

Evaluating Your Physical Ability To Play Golf

There are more people playing golf than ever before in the United States and around the world. In fact, there are more people now starting to play golf than any other sport. Oddly enough, there are also more people quitting the game faster than any other sport. One reason that golfers are quitting the game is because they find golf to be so difficult to play well. Another reason is that many golfers are getting seriously injured.

Why does golf seem to be so difficult and physically stressful for so many people? What are the elements that every golfer should be evaluating to help determine their own playing ability? Once identified, what can be done to help make the process of learning the golf swing easier, make every golfer's ultimate playing performance and enjoyment of the game better?

As a physical therapist specializing in the treatment of golf injuries and performance enhancement, I have asked myself these key questions in my pursuit of discovering what are the essential ingredients to maximum golf swing performance. I feel that answers to these questions can reduce the factors influencing the two primary reasons for golfers leaving the game; it's perceived difficulty and painful injuries.

What I have learned is that there are *five* key factors to optimal and safe swing performance. They are:

- Professional instruction and practice of the necessary skills to play golf.
- Having properly fit equipment.
- Mental training.
- Physical training.
- Natural ability.

These five factors must *all* be evaluated individually and then developed in an integrated fashion to enable any person to become the best golfer he/she can possibly be. However, of these five equally important and essential factors for optimal and safe golf performance, the least evaluated and most ignored element for most golfers is the area of golf-specific *physical training*. Very few golfers have had anything evaluated about their physical condition before starting to play golf. And even if they are doing some type of physical training, in the majority of cases, they have not been professionally evaluated to determine whether the fitness regimen they are doing is specific to the game of golf.

Consequently, if you are a golfer who is not currently performing a golf-specific physical training program and/or have not made certain that your existing program has been fully customized to your individual physical needs, then, to a certain degree, you are presently *physically handicapped* from being able to perform the elements of the full golf swing. Your talents and abilities as a golfer are being interfered with by your physical *inability* to do what you need to do in order to perform the golf swing properly, consistently and safely.

This is terribly frustrating for golfers at all levels. It is also a big reason why so many golfers become extremely discouraged as students of the game. They often feel that golf lessons make them worse. Consequently, most try to buy a game by purchasing the latest equipment that promises to add the needed distance and accuracy they are looking for.

The result is that far too many golfers develop injuries to their low backs, necks, shoulders or elbows, a majority begin to believe that golf is 90% mental, and, in many cases, resort to settling for sub-par performance standards or even quit the game completely.

Therefore, instead of feeling as though you must compromise your swing performance goals due to your physical restrictions, I suggest that you strongly consider receiving your own physical performance evaluation from a health and fitness specialist knowledgeable about the specific demands of golf. The integration of a customized golf-specific fitness training program from a golf fitness expert will improve your physical ability to benefit from the professional golf instruction you receive, the equipment you buy, the practice time you spend on your game and any mental training you receive. In other words, it will enable you to have the real potential of becoming the best and safest golfer that you can be.

To give you some immediate insight, however, into your own physical challenges, try performing the following simple physical tests for balance and posture to help quickly evaluate whether you may currently be limited physically.

Test #1: “Standing Sway” Balance Test

The purpose of this test is to identify muscle and connective tissue tightness that may be pulling a golfer out of ideal standing posture and balance thus interfering with their posture and balance during their swing.

Perform the first test as follows:

- First, stand on a level surface with your arms hanging relaxed by your sides.
- Then, close your eyes and gently relax your body so you can attempt to feel which direction your body naturally tends to drift, tip or sway if you would let it.
- After 5-10 seconds, open your eyes and identify the predominant direction of sway.
- Repeat the test several times to determine if you have a consistent direction of sway.

Much like a tent’s center pole leaning in the direction of a stake in the ground that is pulling too tightly, the direction you consistently feel is the first and/or strongest direction of sway is probably being caused by connective tissue and muscle tightness pulling your body in that direction. If uncorrected, this tightness will also be pulling you out of posture and balance during your swing motion. Any attempts at correcting your swing motion without first reducing the physical causes of your posture and balance dysfunction can lead to inconsistent performance and/or injury.

Test #2: “Club Behind The Spine” Posture Test

We all know that having adequate rotation flexibility in the spine is one of the most essential physical requirements to perform a good golf swing. The area of the spine where rotation should mostly come from is the middle section known as the *thoracic* spine. To have maximal flexibility to turn during the swing, however, your posture at address must also have the physical potential to achieve a straighter thoracic spine. In contrast, a bent thoracic spine at address blocks your ability to turn. Therefore, the purpose of this test is to determine your physical ability to achieve and maintain the ideal, straighter thoracic spine angle at address.

Perform the second test as follows:

- To begin, stand upright while holding a club behind your back with the head of the club in one hand placed flat against your tailbone and the handle of the club in your other hand placed against the back of your head.
- Then, slightly bend your hips and knees (10-15°) and contract your lower abdominal muscles, as needed, to press the small of your back into the shaft of the club.
- Next, while maintaining complete contact of your lower back to the club shaft, straighten and vertically elongate the middle and upper portions of your spine and neck. The goal is to make as much complete contact of the entire length of your spine and back of your head with the club shaft as possible (See Picture #1).
- Once you have done your best to achieve this position, attempt to bend forward from your hips and proportionately from your knees while maintaining complete club contact with your spine and head. Continue to bend forward until you are able to comfortably see a spot on the ground in front of you where the golf ball would normally be positioned at address (See Picture #2).
- A final step for this drill is to then remove the club from your back and grip it with both hands in your normal address position while attempting to maintain all the spine, hip and knee angles previously created (See Picture #3).

If properly achieved, you should now feel comfortably balanced with muscle activity appropriately felt in your lower abdominals, thighs, hips, upper back and shoulder blades. You will have achieved the ideal, straight, thoracic spine angle for the golf address position with proper degrees of hip and knee bend with the greatest potential for producing a safer and highly effective golf swing.

However, if you are unable to *easily* and *comfortably* perform any portion of this test, then it is very likely that you have physical restrictions that are limiting your posture and your swing. Continuing to play golf with a bent upper and middle spine at address will block your natural ability to make a complete turn in your backswing and follow-through. This will then cause you to make adjustments in your swing to compensate for your lack of ideal rotational motion. Every attempted swing with compensations will place excess stress in your body leading to potential injury and poor or inconsistent performance.

To review, try applying these two, easy-to-perform physical tests. They can help quickly identify whether you have physical weaknesses that will interfere with your ability to swing properly. Then, once identified, get in touch with a health and fitness expert specifically trained to evaluate and train golfers. Having a golf-specific fitness evaluation and starting a customized, fitness-training program supervised by a health professional with golf-specific knowledge can:

- Reduce the physical limitations restricting your swing potential.
- Accelerate your learning process.
- Reduce your frustrations as a student when taking lessons from your professional instructor.
- Reduce your injury potential.
- Increase your enjoyment of the game for a lifetime.