ball. You don't need to hook it or fade it in there. Just knock it straight. This may seem like a simple concept to grasp, but remembering it can help you tremendously with your aim.

If you have a 10-foot break from right to left on the green, you still hit a straight putt to try to make it; you just have to aim 10 feet to the right of the hole because of the break. You don't aim at the hole and try to push the ball out with your putter. You pick a spot for your target line and aim so that the green takes care of the work for you.

The same goes for a 30-yard shot over a bunker, or any pitch or chip from off the green. You may determine that the uneven green will cause the ball to break 10 feet from the right to the left after you hit your target, so you have to allow for that, but all you want to do is hit the ball straight to your target landing area.

Remove the curves and angles from your mind after you pick your line and focus on hitting the ball straight.

Ignoring textbook technique

In golf, you practice fundamentals, and you develop preferences (see Chapter 2). You have to adhere to the fundamentals to be successful; the preferences you can enjoy.

The trick is, you can't let a preference take over a fundamental, because you reduce your chances of success. It may feel good to stand a certain way when you putt, and being comfortable is great — but you can't be a good putter if your stance clashes with the fundamentals of putting.

For instance, you can't grip the putter with the toe in the air and stand far away from the ball and think you can be a good putter. If you do, the putter naturally comes off line. Your preference defies the fundamental that the blade should come straight back along the target line, come back down along the same line, and swing straight through toward your target.

Getting too far from your work

Fundamentally, if you put your eyes over your target line, keep your putterhead over the line, take the putterhead straight back on the line, and bring it forward straight through, you can be a good putter. The same goes for chipping. The closer you get to "your work," the easier it is to make good shots.

You won't find any magic that drives this premise, just simple physics and logic. Think of a dart thrower or a billiards player. They each face their target and toss the dart or slide the cue right on line toward the target or hole.

Golf's a little different from darts and billiards because you stand to the side of the ball, but you can improve your chances by getting as close to the line as you can.

Experiencing death by deceleration

Don't stop the club when it strikes the ball at impact. Never, on any shot in golf, should you decelerate. Let the club swing freely and through the ball to its natural completion, as if you're sweeping away dust with a broom or as the pendulum of a grandfather clock swings. Stopping at impact can only result in a flubbed shot that falls short of your target. Make sure you have confidence in the type of shot you want to hit and in the club you pull out of the bag. Most players decelerate because they don't want to hit the ball too far or because they don't have confidence in the shot. Commit . . . and hit!

