



10 RULES FOR PLAYING SMART GOLF BY HALE IRWIN

with Guy Yocom

1

Feed off your good shots.

Several of the best shots I've hit in my career have been 2-irons. On the final hole of the 1974 U.S. Open at Winged Foot, I faced a 2-iron second to a difficult green. It was the most critical shot of my life to that point, and my swing thoughts were to take the club back slowly and maintain eye contact with the ball through impact. The shot came off almost perfectly, and I went on to win my first Open.

Then there was the 1990 U.S. Open at Medinah and the 2-iron I hit on the 16th hole in the playoff against Mike Donald. I had 200 yards, was two shots behind and couldn't play safe. My thoughts were the same as at Winged Foot—slow back, good eye contact—and I nailed it. I made birdie, closed the gap and won. When you hit a good shot, imprint it in your mind and go back to it again and again.

2

Tap your energy reserves.

You might remember that 1990 Open and my high-fiving the gallery after I holed a 45-footer to get into the playoff. One thing I recall was how hard it was to calm down after all that excitement. That night I slept all of about two minutes, and I was a



little concerned about having enough energy for the next day. But even at age 46, I knew that if I could relax that night and not tire myself out by reading, pacing or watching a lot of TV, I'd be able to tap the energy I needed. Despite the lack of sleep, I won the playoff without feeling tired, and after the ceremony I drove 4 1/2 hours from Chicago to St. Louis. The next morning I hopped a plane to Westchester, N.Y., where I won again the next weekend.

Feeling tired should almost never be an excuse, because your body has huge reserves of energy. But if you eat badly, stay out late, drink too much, and so on, you'll pay a price on the course.

3

Don't bottle up your emotions.

I see many young tour players behaving like robots when they make an important shot or putt, and it makes me wonder who they are. I wonder about their depth as human beings; I wonder if they care. I realize they're only doing what the sport psychologist told them, but it seems to me they aren't being themselves.

Tiger Woods has been criticized for being too demonstrative, but I've never had a problem with it. If he showed no emotion at all, he'd

be living a lie by not being true to himself. Let your emotions come out. If your behavior is flat, your game will be flat, too.

4

Ball-striking is king. On the PGA Tour, putting skill and a good short game have an edge on perfect ball-striking, especially with the driver, in their impact on scoring. With amateurs, the reverse is true. I feel sorry for my pro-am partners who drive the ball short and crooked; there's just no way they can score. On the other hand, amateurs who drive it long and fairly straight have more chances. The shortest route to improving is to get on the green in fewer strokes. Increase your time on the practice green if you like, but not at the expense of range time.

5

Good rhythm cures a lot.

The 1998 U.S. Senior Open at Riviera did not start well for me. I opened with 77, seven shots back. My swing didn't feel good. I started my warm-up the following day by concentrating on my rhythm and balance. I hit twice as many short irons as usual, making half swings then three-quarter swings and really slowing things down. By the time I went to the first tee, my mechanics had come together, and I felt comfortable lengthening my swing. I shot 68 to get within five, then went 71-69 to win by one. The best quick tip in golf is to focus on your rhythm and balance.

6

Learn the subtleties of wind.

My first tour win was at Harbour Town in 1971. It was late November and a cold, damp wind was blowing. What normally was a one-club wind turned into more than

a two-clubber because of the temperature and density of the air. Two years later I won there again, but this time in September, when it was 20 degrees warmer. The wind was blowing about the same speed as in '71, but I needed only half a club more instead of two. This is one reason my game has traveled well: I'm a smart wind player. I know velocity is only half the equation. Temperature and humidity can have a huge effect.

7

Don't stretch iron distances.

If you find yourself just outside the distance limit with one of your irons, you have a few options. You can (a) deloft the clubface by playing the ball back; (b) increase your shoulder turn, lengthening your swing; (c) swing a little harder; or (d) take one club more and go easier.

Barring some circumstance that doesn't come to mind, the best option is always (d). When amateurs try to stretch their iron distances, good things rarely happen.

8

Find a sand wedge you love.

I won my three U.S. Opens, 20 tour events and most of my 45 Champions Tour titles carrying only a 56-degree sand wedge. I'd vary the loft by opening or closing the face at address. Now I carry two sand wedges—52 and 58—but my effectiveness with the 58-degree is somewhat limited.

I think most amateurs should use only one sand wedge and get so familiar with it that they can adjust their shotmaking by choking down or adjusting their clubface position, ball position or swing length. If you're handsy at all, lob wedges are very difficult to rely on because you'll tend

to flick at the ball with your hands and either come up short or skull it over.

9

Think before going for par 5s.

I don't take lightly the decision to go for a par 5 in two. The strategy I used on the 13th and 15th holes at Augusta is typical. On the 13th fairway there was a sprinkler head 215 yards out. If my ball was even one step behind it, I'd lay up, because even though I could reach with a 3-wood, it meant playing a low, hard shot that probably wouldn't hold. If I were in front of that 215-yard mark, I'd use my 4-wood, but I wouldn't do it without considering the risks. On 13 there's water short (extreme danger), bunkers to the side and beyond (moderate danger) and chipping areas (slight danger).

My thinking on No. 15 was equally conservative because of the water short and long. I usually wound up laying up on those par 5s, and I played them well. My point is, look at where you'll play your third shot if you miss your second.

10

Don't get fixated on shaft flex.

Early in my career, my 3-, 5- and 9-irons performed differently than my other irons. But I adapted and made them work. Then, when frequency matching came along in the early '80s, I put my clubs on a machine and found that the shafts on those irons were different than the rest, even though the labels all read "S."

Shafts today are much more consistent, but don't try only clubs with, say, regular-flex shafts just because your driver is regular and you like it. If you're buying a hybrid or fairway wood, try different shafts. You might play better with a mix of flexes in your set. ♣

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