

MAKING PEACE WITH THE GAME



Playing Against The Golfer You Used To Be

I cannot remember the moment.

There must have been one.

The point when I realised that I was no longer able to access all the skills that I had previously worked so hard to develop.

I felt sure I had not lost them completely.

Perhaps I had simply misplaced them.

Skills do not disappear in a single moment

I write as someone who used to play the game of golf well. At times I played it very well. Several course records, and a low round of 62, and more than a few wins, albeit only at a national and regional level.

And yet here I am, not able to do some of the things that I had worked to develop for almost half a century. Before you ask, yes I started young.

I noticed that some skills do not disappear in a single moment. They fade in and out. They become less reliable. They turn up on some days and go missing on others. The knowledge is still there. The memory is still there. The feel may even still be there.

But the conditions that once allowed those skills to appear reliably and on request have changed.

That is a difficult thing to accept.

The hard part is not simply that the ball goes shorter, or the scores go higher. It is that we remember.

We remember the club we used to hit from that distance. We remember the shot we used to see. We remember the way our body once responded without quite so much negotiation.

We remember walking onto a tee with a different kind of confidence.

And because we remember, the game can become quietly cruel.

We are not only playing the course in front of us. We are also playing against the golfer we used to be.

At first none of this matters

At first we are learners.

I would have been like every beginner. Trying to understand not only what to do, but how to do it. How to take this strange looking club, move it in some sort of useful direction, hit the ball and send it towards a target.

In many ways, I see this now in my grandson. He is learning new skills on a daily basis.

Some are small.

Some are larger.

Some bring frustration.

Some bring delight.

But there is a freshness to learning at that stage. He is developing a backpack. It is still light. He learns something new, pops into his backpack, carries it forward, and tries again.

Simple.

Golf gives us a backpack

At the start, there is not much in our golfing backpack. A few lessons. A few memories. A few good shots. A few poor ones. But as the years pass, it begins to fill.

For the golfer, there is history.

A previous lifetime best handicap.

Memories of better shots.

Old scorecards.

The club we used to hit.

The quiet, or perhaps noisy, voice saying, you used to do this better.

That is when the backpack becomes heavier.

In sport, performance tends to move through a recognisable journey. We acquire a skill. We practise it. We consolidate it. We try to retain it. Then, at some point, either through changing physical capacity, lack of time, or reduced practice, some parts of the skill may become harder to access.

That is the trajectory.

It rises, it flattens, and eventually it may begin to fall.

If we were to draw a line to represent our progress, we might see it start near the bottom left-hand corner of a page. At first, slowly and perhaps rather wobbly, the line moves upwards and to the right.

It moves upwards as we improve.

It moves sideways as time passes.

In the early stages, our hope is that the line climbs the page more quickly than it moves across it. That is when progress feels exciting. We practise, improve and begin to trust the evidence that we are getting better.

We hit a shot we could not hit before.

We break a score barrier that had previously felt out of reach.

We begin to think, perhaps I can play this game.

At some point, the line starts to flatten.

We are no longer climbing at the same rate. We may still be improving, but the improvement is slower. Less spectacular. Less obvious to the naked eye.

The early gains have gone.

That is true in most skilled activities. A sprinter may begin by running 100 metres in 13 seconds. With training, better technique and improved strength, the time comes down.

Perhaps from 13 seconds to 12.

Then 11.

For the very best, eventually into 10 seconds or below.

But even there, improvement is not linear. There are plateaus. There are small reversals. There are days when the athlete feels as though they have gone backwards. Still, over time, the general curve may show that they are improving.

Golf works in much the same way

A beginner starts by trying to make contact. Then contact becomes more regular. Distance increases. Direction improves. The handicap begins to fall. The bad shots become fewer. The good shots feel less accidental.

And then, naturally, expectation changes.

Most expectation is based on evidence.

We think we can do something because we have done it before.

We have hit that drive.

Holed that putt.

Played to that handicap.

Felt that feeling.

At first, this is useful.

When we are learning something new, we have to experiment. We try. We get a result. Then we use that result as a clue for what might happen next time.

If we were playing another ball sport, and took a shot which successfully sailed straight to the target we would be delighted. Having done it once, we now know it is possible.

But there is a small trap hidden in that moment.

Doing something once does not tell us whether we are skilful, lucky, or somewhere between the two.

To know that, we need more evidence. We need repeated trials. What starts as dozens, quickly turns in thousands or hundreds of thousands of attempts. Only then do we begin to understand our real level.

Not the level we touched once.

Rather the level we can return to often enough for it to mean something.

Golf is full of this.

One good drive can convince us that we should always drive the ball well. One good round can raise the expectation for the next one. A run of good scores can quietly change the way we see ourselves.

We begin to think, this is who I am now.

And sometimes, for a while, we are right.

The handicap comes down. The scores improve. The better shots become more regular. We record lower scores, and so naturally, when we go out again, we expect to produce lower scores.

Then comes another stage

At a certain point, the improvement slows. The golfer gets closer to the best version of their game. The margins become smaller. The work needed to improve becomes greater. The gain from that work becomes less obvious.

For elite performers, this is especially true.

Once someone reaches a very high level, the task is no longer simply to improve. It is to maintain. To hold on. To keep the body, mind and skill close enough to the top of the curve for as long as possible.

The maintenance stage can last for years.

And there is satisfaction in holding on.

There is satisfaction in saying, not yet.

This feels less like denial and more like a quiet act of resistance.

We try to retain the speed, the touch, the confidence and the rhythm. We practise not only to improve, but to keep what we have. That can be hard work. Sometimes it can feel like

standing at the edge of the beach, trying to hold back the incoming tide with just our bare hands.

Impossible, of course.

But still we try.

At some point, for most athletes and golfers, something changes.

The line begins to turn downwards

Not always dramatically. Not always immediately. Sometimes it is so gradual that we barely notice it at first. A club less here. A shot that used to feel routine now requiring a little more thought. A score that used to feel disappointing now beginning to look quite acceptable.

The reasons are many.

It may be our body. Less speed. Less strength. Less flexibility. A loss of balance. An injury that never quite goes away.

It may be time. Less practice. Fewer competitions. More work, family or responsibility. A life that still includes golf, but no longer bends around it.

It may be confidence. That small but important belief that the shot we are about to play is still one we can trust.

It may be emotional. The game carries more history. More memory. More comparison. More frustration.

This is where the backpack matters.

When we begin learning a skill, the backpack is empty, or at least very light. We try, fail, learn, laugh, adjust and try again. There is not too much history in the bag.

As we get better, the backpack starts to fill.

It fills with knowledge, which is useful.

It fills with experience, which is useful too.

But it also fills with expectation.

Past scores.

Old standards.

Former handicaps.

The shot we used to see.

The opinion we once had of ourselves.

The player other people still think we might be.

The memory of being better.

By the time performance starts to reduce, the backpack can become very heavy.

That is one of the difficult things about ageing as a golfer. We are carrying more than clubs. We are carrying a previous version of yourself around the course.

That golfer may have hit the ball further.

That golfer may have had more touch.

That golfer recovered more quickly after a poor round.

That golfer may have stood on the tee with less fear and more ambition.

And the uncomfortable truth is that the golfer we used to be can be a very unfair opponent.

An older golfer may find the ball does not travel quite as far. The long iron no longer carries the same number. The recovery shot that once felt possible now looks too risky. Around the greens, the touch might still be there on some days, but not with the same regularity.

Confidence can also change

A player who once saw opportunity may begin to see danger. The shot over water becomes less inviting. The tight tee shot becomes more threatening. The mind starts to protect the score before the shot has even been played.

This is not weakness.

It is evidence doing what evidence does.

If the recent evidence tells us that we are missing more often, hitting shorter, recovering less well, or scoring higher, then the mind quite reasonably begins to adjust its expectation.

The problem comes when we keep judging today's game against old evidence.

We remember the best of what we were and compare it with the average of what we are.

That is rarely fair.

There is a small grief in this.

That may sound too strong for, what after all, is only a game. But anyone who has cared about their sport will understand it. Golf becomes part of how we know ourselves. So when

the game changes, it is not only the scorecard that looks different. Something in our identity is being asked to adjust too.

I know this from my own experience.

When I first started golf, I was simply a participant. I wanted to play, enjoy the game and see where it took me.

Gradually, I became reasonably good. Then I became competitive. Eventually, I reached a point where I was trying to make a living by playing the game.

At that time, golf occupied a large part of my life. I worked at technique, practice, physical preparation, mental preparation, diet, hydration and all the other details that sit around performance.

Then life changed.

There was less time to play and practise. A few years later, there was even less. I was close to the game, but not in the same way I once was. As coach, I was helping other people with their golf rather than spending the same hours developing my own.

A different kind of acceptance

I could either go mad trying to maintain a level that belonged to another period of my life, or I could accept where I was and try to find satisfaction there.

That does not mean giving up.

Acceptance is sometimes mistaken for surrender. I do not see it that way.

Acceptance is not saying, I no longer care.

It is saying, this is the truth of where I am today.

And once we know where we are, we can begin again from there.

Perhaps this is where many golfers could help themselves.

At the start of a year, or at the end of the previous one, it may be useful to take a simple benchmark. Not a fantasy benchmark. Not a memory of the best golf we ever played. Just a fair picture of the game we have now.

What is our average score?

How many fairways are being hit?

How often are greens being found from different distances?

How close are the wedge shots finishing?

How often are we getting up and down?

How many three-putts are appearing?

How many penalty shots are being taken because of poor decisions rather than poor swings?

These statistics do not need to be complicated. They simply help us to see the game clearly.

For most golfers, the numbers will not approach those of a tour player. They do not need to. They only need to give us a useful starting point.

The purpose is not to beat ourselves up with data.

It is to replace an unfair memory with a fair picture.

Once we have that picture, we can begin to ask better questions.

What has definitely changed?

What is still working?

What can still improve?

And perhaps most importantly, what am I still playing for?

That last question matters.

What is our reason to play?

If the only reason for playing is to return to the golfer we once were, the game can become a rather unforgiving place. But if we are still playing for challenge, health, companionship, competition, curiosity or simply the pleasure of being outside, then the game may still have plenty to give.

Even if some parts of the game are declining, other parts may still improve.

We may lose distance, but improve wedge control.

We may no longer be able to overpower a course, but may still learn to manage it better.

We may have less speed, but more patience.

Less ambition for the risky shot, but more respect for the sensible one.

Less pride in how far the ball once went, but more interest in how to get it round the course today.

This is where satisfaction can return.

Not by pretending we are the golfer we once were, but by finding what is still possible.

Life gets in the way

Ageing changes performance. So does injury. So does a lack of time. So does life.

Willpower and determination matter, but they do not override everything. There are some things we can train, some things we can manage, and some things we have to accept.

The challenge is to know the difference.

That may be the real skill of the older golfer.

Not simply to keep swinging harder.

Not simply to keep hoping that the old game will reappear.

But to recalibrate.

To match ambition with evidence.

To keep trying, but to try in the right places.

To stop measuring every round against a version of ourselves that may no longer be available.

If we keep looking too far back, the game becomes an argument with the past. Every shot is measured against memory. Every round becomes a disappointment because it fails to match something that once existed.

But if we look honestly at where we are now, the game opens slightly.

There is still room to learn.

There is still room to improve.

There is still room to compete, even if the competition is no longer with the player we were twenty years ago.

And there is also room for something quieter.

To make peace with the golfer we are now.

That may not sound like achievement in the usual sporting sense. It does not come with a trophy. It may not lower our handicap. It may not impress anyone standing beside the 18th green.

But it is still a kind of success.

Perhaps one of the more important ones.

Because if we can find a way to enjoy the game from where we are, not from where we used to be, then golf still has something to offer.

Not just today.

Not just this season.

But for as long as we are able to walk to the next tee, hit the next shot, and eventually make our way to the final green.

Perhaps the better question is not, why can I no longer do what I used to do?

Perhaps the better question is, what can I still do well, and what can I still aspire to from here?

That feels like a kinder way to play.

It also feels like a more useful one.

Because golf, like life, does not only ask us to improve. At times, it asks us to adjust. To carry less. To stop dragging the old backpack around the course.

And maybe that is the real skill.

Not simply learning how to play better.

But learning how to keep playing when the game, and the golfer, have changed.

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