

WINNERS KNOW HOW TO WIN



Untangle The Knots

For some reason, I had gained a reputation for helping players with sticky problems they were facing on the golf course. Just like when faced with a knotted chain, the first thing to do is to find one or both of the ends, before starting to untangle the rest of the links.

This story is about a Tour player I once worked with. I have anonymised the player, and will call her Wendy, because the lesson matters more than the name.

Wendy was not a young player trying to find out whether she was good enough. She was a proven winner. Someone who had already shown, many times over, that she could compete, contend and win.

But even very good players can lose their way.

She had been advised to spend time with me by a professional colleague who thought I might be able to help. When she came to see me, she had not won for some time. She had been through a period where cuts had been missed, contention had become less familiar, and the game had started to feel harder than it should.

Looking back, the results give the story some useful context. She was not winning and, more worryingly, she was hardly ever in contention.

Under-par rounds and late start times on the weekend were far from commonplace. She was frustrated. Deep down, she knew that she was capable of much more, yet she was unable to see a way to get herself back to being a player in contention.

Within a year, that sensation would be a thing of the past, but before then we had some knots to untangle.

I had to find one end of the problem. To do that, I had to discover what she wanted. What was she trying to get back to? What had been lost?

Our First Meeting

I think it was October when we met at one of my golf academies and began with a gentle conversation. We had to get to know each other. We did not sit down for a formal interview. Our conversation was far from formal. Just a coffee, followed by a slow walk down to the practice ground.

We talked about her game, her recent results, what it had felt like when she had played well, and what she thought was happening in her golf. We also talked about sport, football, life in general, and how she had come to meet the professional colleague who had put us together.

She told me about her frustration. She told me she had been practising hard. She told me what she had been working on, the drills and routines she was using, and that every practice session had been filmed. Every swing had been looked at from down the line and face on. Every movement had been analysed.

I was fascinated by the idea that this player, who my pre-AI research suggested was pretty instinctive, was taking the whole and breaking it down into its constituent parts.

That was interesting.

Understanding her golfing background was critical. Where did she play as a youngster? What was she doing when she played her best? How could we get her back there?

I was less interested in what was going on in her swing. What positions she was hitting halfway into the backswing, or what the video might show, were not the first things I needed to know.

By the time we reached the practice ground, I already had a feel for where her head was. I knew that she was a competitor. I did not need to be too smart to understand that. She already had a body of evidence behind her, with wins on tour and strong performances at a high level.

All I needed to do was figure out how to straighten some of the knots in the chain that were stopping her from finding the joy of being in contention.

Show me your people and I will tell you who you are

The more we spoke, the more I began to feel that the problem was not simply technical. Of course, there were some technical things going on. Every now and then she would hit a thin shot or scuff the ground before the ball, especially with a long iron. She was hitting big draws, some blocks, and the occasional quick hook. The club was clearly coming too much from the inside. The ball flight told us plenty.

But there was something else.

In the short time I had been with her, I found that this was a player who had once practised with some of the best women in European golf. She had played practice rounds with them. Travelled with them. Had dinner with them. Shared time with them.

Now she was no longer doing that.

Instead, she was spending more time around players who were struggling. Players missing cuts. Players fighting to keep their card. Players living in the same anxious space she was now occupying.

That concerned me.

In golf, your environment matters. The conversations you have matter. The people you spend time with matter. The energy around you matters. If every dinner is about missed cuts, poor shots, bad luck and survival, it is very hard to think like a player who is ready to contend.

Feel And Real

The second thing that concerned me was that every practice session had become technical.

She had lost feel.

She had lost the picture of the shot.

In my view, Wendy was much more of a natural player than she perhaps realised at that moment. She was the kind of player who could see a shot and find a way to play it. Give her a bad lie, trees in the way, and a tight flag, and she might produce something special.

But put her in the middle of the fairway with a mid-iron to a middle pin, and suddenly the shot became difficult, because ironically it was too easy.

That told me something.

Sometimes the harder shot gives the player freedom. There is a clear problem to solve. The imagination switches on. The body organises itself around the task.

The simple shot can be more dangerous, because the player has too much time to think.

I did not want to start by changing her swing. I wanted to help her find a shot. A shot that would take her back to the days of smiles, joy and satisfaction.

She had learned the game on seaside turf. Tight fairways. Firm ground. Not much grass under the ball. That kind of golf teaches you to strike the ball properly. Ball then turf. A different sound. A different feel.

So we started there.

I gave her a wedge and asked her to play a little nipped pitch shot. Nothing complicated. I did not tell her how to do it.

She already knew.

I just asked her to remember the shot.

After the first five or ten of those little pitches from 30 or 40 metres, she was already healing. The ball landing, skidding, then grabbing on the second bounce. A shot she had played thousands of times as a young golfer without ever needing to describe it.

Within a few shots, she was playing them beautifully.

Then we pushed a little further forward.

A short iron pitch. Then a mid-iron pitch. Same feeling. Same idea. Ball first. Turf after. See the shot. Feel the shot. Let the body respond.

Almost immediately, the swing shape began to change. It became more down and left, rather than shallow, stuck and to the right. The strike improved. The flight changed. The player began to look like someone who was playing golf again, not someone trying to pass a swing examination.

I filmed the session.

She asked to see the video.

I made an excuse.

Battery problem. Camera problem. Something like that.

The truth is, I did not want her to see it. Not yet. She had spent too long looking at herself. She needed to feel the shot, not judge the picture.

Independent Work

You have to let the player go. You will not be with them at every critical moment.

They have to own the moment.

Initially we worked together several times, at first meeting every four weeks, then six weeks, and finally eight weeks. When I saw her, we did more of the same. We worked on the shots, but we also spoke about the other parts of her life on tour.

Who was she practising with?

Who was she playing practice rounds with?

Who was she travelling with?

Who was she having dinner with?

What were the conversations like?

I believed then, and still believe now, that some of the lifestyle and environment changes were at least as important as anything we did technically. Perhaps more important.

She practised the little shots. She stopped looking at video. She began to build some trust again.

Early the following year, she travelled overseas and played well. For the first time in quite a while, she shot some scores under par. A top ten finish followed and then, a few months later, back in Europe, she had a chance to win.

Okay, she did not quite get over the line that week, but she was back in contention.

That mattered.

When a player has been out of contention for a long time, getting back into that position is a step. It may not feel like enough to the player, because players judge themselves against the win. But as a coach, you know that contention is part of the way back.

Later that season, she won again.

Less than a year after we started working together, Wendy was back in the winner's circle. In the final round, she had trusted her swing, trusted the work, and remembered enough of herself to get the job done, signing for a splendid charging final round.

What Came Next.

That win was a lovely moment, but the story did not end there.

I called her. I congratulated her. I advised her to enjoy the moment.

Only a few days later, I was working with coaches in Brazil when she called me. She said she needed to see me immediately.

I asked why.

She had seen the highlights of her win on television.

Her swing did not look the way she thought it felt.

That is one of golf's great traps.

The results were better. The ball flight was better. She had been back in contention. She had won again. She would go on to have one of her best years.

But the picture on television did not match the picture in her head, and suddenly she was in danger of being pulled back into positions, technique and self-judgement.

Golfers can be strange like that.

They can be playing well and still be disappointed by the look of the swing. They can be scoring better and still want the movement to match some imagined model. They can forget that the object of the game is not to produce a pretty video. It is to send the ball where it needs to go.

That period with Wendy reminded me of something I have believed for a long time.

Players do not always need more information.

They do not always need another camera angle, another drill, another technical thought, another opinion.

Sometimes they need to remember who they were when the game made sense.

They need to see the shot again.

They need to feel the club strike the ball properly.

They need to spend time with people who lift their standards.

They need to stop watching themselves and start watching the ball.

The swing matters, of course it does. But the swing is not the whole player.

The player is more than the swing. It is memory, confidence, instinct, environment, routine, pressure, imagination and trust.

In this case, the way back began with a small wedge shot from tight turf, and accepting that she had to control her environment on a daily basis.

Nothing grand.

Tony Bennett

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