

Turn That Winter Frown Upside Down - Some good reasons why you as a golfer should be looking forward to winter and an off-season.

By Scott Laurent

After having worked with athletes from multiple sports disciplines, one thing is apparent among those who continue to improve and excel in their sport from year to year, and that is how they approach and structure their off season. With Health and Fitness being such a key component in raising your potential as a golfer, it is wise to have a plan in place during the Winter months to help continue to expand your fitness potential so that this coming Spring, you are ready to step out on the course a new and improved you!

Here are a few areas of focus to help make this Winter a platform for next years improved play.

What You See Is What You Get-

As a golfer coming to the end of the season, you really need to take inventory of how you have progressed good or bad on the course with regards to your fitness and form. For example let's take a golfer named Jeff who might have started this year's golf season with decent fitness but participated very little in conditioning his muscles by warming up and occasionally stretching to help increase his range of motion. Having a shoulder issue and lower back stiffness for Jeff is common towards the end of the season as he experiences a compromise in his form and follow through regularly on the back nine.

Jeff has decided to treat the symptoms (by icing his shoulder occasionally and taking Tylenol for his back pain) instead of attacking the problem each year which could be done through proper resistance training of his muscles and learning how to stretch and increase his range of motion. His swing resembles that of a different golfer from the beginning of the year and at the end. What Jim doesn't realize is that our body and muscle structure including our spine and pelvis, will adapt to these stresses and limitations imposed and recruit an unbalanced use of muscles needed to compensate. This allows Jack to continue playing but with very compromised form and further compounding his original problem with his shoulder and lower back along with potentially creating some other joint and mobility issues.

We need to understand that the off season provides us with an opportunity to recover from the repetitive muscular and skeletal motions of golfing and the possible imbalances that were created during the year due to a lack of flexibility, poor muscle conditioning, etc. It is also a great time to put a plan into action for incorporating resistance (weight training) along with other fitness dimensions such as cardio vascular training and stretching for flexibility to help minimize these imbalances for next year.

Take inventory at years end using a video analysis if possible or an extra set of eyes and compare that to your form at the beginning of the year. Look for any imbalances that you have incorporated into your stance and swing, this could be a tip off to what you need to concentrate on when preparing your body for next year, using the Winter months wisely to accomplish this.

Don't Stop Now, Let's Keep Moving –

Our activity levels seem to come to a screeching halt when the weather gets colder and this is exactly the right time to look at ways to increase your energy expenditure via exercising more indoors. An easy illustration of this is to imagine that someone who walks the course 2-3 times a week during the year burns an additional 2,000-3,000 calories of energy expenditure. The walking might be at a low intensity, but it is suitable enough to reap the many health benefits that come with exercising on a regular basis. Even if you are not walking the course, most of us are more active during the Spring, Summer and Fall as we participate in much more outdoor activities than we do in the Winter time.

The challenge during the Winter is then finding out how to replace some of this lost activity that was convenient to do with the warmer weather. An easy way to see how much activity we have lost is by wearing an inexpensive pedometer and counting your steps each day and averaging them out over a week's period. Do this towards the end of the golf season when you are still active outdoors and then do it while entering the off season. Don't be surprised, you most likely will see a huge discrepancy in the numbers. Try increasing the number of steps you are taking during the off season to insure that you are still remaining active enough. I recommend that clients join a program such as America on the Move (www.americaonthemove.org) which provides easy information about increasing your activity using a pedometer.

Link the extra steps of activity with several days a week of mild to moderate intensity cardio training such as walking on a treadmill, indoor bicycle or elliptical, and you will approach next season with an opportunity to lower that handicap with improved cardio and endurance. Remember the Winter months provide us with a great opportunity to use our extra time wisely now that we aren't on the course every week, so take advantage of it and begin a regular indoor routine at the gym or at home.

Getting to the Core with Training –

Core training can be the most effective type of training that you can do to improve your golf game. When looking at the dynamics of the stance and swing it is easy to see as this is the area of the body where the majority of the golf swing occurs.

Core training involves training movements that incorporate the abdominals, back muscles, hip flexors along with all the supportive muscles and connective tissue between your hips and your sternum. Core training helps provide the spine and pelvis with the proper support needed to carry out daily activities as well as providing the foundation for

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an effective golf stance, swing and follow through. With a good core training program, you should be training stability, balance, strength and power.

An example of Core training exercises would be doing sit up crunches on a fit ball, using a hyperextension bench, doing trunk rotation with a medicine ball or exercise bands. The idea is to work with moderate weight, sometimes just your own body weight, while doing higher repetitions (15-20) as we build the endurance aspect of strengthening our core. Lot's of information is available on core training that you can read in articles or by using the help of a personal trainer that offers a core training class. Through specificity of training, the goal is to do the core training exercises that help transition your strength gains to the motions needed to excel on the golf course.

So when the days become shorter and the thermometer dips below the comfort level for being outside as often, know that the greatest opportunity we have to improve our golf game for next year, lies in what we do in the next few Winter months. It is much easier to condition our bodies in the off season and maintain that level of fitness through the active golf season, than to do nothing now and try and jump start our fitness when the golf season starts next Spring. You will be happy you did!

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