



THE SUNDAY TIMES

I AM THE first to admit that I haven't exactly looked after myself over the years. I listen to athletes telling the world: "My body is a temple", and I have to take my hat off to them, while thinking: "And my body is a rubbish bin!"

But as the years have begun to catch up with me (having done the sums, I am stunned to discover that I am now 57 years old), apart from wondering where they have all gone, I ask what happened to my plan to become an Olympic 1500m champion before going on to become the youngest Prime Minister this country has ever had.

Well, I didn't become an Olympic champion because I didn't train – in fact, I didn't do any running at all after I left school. Hated it, in fact. But loved the idea of becoming a champion. As it turned out, I would also have found myself competing with some guy called Coe and another by the name of Ovett. I believe they were rather good.

And I didn't become the youngest Prime Minister because I really couldn't make up my mind which party I supported, and I figured that the Loving Platform Shoes While Wearing Red Bell Bottom Trousers Party simply wouldn't appeal to enough people to successfully launch my political career.

And that, in a nutshell, is how I became a journalist. I always wanted to be fit, it was just that what was involved in getting to that condition seemed like too much hard work. And I soon found myself working all hours in an ultimately futile attempt to be as successful as possible in my career.

Five or six years ago I finally summoned up the motivation to give up smoking, but exercise remained anathema to me and a belly began to form. And so it remained until I began my golf improvement programme with Jean-Jacques Rivet, the world-renowned biomechanist, Paul Stuart, the director of golf at the fabulous London Club, and, now, Rob Hillman, head of torture with the European Tour.

I first met Rob at Wentworth, home of the Tour and also of the BMW PGA Championship. Okay, I admit it – head of torture is not his official title. He is the main man in the Tour's state-of-the-art physiotherapy truck, an amazing piece of kit that travels to all parts of the globe with the players.

As professional golfers have become athletes – and you only have to look at the physiques of perhaps as many as 95% of them to realise how much time they spend working out – so they have become more susceptible to the odd twinge, and look for ways to avoid it. They want exercise programmes designed to help their bodies deal with the strain of pounding thousands of golf balls. Let's be clear about something

here – the golf swing is not a natural movement, and it puts a great deal of strain on back, neck, shoulder, stomach and leg muscles.

The guys in the physio truck ease away the pains of the players while telling them precisely what exercises they should be focusing on.

So when Rob tells a European Tour player to touch his toes, that player will do so without thinking. When he told me to do it, I ground to a halt with the tips of my fingers fully 12 inches from my toes. It wasn't a pretty sight. He put me through various other tests, in order to find out precisely what my body could and could not do.

You may recall that JJ gave me a series of exercises to strengthen the left side of my body and improve my flexibility. I have been doing them religiously for three months now, and have felt a difference, but more of that later.

Rob pulled my legs, arms and torso every which way but loose, telling me to push, then relax, while he pulled. Push, relax, pull. Remarkably, with each progression, I could feel the range of movement and mobility in each part of my body improving – without pain!

Then he got me to stand up, put a ball between my knees and squeeze it. I did this several times. “Now Derek, I want you to touch your toes.”

And do you know what? I did. Easily. This may sound odd to you, but it really got my juices going.

Before I go on, I need to take you back to perhaps 30-40 minutes earlier in the day. I had been told to go out to the driving range to hit a few balls. Under any circumstances, hitting golf balls on the range at Wentworth is a pretty traumatic experience – the grass is just so perfect, beautifully manicured, that it seems a crime to take a divot.

Now imagine doing so with your coach, Paul Stuart, biomechanist, JJ Rivet, several key members of the European Tour backroom team and friend Richard Hope looking on. Oh yes, and did I mention that this was on the Wednesday of the PGA Championship? So I found myself hitting golf balls alongside some of the finest players in the world, while being eyed up by curious members of the public.

JJ filmed my swing and quietly checked out the data. You might remember that I had been transferring huge amounts of my weight to the right side of my body during my backswing, while taking the club too far back. My biggest fault was an inability to generate sufficient compression with my irons at the moment of impact. I have been working really, really hard to put things right, and felt that although much still needs to be done, progress is being made.

I was asked by JJ and Paul if I had noticed any difference in my ball striking since we were last together at the London Club. “Well yes, I have actually, I keep flying the greens, especially from the seven iron through to the wedge, and in some cases by fully 20 yards.” They smiled.

JJ then told me that it was time to meet Rob Hillman, so off I went for the session I described earlier.

Now I am not going to try to kid you here. Although I was ecstatic about being able to touch my toes, I was absolutely knackered. The temperature was around 85F, so I was also very, very hot. All that I wanted to do was to find somewhere to sit down with a cold drink.

No chance. "Right then Derek, now we want you to go back out to the range, hit a few balls and see how your body feels," said Rob. I looked towards JJ for help. No chance. I turned to Paul. "Come on Derek, let's go out there and see what your made of," he said. "Sweat," I muttered.

I took a couple of practice swings. Hey, this feels good. Really good. Really, really good. Then I hit a ball and looked on in shock as it soared into the cloudless blue sky, moving gently from right to left. At around that point, I was aware of a couple standing behind me. "Who is that, Brian?" she asked. "Aw don't worry, he's nobody." Nobody? Nobody? I will have you know that I was still holding the follow-through pose at this moment.

I hit another shot, and then another. Both the same as before.

JJ called me over to look at the data. He was smiling. Not in a laughing-at-me kind of a way, but in a Professor Higgins I-think-he's-got-it way. And sure enough, even I could see huge differences. Most important, I could feel that things were getting better. "Derek, you have made really good progress," JJ said. "Really good progress. Keep it up. Just keep working on these same things until next we meet."

For the record, I am convinced that the key for me is to concentrate on keeping my left knee solid and stable during my backswing – any movement of the knee should be slightly forward if anything, not back. Just watch the top pros next time you tune in to Sky's golf coverage.

Why the solid knee? If your knee doesn't buckle, it is very difficult to overswing, thus you generate more power. More power equates to more distance. I love it, just love it.

Minutes later, somebody else had taken my place under JJ's watchful gaze – some Italian kid by the name of Matteo Manassero. He shows promise, apparently.

As for me, well no, I am not nobody. When I next stand on that first tee, I am Rory McIlroy.

Derek Clements - 2012