

THE CULT OF THE WOODEN PUTTER

MR. JOHN LOW'S PHILOSOPHY AND ADVICE

From time to time there are indications of a revival of the cult of the wooden putter, and no golfer considers his experience to any extent complete until he has made a trial of the earliest of the instruments that were used for the work upon the green, and to which many of the best players in Britain are still faithful. Among these Mr. John Low is certainly the leader. He has always been regarded as a veritable prince of putters among British amateurs, and his wonderful work on the greens attracted great attention when he toured in the United States with the Oxford and Cambridge team. His advice which so often has an original flavour, is always well worth study, and hereunder are set forth his thoughts upon the selection and points of the wooden putter itself. Much that is said about wooden putters applies, of course, to aluminum putters also.

PUTTERS may be divided into three classes, viz.—1. The putter (vulgarly called the "wooden putter"). 2. The putting cleek. 3. The iron putter. The last-named is a straight-faced, rather heavy weapon, sometimes (probably by the Irish) made of gun metal. It has existed in some shape or form from early times, but except as a gift to an enemy is not to be recommended. We are left, therefore, with the putter and the cleek to choose from, and an examination of their rival claims will, I think, show that a golfer should make himself master of both weapons. Where the greens are true and solid and the lies good, I have no doubt that the putter is, both for scientific and artistic reasons, the better tool. On flat but untrue greens, where cuppy lies abound, the cleek will probably be found more serviceable. When a ball is struck with a putter it is influenced throughout its course to the hole by the nature of the ground, and a nice calculation is necessary of slope and pace of green. It is essential, therefore, that the green be true in order that the nice computation of the player may turn out to be correct.

With the cleek, on the other hand, the ball is in a manner forced up to the hole with a sort of skidding motion, and seems controlled by the loft of the club face right up to the hole.

If the ball lie cupped and the putter be used, the straight face will cause the ball to jump in the air, and so both strength and direction will be sacrificed; but with the cleek the ball will be lofted out of the cup and will run the rest of its course with the advantage of a good start. The great increase of inland golf courses was the cause of popularising the cleek, especially among professionals who had to play matches on these greens and found it difficult to return to the putter on revisiting their native shore courses.

I have indicated two classes of shot where the cleek seems better fitted for the work on hand than the putter, but in all other circumstances the wooden club I believe to be the most accurate. With the putter the ball is struck with exactly the same kind of blow that a cue gives a billiard ball, free and in the centre of the ball. I do not know of any club which is capable of giving this free, true hit to the same degree as the putter. In cleek-putting the ball is tapped or pushed or pulled or scuffled up to the hole, not hit cleanly and truly as in a drive. Now with this scuffling style the ball is never running freely, but is always liable to catch on any inequality of ground, and in ascending a slope is very liable to "catch up" and finish its course far short of the goal. Not

so with the wooden weapon; from its sweet face the ball rolls on through dale and over hill, seeming to gain confidence with each difficulty surmounted, until it draws up just two feet past the hole, out of breath, but with the journey completed. I do not of course, mean to say that golfers who putt with the cleek are always short in their putts, but I have noticed that they generally overcome the natural tendency to be short by some unnatural way of hitting the ball. Thus some take the loft off the club by turning in the face, others by standing in front of the ball, others by carrying the whole club as it were through "on a piece"; but these are all works which have to be added to the simple act of true hitting, which is alone necessary in putter play. There is no shot so beautiful from the spectator's point of view as the long putt well played with a heavy wooden tool; for the greatest golfing skill is exhibited with the least apparent effort.

WHEN it is recognized that a putter may cost from a shilling to half a sovereign to produce out of the same material, the fallacy of the saying, "a good player can play as well with one club as with another," will be partly understood. The truth is that good clubs cannot be made quickly or by unskilled workmen, nor are clubs worth buying unless they are well and carefully fashioned. George Lorimer, one of the best of clubmakers, has said that he liked to have a week in which to make a putter. His habit is to take up the head in the morning and look at the work of the day before with a fresh eye; after half an hour's touching up he will put his work down again and so, working at intervals, at last turn out

a beautiful and cunningly-formed thing.

It has been suggested that the first workman tried his 'prentice hand on man, and after meeting with a measure of success proceeded to the more delicate task of creating woman. About the putter there is something so slender and sensitive, so fitful, capricious and fickle, shall I venture to say even at times inconstant, that no doubt can be felt as to the sex question. Plainly, such a companion will not readily be chanced on among the common herd or met with in the crowded street; she must be sought for with care and skill. No club is so human as the putter, none so worthy the name of friend, if true, none more likely to do one an injury if disloyal and treacherous. Like many of her sex the putter has a touch of vanity in her nature which must be humoured, if she is to be won as a faithful mistress. Never must she be placed in the bag beside the horrid face of the pugilistic-looking niblick or the pug-headed mashie, but rather in company with the elegant family of spoons, who will say sweet things to her during the night season, and never fail to pass a word of compliment after a more than usually long "steal." Of her personal appearance she is moreover vain, far beyond the vanity of other clubs. Nothing will please her better than a new coat of varnish of the very finest quality. Often have I noticed, when, perhaps through my own fault, some coldness seemed to have sprung up between my putter and myself, and our relationship seemed strained, so that scarcely were we on speaking terms, that a new jacket brought about a return of a former and better state of things. A smiling face would greet me on the morrow, and my every wish became

a pleasure for her to fulfill. The putter is very jealous of her male rival, the cleeck, and hates to see him doing work which she would willingly and capably perform. Yet she is quick to take vengeance for the insult of being asked to do labour unsuited to her sex, and abhors to appear on rough and untrue greens.

SOME MEN have what is vulgarly called "an eye for a good thing." This is a most useful "eye" to have, for it enables one to place a true value on any intended purchase, and so to conduct one's subsequent operations from a sound basis. To some it is given to know a good horse, or dog, or picture, or investment of any kind at first sight, and put their knowledge to good account. And, strange though it may seem, such men are not necessarily good horsemen, or artists of note, or great financiers; their eye is an eye of instinct rather than of reasonable knowledge. It is because of this fact that many good golfers play with very poor clubs, while there are among the poorer players men who can pick out a good tool with unflinching instinct. But if you wish a good putter of wood you will hardly expect to find one in a clubmaker's ready-made stock, far less in a toy shop or a tobacconist's window. The putter must be sought for with care and not hastily, for she is to be the friend, be it hoped, of many years. First, then, find out a workman of repute as a maker of putters—and in these days of "reach-me-down" clubs there are few such artists—and having found him proceed warily. It will never do to go and order him to make you a first-class club for your match next morning; you would probably receive only the work of an apprentice. Wait your time and you will find the great man about his shop or

on his doorstep at the dinner hour, and may remark to him that the day is fine; this will be a safe opening, even though rain be falling in torrents, for it will give him the idea that you are a simple fellow and so throw him off his guard.

If a half empty pipe lies beside him offer him a cigar, and mention that you are afraid that it is not as good as you would have wished, being the last of the box, at the same time giving him to understand that another box is expected that evening. The cigar having been accepted and lighted, you may, in course of conversation allude to a very fine putter made by a rival clubmaker which, you will tell your friend, is being much talked about and copied. This will be almost certainly a winning card to play, for there is much jealousy among the profession, and as likely as not the remark will be made that So-and-So—naming the rival maker—has about as much idea of fashioning a putter as he has of successfully solving the problem of aerial navigation. Do not press the matter to a conclusion, but meet your man again in similar manner, this time carelessly holding in your hand the club which you have long felt was the cause of the success of some distinguished player. Almost seem to hide it from the clubmaker, and he will be sure to ask to see it, and probably volunteer to make you one on the same lines with slight improvements of his own. In time you will get your putter, and it will probably be a good one; in any case it will be good enough to re-sell if it does not suit you, which is always a point to be considered.

ANOTHER PLAN is to buy a putter that you fancy from another player. This is a quicker, but probably more

costly method, and not always satisfactory. It is always easy to putt with anyone else's club, because the one idea that you have in your mind is to find the true centre of the head and bring it in contact with the ball. But after the club has become your own property you quickly forget this first principle, and find the ball less liable to go holeward than formerly. Matters of weight and lie and size I will discuss later; but this much must be noted here, viz., that an ugly looking putter is very seldom a good one, and a pretty club is generally a useful tool.

THE WEIGHT of the club varies so much according to the individual taste of the player that no very hard rule on this point can be laid down. The man who plays with a light club gains in swiftness what he loses in the more solid blow of the heavier weapon. In putters the heavier the club the more difficult will it be for some men to hit with the delicacy which is requisite for getting the proper distance out of the shot. A heavy club will require to be well under command, especially on keen greens, but the extra weight will give greater smoothness in the stroke. A putter head of about ten ounces will be heavy enough to give this steady blow and yet light enough to be well under control for the distance-gauging business of approach putting.

THERE IS PROBABLY no club which has received so little attention in recent years and been so uniformly made badly as the putter of wood. Until Mr. Mills introduced his putters cast from good wooden models, the idea of the proper shape for a club head seemed to have been almost lost. A few years ago I do not suppose that there were more than a dozen putters

in England which could by any stretch of imagination have been called fit to play with. At St. Andrews, owing probably to the fact that the putter is the only club permitted to appear on the "Ladies' Green," the art of putter-making was to some extent kept up. At "Tom's" or at "Forgan's" a fair putter could always be obtained, even ready-made, but in an English club-maker's shop they were almost unknown. I remember some years ago, I fancy about 1892, Andrew Kirkaldy reintroduced the putter by means of his fine play with the wooden tool. But Andrew gave up the putter and started a cleek instead, much, I fear, to his own loss, as he now admits, and so the wood was laid aside by his followers also. Shortly after this three very fine putters were made in Tom's shop, one for Mr. James Cunningham, one for Mr. Peter Anderson, and the third for Hugh Kirkaldy. They were made, if I mistake not, by Tingey, who was at that time apprentice to the grand old man, and were copied from an old putter, but whether it was young Tommy's, or one belonging to Mr. Cunningham, I cannot at the moment remember. The feature of these putters was the narrow long head and the thin straight face. Hugh Kirkaldy's club he gave me not long before his death, and it has served me as a model for subsequent clubs, and is the original of the K model as used by Mr. Mills.

These two features, the thin face and the narrow head, seem to me essential to a good putter, and are seldom found in the ordinary wooden club. The ordinary wooden putter is a dumpy-headed clumsy fellow with a broad head, thick neck, and deep face. Even the famous Philp putters were by no means fair of countenance, and were, moreover, in their original

shape—that is, before the face was much filed—very hooked in the nose. I have often heard players complain that they could not "hole out" with a wooden club, and on looking at the face of their clubs I quite understood the difficulty. The face of the putter must be absolutely true, for the slightest inequality will quickly affect the direction of the ball. In a long putt, though the ball may spring from the club slightly off the line, owing to the lie of the ball or the inequality of the putter face, if the "general tendency" of the club be correct, the ball will probably regain the right line before the end of its journey. But with short putts there will be but small hope of this repentance and of return to the right line; for the life journey of the ball will be too short to admit of such change for the better. For these short putts, therefore, it is of great importance to strike the ball with a club whose face is quite straight and true. I am inclined to think that both in putters and cleeks the head should be very long, but as Mr. Hilton is in favour of a medium length putter head I still have an open mind on the question. My reason for liking the long head is that if the ball be hit slightly off the true hitting centre the long head does not accentuate the fault to so great a degree as the shorter one. A thick-headed putter is so clumsy a weapon that no fine work could be expected of it; moreover some of the bludgeons are so broad that they require a large plot of even ground to accommodate them. The narrow head, on the other hand, will lie on almost any slope almost as well as the cleek. The best breadth of head will be arrived at by starting with a big-headed putter and filing it down, until the point be reached at which the club begins to lose the sweet

driving power which distinguishes it from the cleek. The control of the cleek will thus be gained without unduly sacrificing the quality of smooth running which the putter imparts to the ball. I have found by experiment that this intermediate state of width is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

THE OTHER POINT of importance for consideration in the putter head is the depth of the face. Until recently nearly all putters were made with rather deep faces, $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches being about the average. James Anderson, one of the best of putters, and J. O. F. Morris, I think, rather fancied the same shape. I used to discuss this point, with "old Tom," and one day, on his son Tommy's old putter being produced, it was found that the face was shallow and the head thin. "Tom" had a lot of clubs made from this model by Drummond, an excellent workman, in his shop, and very fine putters they were. The deep-faced club seems to me to smother the ball, and, unless slightly lofted, rather hides the full view of the ball; it has moreover a tendency to make the ball run too much. The shallow face enables the player to hit the ball rather below its centre of gravity, and so impart a "drag" which allows of free hitting on keen greens. With the rubber ball, however, a deeper face seems to prevent in some measure the uncertain jumping motion of these balls so detrimental to steady play. A less shallow face may therefore find favour on soft greens; or the ball may, under certain circumstances, be struck with the sole of the club slightly off the ground level.

IT IS A FACT perhaps not always recognised that the shaft and head of a putter stand in quite a different relationship to each other from the shaft

and head of other wooden clubs. In other clubs each individual player will have his shaft made so as to "bring out" the driving qualities of the head to the best advantage compatible with the manner of his style of hitting. The shaft will, in short, be but a medium for imparting strength, direction and distance being for the most part governed by stance and length of swing. The putter shaft, on the other hand, is much more part of the head, for it is necessary that the player's hands be in touch not with the head only, but with the ball. From the fingers through the shaft, past the whipping to the face of the club, to the very ball itself, the sense of touch must go, if fine and delicate work is to be accomplished. In driving it is the head of the club that we want to "feel," in putting it is the ball itself. In the short approach shots, especially in the "running up" ones, when the ball is hit absolutely clean, and no turf taken, this sense of touch is needed, but not nearly in so great a degree as in putting. In driving, though many of us hold the club with the fingers, it is the hands, as a whole, that do the work; but in putting it is, or should be, the fingers that directly control the ball. It is obvious, therefore, that the shaft and grip also must be in perfect harmony with the head of the club, for they are the mediums which communicate from the fingers to the head the message to the ball.

A GOOD LENGTH for the shaft will be about thirty-four inches, though it may be mentioned that Mr. Hilton and other good putters prefer a shorter club. The shorter the shaft, the nearer will the player's hands be to the ball, nearer in point of distance, of course, but nearer also in point of "touch." I am, however, of opinion

that greater steadiness of body can be obtained by standing fairly upright than by excess of stooping, and this more upright attitude will demand a shaft of medium length. For some unknown reason many big men use short shafts or grip their club very low down the handle. Mr. Eric Hambro used to use a very small portion of the wood he had no doubt duly paid for, and the same remark applies with more force to the practice of the Earl of Winchilsea when "holing out" with a cleek. Mr. Maxwell, on the other hand, perhaps from economic motives, uses practically a shaftless cleek to very good purpose. Of more importance than the length of the shaft is its shape, weight and degree of stiffness. The shaft of a putter should not be straight, but should have a very distinct upward bend. This upward bend should not extend throughout the whole length of the handle, but should be confined to a single spot. This spot is situated at the foot of the leather when the grip is of ordinary length, say twelve inches from the end of the club. If the shaft be described from top to bottom by the letters A B C, and B is the point in this line where the angle is to be made, then the shaft should be bent at B until the line AB produced is found to come out at the true centre of the club head. In other words if the direction of the leather-covered grip of a putter be produced it should end in the hitting point of the club head, not at the heel or toe. This matter of the head in the shaft is so important that I may say I have never seen a putter of wood or aluminum without this bend which balanced properly in the hands.

It is obviously true that the putter shaft should be stiff, but there are so many kinds of stiff shafts that it may

be well to point out that all stiff shafts are not *ipso facto* good and suitable for putter handles. You can make a stiff shaft out of iron, or out of soft ash an inch thick; it is not stiffness alone that is required, it is stiffness without the sacrifice of other necessary qualities. The ideal putter shaft should be made out of rigid but light hickory, thoroughly seasoned and of straight grain. The wood must be light, for a good deal of it should be left under the hands, only a thin wrapping being placed under the leather. The shaft should taper slightly, but never be very thin, even at the foot, where a certain amount of rigidity is necessary. Soft green wood would require to be too thick to gain the requisite stiffness, and equally to be avoided is the stiff shaft made of heavy close-grained timber, which is a dead and unprofitable thing to handle.

WHEN THESE THINGS have been obtained there still remains the greatest difficulty of all, namely the insertion of the lead. An ordinary driver head weighs from 7 oz. to 7½ oz. and a putter head 10 oz. to 11 oz.; much more lead is therefore needed in the latter than in the former, and the difficulty of getting the head to contain this extra lead is increased fourfold by reason of the thin and shallow shape which I have advocated. It will be found almost impossible to make a club of this shape up to, say, 11 oz. without bringing the lead too near the face of the head, unless pretty heavy wood be employed. The heavier and harder woods therefore suggest themselves for putter heads, apple and American woods being alike good. Finally, the lead should be soft, for a hard lead will not unite itself to the wood in a satisfactory manner.

I have described the parts of the putter of wood at some length, because the club to be of use must be perfect in every detail of structure. If the player feels that he has a club that will send the ball straight, granted that he strike fairly, he will have at least gained the confidence which is more than half success. Mr. Travis in his excellent book on "Practical Golf," dismisses the putter with a word, but it is just possible that the art of putter-making may not have reached a higher point in America than in this country, and that the clubs the American champion has tried were not of the best. I am convinced that on large greens, and especially where the whole turf of the course is of a more or less homogeneous character, the putter is capable of great things. A good deal of very successful approaching can be done also with the wooden tool, and for this purpose it is well to carry a second club slightly lofted; if the "holing out" club be used for the long shots, the face is apt to lose its necessary perfection of surface. Many players play the long putt with wood, and hole out with the cleek; personally, if I change it is to hole out with wood after running up with the cleek. There can be no doubt that the putter has a bad name for work near the hole, but this name is wrongly given. If the club be true, and the heart of the puttre bold enough to strike the ball freely, there can be no more deadly weapon on good hard greens. To get a putter practically perfect in all parts is possible. Should any reader be the happy possessor of this perfect weapon, to him I would give the Gilbertian advice—

*Take all these, you happy man,
Take and keep them if you can.
Happy man, happy man.*