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# Martin's 7 Maxims of the Short Game

When I first started out teaching, I watched as much film of Seve's short game as I possibly could, and I spotted some definite patterns. For one, the time it took him to go through his pre-shot routine was the same whether he was chipping on the 72nd hole of the British Open or the 6th hole of the Wednesday Pro-Am. He'd walk in from behind the ball, holding the club with just his right hand, and shake the tension out of his left arm.

Then he'd set the clubhead down about six inches away from the ball, put his

left hand on the club, hitch up his pants, look at the target, look at it again, and go.

He was always so focused on the target. All of the great short-game players are—they stare at the target and glance at the ball. The average golfer, by contrast, stares at the ball and only casually glances at the target.

Perhaps Seve's greatest quality was his ability to make the most solid contact possible that the lie would permit. If you could imagine a dot on the back of the ball and another on the center of the clubface, he made them collide just about every time. He never mis-hit the ball. His hand-eye coordination was extraordinary.

The reason I bring up these traits of Seve's is because they constitute two of my seven maxims of the short game. Whether you want to become great at the short game or shave a few strokes off your scorecard, you need to follow these rules. Seve had a tremendous imagination, and he was supremely confident in his ability to execute shots most people would deem high-risk, but I believe he always adhered to these rules. As you practice the shots in this book and work to implement them into your own short game, refer back to these rules. If you do, your improvement will be much faster, and your scores will start to reflect it.

## Maxim #1: Solid Contact Is Essential

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The importance of making solid contact in the short game cannot be overstated. It's so important, I dedicated half a chapter's worth of drills to it (see chapter 7). To consistently hit the ball a predictable distance, you must make solid contact (see FIGURE 1.1). Now, in some instances you simply can't make flush contact with the ball (e.g., from the sand or the thick rough). When the ball is nestled down in several inches



of rough, you're going to catch a lot of grass between the ball and the clubface, and the distance—particularly the amount of roll—will be somewhat unpredictable. Still, whether you're hitting out of the thick junk or from the greenside bunker, you

want to contact the ball in line with the center of the clubface. The more consistently you're able to do this, the more reliable your distances will be.

If you contact the ball all over the face, you won't be able to develop any sense of touch or distance, because you'll have nothing to refer back to—except a wide array of mis-hits and erratic distances. Yet if you know that your 9 o'clock backswing produces a 50-yard shot, because you consistently hit the ball solidly, then you can swing away with confidence any time you have to play to that yardage.

Distance control in the short game is more important than direction. If you chip the ball 3 feet left or right of the hole but the correct distance, you still have a good opportunity to get the ball up-and-down; however, if you chip it on line but well short of or past the hole, then you have your work cut out for you. When I watch most recreational golfers, I see more shots come up short than long, although some blaze past the hole. That's because most recreational golfers don't hit the ball solidly enough on a consistent basis.

## Maxim #2: Use the Least-Lofted Club Possible That Will Land the Ball on the Green

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There are some world-class players who use only one club to chip or pitch with—usually a lob or a sand wedge. If you played golf all day long and played on the PGA Tour, maybe you could, too. For most people, though, I recommend using the least-lofted club possible that will still land the ball on the green (see FIGURE 1.2). I prescribe to the theory of “minimum air time, maximum ground time.” Why? Because it's much



easier to judge the distance when rolling something along the ground than it is tossing it through the air. For one, you don't have to take as much swing, and second, the ball won't have as much backspin. If you're not sure which method is easier, try tossing ten balls underhanded at a flagstick 20 yards away—covering the entire distance in the air. Next, take ten balls and roll them along the ground at the same hole. See which set of ten balls finishes closer to the target. It's usually the roll.

A pitch shot with a sand wedge or a lofted club requires more wrist hinge and a bigger swing than a chip, and therefore has more room for error. A chip with a lesser-lofted club—say, a 7-iron—requires far less swing and is much easier to control because the clubhead has less distance to travel. In other words, it's easier to put the sweet spot of the face on the

ball. Therefore, unless you have some obstacle to carry (e.g., a bunker or a heavy rough) or there's a fair amount of slope to navigate between you and the hole, you should always favor the chip.

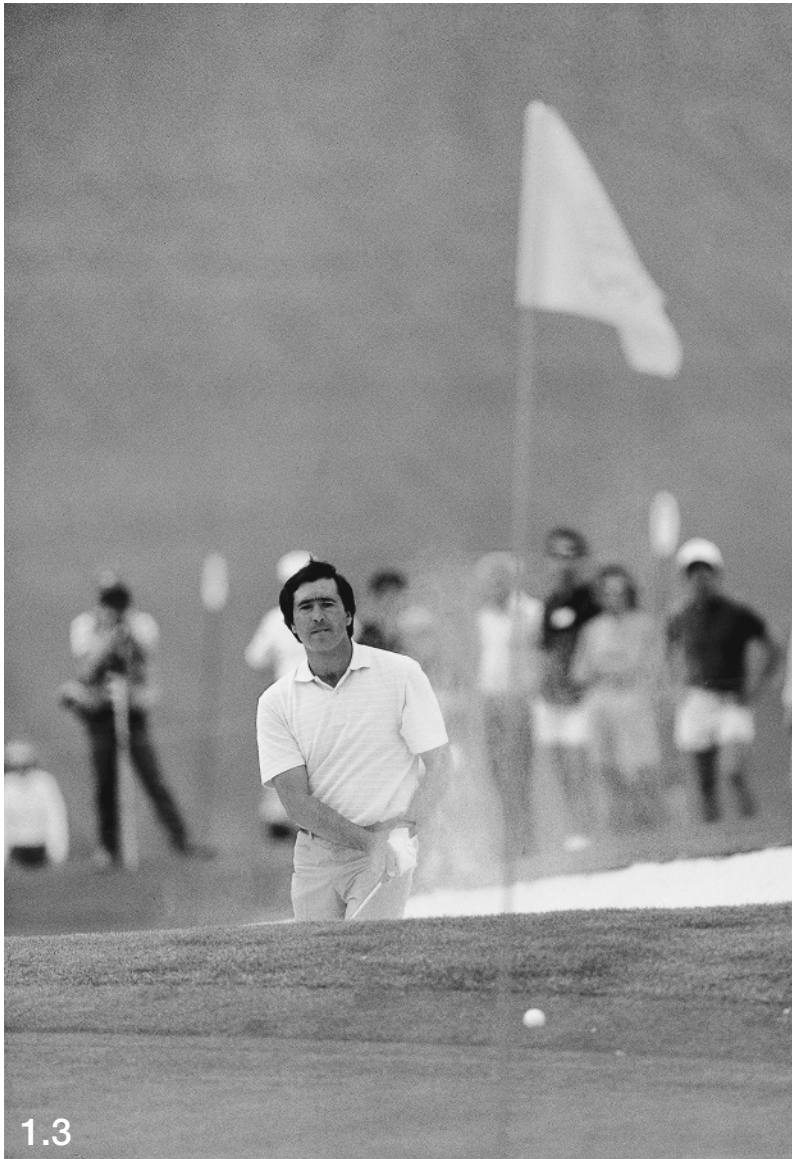
The other advantage to keeping the ball low, besides needing less swing, is that you can keep your swing essentially the same. The feel of the swing doesn't change, only the choice of the club does. You control the amount of distance the ball flies in the air and rolls along the ground by the club's loft. A pitching wedge typically has a carry-to-roll ratio of 1:2; a 9-iron, 1:3; an 8-iron, 1:4, and so on. But when you choose to hit every shot in the short game with only one club, you have to vary the length of your swing, the ball position, and the attack angle to control the distance, which is too difficult for most people. By varying clubs, however, you keep the swing elements constant and you need less backswing. It's simple: the more swing you have to make, the more difficult you make it on yourself.

## Maxim #3: Land the Ball on a Flat Surface

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Whenever possible, land the ball on a flat area of the green, where the first bounce is likely to be straight and more predictable (see FIGURE 1.3). Landing the ball on a slope is a risky play, because the hill will often kill the ball's momentum and, in many instances, shoot it off-line. If the spot you want to land the ball on is hilly, then chip it over the slope or use your imagination and move where the front of the green (that is, your landing spot) is in your mind's eye. Also pay close attention to the grain of the green: if it's downgrain (the grass will appear shiny in color), the ball will often take off when it

lands; conversely, if it's into the grain (the grass will appear darker), the ball will often hit the brakes when it lands. A good chipper takes all of these things—grain, slope, wind, firmness of the green, and so on—into consideration.



Most Tour pros land the ball one to two paces onto the green when chipping. This provides them a little margin for safety. You don't want to land the ball too close to the edge of the green, because if you come up short in the fringe, the bounce can be unpredictable. Most greens slope from back to front, too, so it's okay to carry the ball a little farther onto the putting surface, since you're chipping slightly uphill into the slope. If you land the ball on the edge of the green, you might come up short.

## Maxim #4: Swing the Club along Your Shoulder Line

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Should you need some height and stopping power, you'll want to open your stance so that a line along the toes and the shoulders points left of the target. Opening your stance helps impart more cutspin on the ball, so that it flies higher and drops more vertically from the sky, like a parachutist coming in for a landing. The ball may spin a wee bit to the right on landing, but it will stop much quicker than a standard pitch shot. This is useful when you're trying to lob the ball over a greenside bunker to a tight pin location, or you need some extra height to clear the lip of a bunker. Most shots in the short game are played from an open stance.

The higher and softer you want the ball to go, the farther you aim to the left and the more you swing to the left—on the plane of your shoulders (see FIGURE 1.4). The clubhead should always follow the line of your shoulders during the swing. This is important, because many golfers think that they should direct their swing at the target. Not so. Your shoulders are parallel to your swing's plane, or path, and the more you move your shoulders to the left, the more the plane moves to the

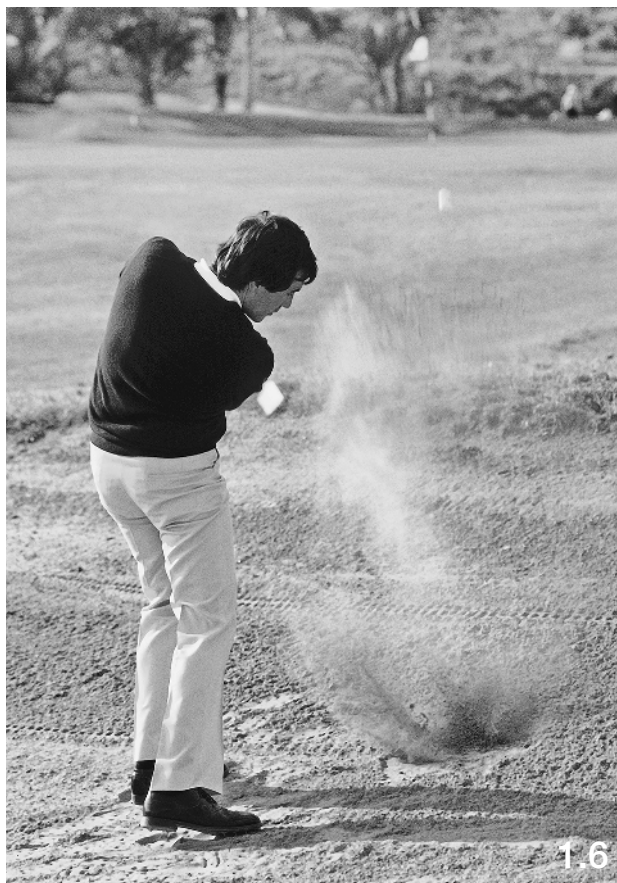


left. If you set up with your shoulders perfectly square to the target, then you will swing the club in the direction of the target. You should always swing on the plane of the shoulders; just remember that the plane isn't always aimed at the target.

## Maxim #5: Have the Clubface Looking at the Target

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When I speak of the target, I'm not necessarily referring to the flagstick. Your target could be a tree behind the green, a playing partner's marker several feet from the flagstick, the edge of a bunker, and so on. It's where you want the ball to start, and it's almost always where you want to aim your clubface (see FIGURES 1.5 and 1.6).



As an example, let's say you're hitting your third shot into the 10th green at Pebble Beach Golf Links. The green slopes sharply from left to right, toward the ocean, so any errant approach shot to the right is sure to find the beach below. About the only chance you have to wedge it close is to aim your clubface at the left side of the green, well left of the pin, and let the ball feed down toward the hole. If you aim the face directly at the flagstick—even with your feet and shoulders open to the target—the ball is going to land near the flag—probably to the right of the flag—and quickly run out of real estate.

The face angle at impact is largely responsible for the shot's initial starting direction (about 75–85 percent); therefore, if you aim your face at the flagstick, that's likely where it's going to start. Before you play your shot, make sure to examine the lie of the ball, the slope of the green, the position of the flag, the wind . . . anything that may affect the trajectory or the spin on the ball, how it rolls, and what your target will be. Don't always assume that the target is the flagstick—sometimes the best play is to aim 20 feet left or right of the pin. In this instance, adjust your target so that it's 20 feet away from the flag, and aim your clubface accordingly.

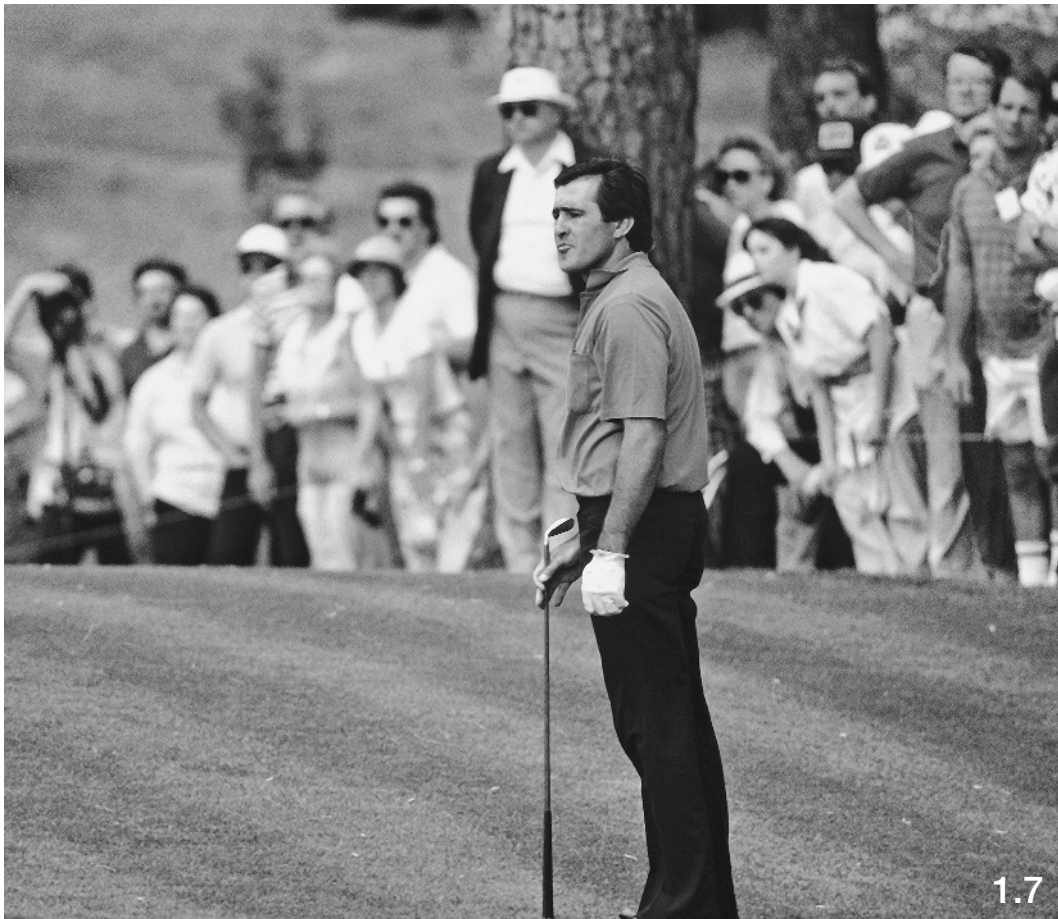
## Maxim #6: See the Shot in Your Mind's Eye and Rehearse It

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I detailed Seve's pre-shot routine earlier in this chapter. In a nutshell, he would spend most of his time (about 90 percent) looking at the target and visualizing the shot—its trajectory, how much the ball would spin and roll out, and in

what direction (see FIGURE 1.7). All great players do this; in fact, Jack Nicklaus talked about how he'd see the shot like a movie in reverse, with the ball coming out of the hole and working its way back toward him. This visualization technique gave him something to react to, whereas the average recreational golfer stares at the ball and the ground and has no sense of where the target is or what he or she wants to do with the ball.

The secret to being really good at the short game is to elevate your awareness of the clubhead, the direction of the wind, the slope of the green (is it uphill or downhill?) and,



most important, the target. I recommend running through a really short pre-shot checklist, then taking several rehearsal swings off to the side of the ball. As you do this, visualize the shot as you want it to play out—see the trajectory, the precise landing spot, the run-out, and so on. Try to brush the ground with the club where the ball would be in your stance, or just ahead of it. Once you're done with your practice swings, set up to the ball, take one final look at the target, and go. Because of the connection you have to the target, you should have a good feel for the amount of swing you need to make to produce the desired result.

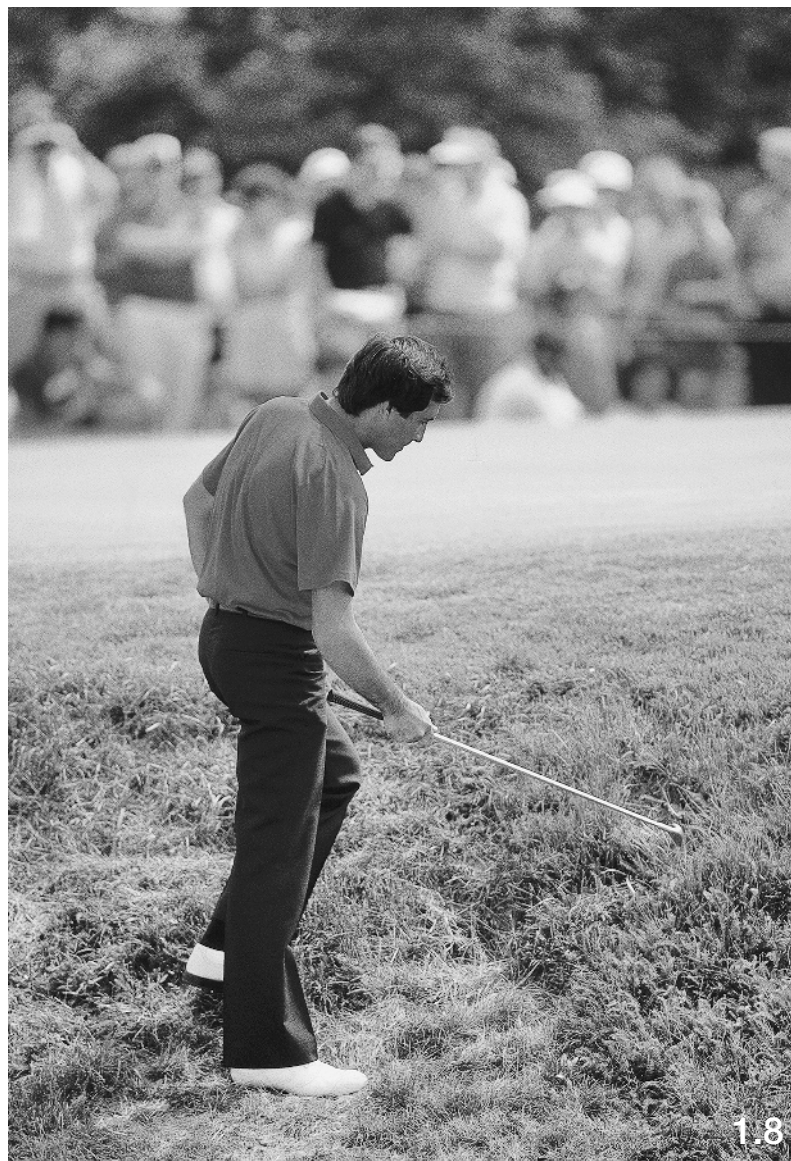
## Maxim #7: The Lie of the Ball Dictates What's Possible

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Seve was a very confident and aggressive player, but he wasn't foolish. If the lie was near impossible, and he didn't think he could put the club on the ball and hit a reasonably good shot, he wouldn't attempt it.

The lie is the very first thing you should examine when you arrive at your ball (see FIGURE 1.8). It, more than anything else, determines how you are to play the shot. If, on one hand, the ball has settled down in the rough, you're not going to be able to spin it very well, so you can forget about trying that super-high flop shot. You then need to look at other alternatives, such as pitching the ball 20 feet left or right of the pin or 25 feet beyond the hole. If, on the other hand, the ball is sitting reasonably well and you can get most of the clubface on it—or can slide the clubhead underneath it—then the high lob is something to consider.

When you encounter a very poor lie, always ask yourself, “What's my best chance to get the ball up-and-down in two?”



Sometimes, the best option might be to leave yourself with a 25- or 30-foot putt for par. The most important thing is to not bring double or triple bogey into the equation. Three shots can be okay; just don't make it four or five.



## Think LOWER

Earlier, I mentioned the importance of having your own pre-shot checklist. This means gathering as much information as you can about the shot so that you can make a sound decision about which club to choose and what shot to play. When you step up to the ball, all of your thinking should be done. It's not the time to be indecisive; you should have a clear game plan for what you're going to do.

The following five-step pre-shot checklist is easy to remember because it's an acronym for the word LOWER. It's also very efficient—run through it several times on the practice range and the course, and it will become second nature to you.

- L**— First, examine the **Lie** of the ball. Is it sitting up in the grass or down? Is it above or below your feet? Is the ground firm or soft?
- O**— What **O**ptions are open to you? Preferably, you want to use the least-lofted club possible and keep the ball along the ground, but you might have to launch it up high to avoid a bunker or some other obstacle.
- W**— Is there any **W**ind, and, if so, in which direction is it blowing? Shots into the wind tend to roll a lot less, whereas shots downwind tend to take off.
- E**— How much **E**levation is there? If the shot is significantly uphill, you may have to carry the ball higher and farther and play more club; if it's downhill, you may want to hit the ball short of the green and let it trickle on, or hit the softest-landing ball possible. The slope of the green is also very important—if it slopes significantly from right to left, then you'll want to make sure to land the ball to the right of the flagstick and let it feed down to the hole.
- R**— When you're done examining all of the information, **R**ehearse your swing a few times to get a feel for the length of swing you need to make. Make sure to look at the target as you swing because your eyes are the best gauge of distance.

## Short Game No-No's

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Just as there are several must-haves in the short game, there are a few things you should absolutely try to avoid. Atop this list of no-no's is a strong grip (hands turned more to the right on the handle, with the V's formed by your thumbs and forefingers pointing toward your right shoulder). There are very few shots in the short game where you want the clubface turning over through impact, and that's exactly what the stronger grip encourages. With a strong grip, there's a tendency to drop the right shoulder too much on the downswing, instead of turning it through, which makes getting the bottom of your swing's arc to the ball or just beyond it very difficult. The shoulders tend to move up and down, instead of on a circular path similar to a tilted merry-go-round, and the result is a lot of fat and thin shots.

With a neutral grip (V's pointing toward chin), which Seve used, the face is more prone to stay square to open, and the shoulders will turn on a plane somewhere between vertical and horizontal. That leads me to another common short-game mistake, which is swinging the club off-plane. In order for the bottom of the swing's arc to hit the ground in the right place—directly under the ball or, sometimes, on the target side of the ball—the club has to be traveling on a circular arc. (Many of golf's best teachers refer to this as an inside to down-the-line to back inside path.) A lot of golfers think they should swing the club straight back and straight through, but that will only put the bottom of the arc in the wrong place, usually behind the ball. When you set up, make sure to position the ball at the bottom of your swing's arc (where you want the clubhead to touch the ground) or before it. Provided you swing the club on-plane, you should hit the ball solid.

Another thing you should never attempt to do is keep your body completely still. Golfers seem to blame every mis-hit on

moving too much, whether it's lifting their heads prematurely or dipping down at the start of the downswing, so they compensate by trying to remain frozen on the next shot. Seve never tried to keep his head down—he'd hit the shot, and it would pop right back up. He had his feet, hips, knees, and shoulders moving all of the time, as do most good players.

The golf swing is an athletic movement, and the idea of trying to keep your head still or your spine angle constant is a bad thing. If you remain too static, then you have no momentum to move your arms back and forth. The job of the hands and the arms in the swing is to lift and lower the club, while the body's role is to move the club away from and toward the target. If you stand still, then you haven't got a body to move the club to and fro, and your arms have to do it. When you're forced to move the club toward the target with your arms, you're going to have a more difficult time making solid contact.

The last kiss-of-death philosophy I want to address is the idea that you should deliberately accelerate through the ball. Other than moving too much, the most common excuse golfers make for a bad shot is decelerating the club into impact. As a result, you get players standing still and overaccelerating their hands and arms into the finish. This is disastrous. You don't find acceleration with a hit from your hands and arms; you get it from the correct sequencing and pivoting of your body. As the body turns through, it pulls the hands and the arms along for the ride, providing the momentum they need to bring the club to a full finish. Acceleration: yes! Deliberate hand acceleration: certainly not!

