

## JOHN L. LOW ON PUTTING

IN MANY WAYS *Mr. John L. Low is regarded as the greatest authority on British amateur golf. He is a pleasant theorist who divines the spirit and the full sporting value of the game as few others have ever done. In practice he is a fine player of much achievement, and, though he worries little about championships, he has been unfortunate not to have been more than once in the final of the British amateur championship, which he was in 1898, having been in the semi-final the previous year. He was one of the party of golfers from the Oxford and Cambridge Universities that toured through the United States thirteen years ago. He is chairman of the Rules of Golf Committee.*

*Mr. Low may be said to have specialised in putting, and is one of the finest and deadliest putters in British amateur golf, with a style which, while strongly peculiar to himself, is much varied in the course of a single game, when it has been said Mr. Low will have recourse to all the clubs in his bag except his driver and niblick for putting purposes and to answer the special requirements of the case. His style more closely resembles that of some of the best putters of the young American school than any other—generally erect, with feet close together and a steady swing from well-poised wrists and a smooth follow through. The following gist of his teaching was laid before British golfers some time ago, but is new to American readers.*

MANY PERSONS despise putting, but in their heart of hearts they know that they either play or do not play what they call their "game" according as their putting is indifferent, or bad, or good. On the slightest provocation the golfer will change the style of his club with the idea that the new found weapon will yield him greater service. As I once watched the players hole out on the last green at St. Andrews, I saw two waves of fashion take hold of them and carry them for a few days on the crest of success, and then fling them in utmost helplessness into the trough of despair. Mr. Macfie, putted, or rather malletted, the ball with great cunning with his hammer-headed instrument, and the crowd followed him in everything but his skill. Then Mr. Ernley Blackwell happened to pick up a

dog-leg putting cleek with very shallow face, and blade so thick that the ball left the club as off a wood face. He putted well with his club, for it was a good enough thing to work with, and this particular kind of club suited him, and being, moreover, a very fine putter, he flattered the club. Then it was said, "Have you seen Blackwell's club? Why, I tried one like it, and anyone could putt with it." And so in a vain dream of hope the crowd go forth once more to enjoy the fun of the new toy and taste yet again the bitterness of failure. And it will ever be so as long as men imagine that they have only to get the right club, or assume the proper attitude, and everything will go well.

## TWO PRIME FAULTS

ADVICE on putting must be to a great extent negative, and for this reason we may in a word state the two great causes of failure. The first is moving the body forward at the moment of striking; and the second is drawing the club backward in an inward direction. It is difficult sometimes to avoid the latter fault; for out of ignorance we commit the sin owing to our position over the ball, not behind or in front of it. We cannot tell how we bring the club back, at least not without careful thought, and so we slip into the bad habit unawares. If we used a mallet or a billiard cue we should not so readily make this mistake; there is supposed to be no rule against avoiding the danger in this manner, but fortunately few golfers avail themselves of such cures. To take the club straight back from the ball is far more important than the nice adjustment of the face or blade so often urged. Mathematical putting has indeed hitherto been distinctly unsuccessful.

The moving forward of the body, or "swaying," is a fault common in all golfing shots, but is most surely disadvantageous in putting. If we take our aim and make our balance from one position and then proceed to take up another during the swing of the club, all the time hoping that we shall get back into our first attitude, we are trifling with a very delicate arrangement of conditions. True hitting is largely a matter of balance, and balance is not a thing too easy of adjustment. In driving we are striving to put force into the stroke,

and have some excuse if too earnestly we strive to get into a position of advantage for the downward blow. If we could time the stroke properly with our hands and manage the sway properly at the same time it would be all right, but the feat is too obviously impracticable.\* Against this "swaying" we may turn out our left foot in the direction of the hole and so prevent the body weight from being too much taken from this balance in the backward swing; but in putting this precaution should not be necessary, for the power of the hands should be sufficient for the stroke and the tendency to swing the body backwards should be easily overcome by practice. It is in the forward swing that the temptation is most apt to make itself felt, and should be most carefully avoided. It is well then to take the club straight back and to keep the body steady, hitting with the hands only. In fact, I would go further and say that putting should be the work of the fingers, if possible the very tips of the fingers, where the sense-bulbs lie.

#### ON BEING NATURAL.

HAVE YOU EVER, after toiling round the links on an "off putting day, with a non-golfing friend, who stood so close to you that it was impossible to hear the scarcely more than thought-uttered sneer which accompanied each failure, said, "Just try a putt yourself and you see that it is not so easy as it looks?" If you have, you will have played a sad part, for your friend will probably hole out with the greatest ease five out of six puts of six feet, and finally, after a miss, will remark, "Oh, I see, one could miss, will remark, "Oh, I see, one could miss one at times." But this man has the secret now when he is no golfer; but he does not know what it is, for he has not realized the reason of his success. Let him but become a real golfer, and in a few days you will find him with two or three putters endeavoring, with but meagre results, to hole out from a bare yard's distance. And what is the reason? Simply that he has unlearned the secret of putting, and no longer hits the ball freely and in a natural manner. The art of putting consists in hitting the ball with freedom, grace and accuracy, in the middle of the club.

The beginning of an art is generally ac-

quired by imitation, of a science by precept, while inspiration comes from the gods. Do not imitate any putter, however successful, who seems to you unnatural in his methods. If you hear that a certain player plays to pull all his putts, do not imitate him. If you are told that a particular professional player slices his putts, do not try to copy him. If you see a golfer in an easy, natural way hit the ball freely towards, or into, the hole, look at him as often as possible.

As a matter of fact, club, stance, and method are quite secondary considerations in putting. The one needful thing is that the player should hit the ball in the right direction and with the proper strength. I am convinced that it is possible to do this with almost any fashion of club and from any kind of golfing stance. I do not think that, if a man was putting very well, he would putt very badly if he changed his stance and played with his legs crossed; I have for fun tried this unusual position, and the results have been fairly satisfactory. The great difficulty is to get players to realize that it is their habit of mis-hitting the ball and not their club that is at the root of their evil putting. Certain positions no doubt lend themselves more favourably to accurate hitting of the ball than others, and the best will be the one which is found to be the most natural. If the player is standing in a posture which he has copied from some other golfer, part of his mental energy will be occupied by the consideration of the exactness of his portraiture. If to this be added ideas as to the placing of the club on the ground, the manner of drawing it back from the ball, the "follow through" after hitting, and so on, the poor man's mind will be so pelted with notions that the ball hitting business—most important of all—will be battered out of it. There are many men whose minds can be read, almost aloud, as they putt, so obviously do they go through a set of rules in their minds as they play. It is painful to watch their labour, and they seldom bring forth fair results, save when everything is going well with them. In moments of excitement great concentration of mind and coolness of calculation are hardly possible, and it is then that a natural and easy style will be seen to advantage. The natural players has only to think of one thing, the hitting of the ball;

\* Curiously enough this is exactly what Edward Ray does!—Editor.

the golfer who is working by rule has to strive almost against the possible to collect and bring to bear his different rules.

#### CONCENTRATION.

I AM QUITE conscious that I advocate a great variety of shots on the putting green, and that I am persuaded that these different shots require to be played under certain rules. What I wish to emphasize is that the rules which I suggest should be practised again and again, until they become to the player a second nature. Some calculation of the chances in favour of playing a shot in one manner or another may be made before the ball is addressed, but when the ball is being struck theories must leave the mind, and the player must think of nothing but true hitting. The least movement of a spectator puts a man off his putt, which means that some thought has entered into his mind and spoilt his singleness of purpose. Something will be gained if the player, after having determined in his mind how his putt should be played, focuses his ideas into one point when actually making the stroke—that point being the centre of the ball.

When I say that thoughts introspective should be banished from the mind when the ball is being struck, I by no means wish to convey the idea that the "how and why" of putting is of small importance. There are, in fact, almost as many shots to be played on the putting green as throughout the course, but when actually making the shot the mind must be single, for the difficulty of hitting the ball truly with a putter is a hard feat to perform. Take, for instance, the very common shot on the green—the holing out of a four-foot putt with "borrow" either from the right or left-hand side. If the "borrow" be about three or four inches, and from the right, and the green be keen, a somewhat hard shot is suggested. The stroke may be played by hitting the ball in the centre of the club and trying to drop it in from the right with just sufficient strength to reach the hole. Two or three points are suggested even by this simple-enough-looking shot which may here be noticed. First, in playing a stroke of this sort several features have been added to the simple or straight putt. The most important is that the "borrow" has been introduced, and moreover the "borrow" will depend entirely on the strength. The more gently the stroke will

be played, the more will it be necessary to allow for the influence of the ground on the ball. Wind may also be either an exaggerating or counteracting force, and in either case must be considered. If the slightest degree too much allowance be made for the "borrow" or if the ball be struck by one point too hard it will slip round the top side of the hole and perhaps run of holing. If, on the other hand, too little strength or elevation be given, the miserable experience of not reaching the hole will be the result. When the ball is played to be dropped, it will be found that unless it enters the hole exactly in the centre—in the centre, that is, of the hole as compared with the line in which it is travelling—it will swing round either from the top or bottom.

#### ANOTHER WAY OF HOLING.

Now the scientific player will, after looking at the balls from the hole, at once determine to play a "shot," by which I mean not to play the ball in the ordinary way from the club centre, trusting to the nice calculation before suggested. This shot will consist in playing the ball quite straight at the hole, just on the right-hand lip, fairly hard but counteracting the hill by hitting the ball with slice off the heel of the putter. The great difficulty of strength has thus been overcome; the "line" for the dropping shot was comparatively easy to determine, but as we noted the least variation in strength entirely altered this "line." The ball may now be struck without any nicety of strength along a definite line, the only difficulty being the true hitting of the ball, and on this point alone the player will now be able to concentrate his undivided mind. This same stroke of slicing against a hill will also be equally efficacious when a strong wind blows from the right hand side. Instead of allowing the wind to blow the ball from the right of the hole, the ball will be fighting against the air, and may, therefore, be struck straighter, and, what is more important still, struck much harder.

Supposing the position of things is reversed and the "borrow" on the putt is from the left instead of the right, the "dropping" stroke will be still a difficult one to negotiate. The least slice put on the ball will accentuate the slope of the hill; and it is very easy to slice a ball with a putter. The shot which suggests itself

under the circumstances is just the converse of the one described in the last paragraph. The ball should be hit off the nose of the putter and played with pull against the hill slope, thus discounting the ground influence. By this means many a putt with "borrow" becomes a straight shot and easily played.

It may with much show of truth be advanced that the difficulty of hitting the ball off the heel or toe with slice or pull is greater than the calculation difficulty involved in allowing the "borrow" to do its own work. I would submit, however, that those who so argue are, from lack of a definite aim in hitting, apt to strike the ball indiscriminately off the centre, heel, or toe without intent. The fact that the ball must be struck with a fixed and small portion of the head will tend to make the aim more exact and concentrate the mind on true hitting. I do not suggest that putts should always be sliced or pulled, or that the centre of the putter head is not the spot most frequently to be used. If, however, the player will in practice try over and over again the different shots which may be played on the green, until he is able to slice or pull or top at will, he will find at times in real play shots which may much the more easily be played by the employment of these methods.

#### A FALLACY.

ONE OF THE products of the "four-ball" and "best of balls," or rather "better of balls" match is the new tactics employed on the putting green. It is a very common practice for one of a side to play to lay the ball dead for "a half" in order that his partner may have a free shot at the hole with a view to scoring a win. Observation of the results arising from such a system of combination brings out clearly a point in putting which is not universally recognized. Very frequently the man who is playing to lie close to the hole succeeds beyond his intent, and places the ball in the hole it-

self. On the other hand, it is but rarely that we see the man who is trying to force a win with a bold putt bring off his coup. I have heard those well qualified to speak say that young Tommy Morris was a much better putter than present-day players, because he always went "bang" for the back of the hole. There is in this statement a great compliment paid to his marvelous genius, but it is a praise not quite on the surface of the words. The fact was, as his father told me, that the boy champion was a grand "holer out," and did not in the least mind running three or four feet past the hole, for he seldom missed on the return journey. That he holed more long putts by playing them strongly than by striving to get the exact strength I cannot believe. The plan of "playing for the back of the hole" is all right in certain shots, and in cases of "borrow," as I have already attempted to prove. But as a rule of putting I believe it to be a half-crown-destroying heresy. On bad greens it is, of course, sometimes necessary to bolt one's putts, for, as on an untrue billiard table, playing slow shots will not pay. It is seldom, however, that the man who always plays at the back of the hole putts with much success. I remember, when Andrew Kirkaldy was in his best form with his wooden putter, that from the edge of the green the ball generally lay some six inches from the hole, if it did not actually go into it. Seldom did he overrun the goal by more than two feet, and he holed a great number of long shots. The impression conveyed by his play was that he was striving principally to gauge the exact distance, never driving at the back of the hole. A ball which is played with exactly the right strength will sometimes drop in from the side of the hole; a ball that is played a yard too hard never will. A properly hit putt should have just sufficient strength to reach the back of the hole, not to strike it.

*(To be Concluded)*

