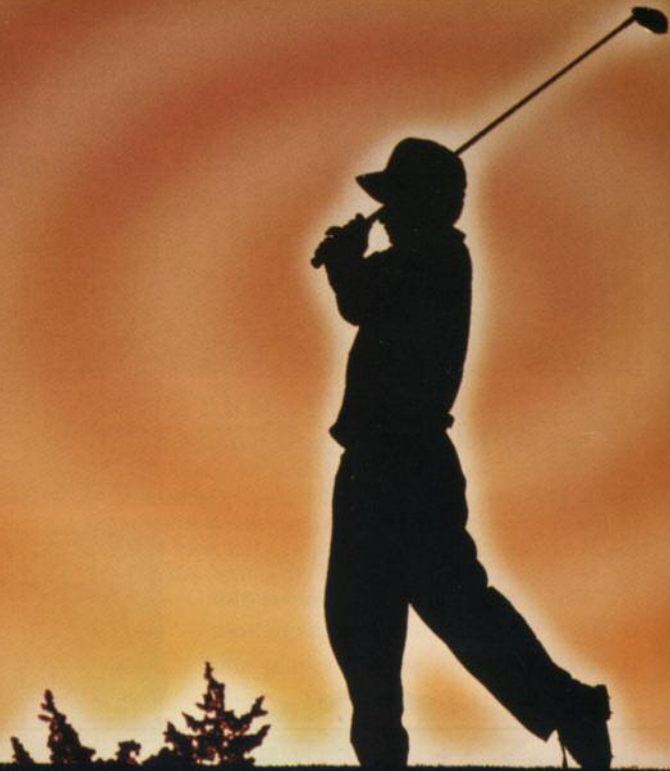


Par for the Course

From pros to duffers,
golfers focus on fitness

BY BETH STAMBAUGH



Notice anything different about today's top golfers? Slim-waisted, broad-shouldered and just plain buff, golf is sporting a new profile. Tiger Woods, Ernie Els, David Duval and Sergio Garcia are just a few who have transformed the sport's physical image. With more following suit, it's clear that golfers who want an edge on the competition are hitting more than just golf balls — they're hitting the gym.

"A fit golfer is a better golfer," said Joe Gennusa, an exercise physiologist and co-owner of Golfer's Athletic Club in Ponte Vedra. "Outside of being able to hit the ball harder with less effort, being fit can help a golfer play more often and for longer."

And although golf may not be viewed as a physically demanding sport, it requires a tremendous amount of athletic ability, he says. "The golf swing is a high-intensity action. If you factor in the number of times a golfer swings during a round — usually 50-60 — it really adds up to a lot of stress on the

body," said Gennusa. "And it uses muscles throughout the entire body."

The effects of a proper exercise program are immense. Gennusa says that in terms of stamina, injury prevention, recovery time and winning an event, fit golfers have a big advantage.

He's witnessed this first-hand from training a number of professional and recreational golfers. He recommends they focus on flexibility, stretching and strength training. He emphasizes "core conditioning," which involves strengthening the body from the middle or core outward.

"Muscle tone and definition are nice by-products, but they are not the goal. We want to strengthen the muscles from the inside out," said Gennusa.

The muscles of the abdominal wall, around the spinal column, the pelvic floor and hips are targeted using rubber resistance cords, stability balls and medicine balls. These exercises rely on resistance to build strength, he says, which is perfect for preparing the body for the repetitive swinging motion. Strengthening the muscles in these areas also helps reduce injury, which is extremely important to pro golfers who may play as many as 30 to 40 tournaments a year.

"Traditional exercise programs usually don't address those areas," he said, adding that exercises for golf are very specific to the sport. For maximum benefits, Gennusa suggests golfers work out three times a week for 45 minutes each time. He also encourages them to do cardiovascular exercise, such as walking, jogging or cycling. Aerobic exercise provides golfers with the endurance needed to get through 18 holes, he said.

"It may not require the same type of endurance needed to run a marathon,



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but you definitely need stamina to get through the course without fatiguing," said Gennusa.

One of the golfers Gennusa works with is Mark McCumber, a PGA Tour veteran and 1988 winner of The Players Championship, who learned about the benefits of exercise the hard way.

"Exercise was never a consistent part of my life," said McCumber. More than 25 years of playing professional golf took its toll and he had to have rotator cuff surgery two years ago. After the surgery, he had a difficult time regaining his strength so his doctors recommended he start working out.

He began a golf-specific conditioning program which involved walking, stretching and a number of exercises utilizing a full range of motion to strengthen the muscles most often used in golf – including the back, shoulders, rotator cuffs and hips. Like most of Gennusa's golf clients, McCumber does a variety of exercises with rubber resistance cords and stability balls and also does exercises to improve balance.

"I'm convinced that I wouldn't be able to compete now without working out on a regular basis," said McCumber. He is currently competing on the Champions Tour and rarely misses his three weekly workouts.

McCumber said that many golfers in his generation didn't work out regularly but that it's become the norm for today's golfers. "With so much competition and so much at stake, you want every advantage you can get," he said.

Physical fitness has become such an integral part of today's game that two 48-foot fitness trailers follow PGA and Champions Tour golfers from tournament to tournament. The trailers are staffed with full-time physical therapists, chiropractors and personal trainers. One trailer is dedicated to physical therapy and treating injuries while the other, decked out with every



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type of exercise equipment imaginable, is exclusively for working out. HealthSouth Corporation, the official healthcare provider for the Tour, provides the personnel to help the players with rehabilitation, preventive care and personal training.

Brad Marquez, a HealthSouth physical therapist who travels with the PGA, said about half of the players on the Tour use the fitness trailers on a regular basis. "It is entirely optional, so it's up to each player to decide," he said. "Many players hope to have a 20- to 30-year career and they know that being fit will help their bodies

maintain a high level of performance."

He said injury prevention is the number one reason most of the players use the trailers while on Tour. The most common types of injuries he sees are spinal in nature – the neck, back and lower back. "The lower back takes the primary brunt of stress during a golf swing. This can lead to spinal lesions, shoulder, elbow and hip problems," said Marquez. Wrist injuries are also common.

To remain injury-free, the players focus on improving flexibility and strength. "Golf is such a dynamic sport. To complete that 280-degree

swing, you must be equally flexible and strong," said Marquez.

He said he's noticed an increase in the amount of golfers who take working out seriously. "There used to be a common misperception that golf was a sport that you didn't need to be fit for," said Marquez. "Now that the advantages are obvious, it's really started a wave that's gaining momentum."

The golf-fitness connection has filtered down to the amateur and recreational levels as well. For recreational golfers, being fit allows them to play better, reduce injury and enjoy the sport more.

"Many of the recreational golfers I work with don't necessarily equate a better game with a better score," Gennusa said. "They are working out so they can enjoy the sport with less aches and pains."

Not a bad goal for any golfer. ■

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