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MY EUROPEAN TOUR

THE SWING'S THE THING

Sunday, 18 March 2012

J'aime

Soyez le premier



The Albatros Golf Performance Centre at Terre Blanche. (EuropeanTour)

MY EUROPEAN TOUR

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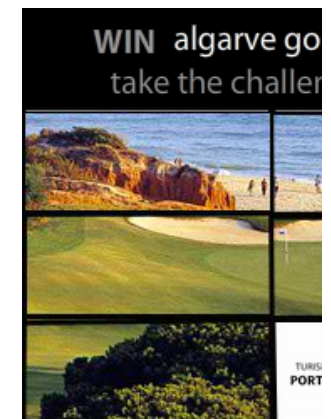
MY FAVOURITE PLAYER



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Sunday Times journalist Derek Clements sets out on a season-long journey to prove that, even at 57 years of age, it is possible to teach an old dog (a very old dog) new tricks when it comes to his golf game.

He starts off with a visit to the European Tour's first Performance Institute, based at the wonderful Terre Blanche Hotel and Spa in the Provence region of south-east France, where he puts himself in the hands of world-renowned biomechanist Jean-Jacques Rivet, acclaimed golf coach Alain Alberti and TaylorMade club fitter Vincent Mauger.

The results initially left Derek wondering whether he was playing the right sport, but he returned to England more determined than ever to put what he has learnt into practice and achieve his aim, which is to reduce his handicap from 12 to nine.

With two stunning golf courses, you could be forgiven for thinking that Terre Blanche would be prepared to rest on its laurels – not a bit of it.

Director of Golf Jean-Marie Cassela is determined to create a world-class golf facility in the south of France and has done precisely that with L'Albatros Golf Performance Centre, which has

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just been inaugurated as the European Tour's first Performance Institute in the country.

Essentially, it is somewhere that golfers of all levels can come to take advantage of the latest knowledge, hi-tech equipment and facilities – many of the finest young golfers in France come here on a regular basis, and all of them say their games have benefited as a result.

I wanted to find out if what is on offer would work for me, as a 57-year-old 12-handicapper whose game seems to have been in terminal decline for the past four or five years. I used to be a decent single-figure player, but those days are long gone, and I have become increasingly frustrated at my inability to play consistently well.

If truth be told, the only exercise I get is playing golf and walking my dog, but I have always known that I have been blessed with decent flexibility and today's equipment (clubs and balls) allows me to hit the ball as far today as when I was in my twenties and producing the best golf of my life.

My mission was to have my swing looked at and to ensure that I was using clubs that matched my height, build and swing speed.

If you were going to buy a suit, you would try it on first; if you were buying a car you would take it for a test drive. But when it comes to buying a new set of golf clubs, most players leave their common sense at home and buy a set off the shelf, without hitting a single shot, just because their favourite golfer used the same model to win the Baked Beans Waste Management Masters Open. Never mind that he is a pro, swings the club twice as fast and is five inches taller.

Why would anybody spend up to £2,000 on a set of clubs without first knowing that they were suitable? I am 5ft 9in so it seems pretty obvious to me that I would be wasting my time using the same set of clubs that somebody of 5ft 6in or 6ft 3in would employ. And it stands to reason that my swing speed is going to be a lot slower than that of a 25-year-old who may be the same height as me – and that means we must require different shafts.

So part of this process was to be fitted out for a new set of clubs at Terre Blanche by Vincent Mauger, of TaylorMade. And it soon become pretty obvious that there are vast differences between shafts and clubheads. There were some combinations with which I struggled to even get the ball airborne, while there were others that caused me to slice everything (I NEVER visit the right-hand side of any golf course, so that came as a shock to the system), but then you pick up the club that feels right for you. It is a Eureka moment. You hit the ball, it comes out the sweet spot and it rises into the air and keeps on rising. It feels great. Then you hit another. And the same thing happens.

Vincent, meanwhile, is consulting all his computer gadgetry and confirms that this is the club for you. Strangely, although I finished up with regular flex steel and graphite shafts on all other clubs, Vincent recommended a three wood fitted with a lightweight stiff shaft with which I hit the ball 20 yards further than I had with my current club (the favourite club in my bag, by the way). Not once, but every time. TWENTY yards!

All right, so that takes care of the clubs. Now I want to tell you about biomechanics. Like me, you will almost certainly have heard the word. You may even know all about Dave Alred, the biomechanist who helped Jonny Wilkinson become the greatest kicker in rugby union by studying his movements as he struck the oval ball and identifying what Wilkinson needed to do to produce the optimum performance each and every time.

Alred was convinced that what he did could work in any sport and offered his services to Luke Donald. He didn't pretend to be a golf coach, but he understood the movements that were required to produce the best swing. Donald surprised many in the game by accepting Alred's offer. The result? Wasn't that the same Luke Donald who won the PGA Tour and European Tour money lists last season, the first ever to do so?

So there has to be something to biomechanics. And after spending a day with Jean-Jacques Rivet, Head of Biomechanics and Sport Performance, European Tour Performance Institute at Terre Blanche, I am here to tell you that the man is a genius and that the work he has been doing for years represents the future of golf.

Jean-Jacques Rivet

Like Alred, JJ, as he is affectionately known, makes no claims to be a golf coach, but he understands body movement and knows which moves are helpful and which are harmful to a good golf swing. And many of the world's very best tour professionals consult him because of what he can do for them.

Before picking up a golf club, I was told to take my shoes off and stand in two foot imprints connected to a computer, to relax and to stand stock still for 45 seconds. It wasn't long before I felt some movement in my feet, coming from the imprints, or so I thought. JJ looked at the data and immediately informed me that what he was seeing told him that I was tired – he was absolutely right. I had been so worried about the process that I had barely slept the night before and I had been gently rocking about. It was my own body movement I had been feeling.

I had an idea that my swing problems came from excessive leg and foot movement, something that has gradually increased over the years. The problem is that on days where my timing is off, I can't hit the ball to save my life. JJ asked me what I wanted to achieve, and I told him that my aim was to reduce my handicap from 12 to nine by the end of the year, but what I wanted more than anything else was to achieve consistency.

He told me that he would do his best to find a way for me to hit straight golf shots – this puzzled me because I had always been led to believe that it was impossible to hit a golf ball dead straight as every shot imparts spin. I was wrong. JJ wasn't.

JJ asked me to hit a series of shots, first with a wedge, then with a seven iron. On a good day, I draw the ball gently from right to left; more typically, the flight is a hook, especially with irons. Sure enough, every shot started slightly right of the target and finished way to the left. I had been standing on a mat, under which were sensors that recorded my every movement. JJ also filmed my swing.

Then came the results. My swing looked exactly as I imagined it would, so no real surprises there, but the real shocker was when we looked at the movement of my feet. In the time it took me to swing the club back, hit the ball and follow through, there were four distinct movements in my feet and body. And the worst news of all was that the final movement took my bodyweight back towards my right foot – the last thing you want to do when trying to hit good golf shots.

It didn't seem to come as a huge surprise to JJ though, who told me that he now wanted to assess my general levels of fitness. My flexibility was fine – in fact, I scored remarkably well on that front for somebody of my age. Apparently it is all down to genes, pot luck. The results showed that the right side of my body was stronger than my left, which is not unusual, and that I had lost strength in muscles just above my ankles.

JJ also informed me I had too much weight on my toes when I had been hitting golf balls earlier. The solution? His assistant, Jean-Paul Fernandez, asked me to stand in a machine that would produce a pair of special insoles to go inside my golf shoes – these would gently push my toes up and encourage me take the weight off them.

When the insoles were ready (a process that takes a matter of minutes), we went back to the mat and I was asked to hit more golf balls out onto the range, but this time JJ wanted me to turn my right foot in so that it was at right angles to my intended direction of flight (I have always played with it slightly flayed out) and keep both feet firmly planted to the ground until after making impact with the ball. I knew that it made sense, but knowing it and doing it are two very different things.

The problem is that JJ was and is asking me to change a habit ingrained over many years. I wish that I could tell you that after six or seven shots it all just clicked into place, but I can't. The quality of my shots was awful, and JJ told me I was still moving both feet too much.

Just when I thought that things couldn't get any worse, Alain Alberti arrived to make me suffer some more. Alain is a renowned coach and head of the David Leadbetter Academy at Terre Blanche. He works with many of the finest amateurs in the game and coaches Raphael Jacquelin and a number of other top European Tour golfers. So this is a man who knows what he is talking about.

He watched me hit a few shots and confirmed JJ's diagnosis – I had to keep my feet grounded. And then he told me that I also need to cock my wrists much earlier in my backswing, telling me

that if I did so it would eliminate my hook and result in a crisper, more powerful strike.

Again, I knew he was correct. But this meant making another fundamental change to my technique.

And still it wasn't over. Jean-Paul took me into the gym area, where he gave me a series of exercises designed to strengthen the left side of my body. To my relief, they were not especially gruelling, although I could feel the odd twinge in various parts of my body as I stretched muscles that have been dormant for years.

Since returning to England, Jean-Paul has forwarded me my exercise plan. I will be adhering to it rigidly, and I will be working on keeping my feet grounded during my golf swing and on breaking my wrists earlier. I know that, for a while at least, it is not going to be pretty, but I also know that it is going to be worth it in the long run and that I will see improvements both in my game and in my general level of fitness.

And biomechanics? It works, no matter what your ability.

I will be producing monthly reports charting my progress. Hopefully, some of you might even be converted before too long.

To find out more about the ETPI and how to improve your own game, check out the [Tour Fit section](#) of My European Tour and sign up for the Tour Fiit Programme. It's free to register and you'll get your own improvement plan to get that handicap down.

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