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Stalking the Commonest Fault

No. 3—Stewart Maiden Finds They Have a Hard Time Timing

By O. B. Keeler

"NOW about this matter of timing?" I suggested.

Stewart Maiden reflected.

"Well, they seem to have a pretty hard time timing," he said, "I should say that the majority of golfers never get it, except once in a while; sort of accidentally."

"Then there must be a secret about it."

"Yes. That's just it. It's a secret."

"All right. You can't keep a secret like that. So let's have it."

"It's not my secret. I wish it was."

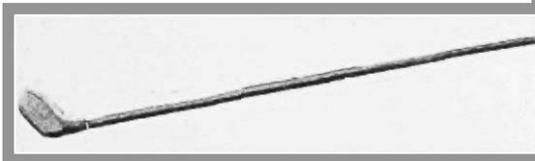
"You can time a swing, can't you?"

"Yes. At least I used to. And I can look at a swing and see that it is well timed, or not well timed—that is, usually."

"Well, then, isn't that all there is to it?"

"Not by a whole lot. The timing device is inside a player. What I see of his swing is the outside. That's merely the result of the way his timer is functioning, or not functioning. I can tell him that he is hitting too soon, or getting his hands ahead of the club, or any one of a lot of other things he may be doing wrong. And sometimes that will help him 'set' his timer. And then, again, it won't."

"Why won't it?"



"Timing is instinctive, when you get right down to it. There's an open window. You are about forty feet from it. Can I tell you how to throw a ball through it? If you happen to be a baseball pitcher, it would be a cinch for you to throw a peck of balls through it, one after the other. If you missed it would be an accident—an error of timing. You didn't cut the ball loose at the right place, or the final snap in the wrist was a bit off. A pitcher's speed and accuracy both are a matter of timing. So is a country boy's ability to sting another with a green apple. It's an instinct, cultivated by practice."

"A woman would have a skinny chance to hit anybody with a green apple, wouldn't she?"

"Exactly. And it is much harder to get a woman to time a golf swing than it is a man, as a rule. Men have been throwing things around for several hundred thousand years, I suppose. The throwing instinct probably is pretty much hereditary. Some people have it more than others."

"But about hitting?"

"Same thing. I should say the golfing swing is a good deal more complex than the throwing swing; using an implement and striking the ball instead of holding it and letting it fly from the hand. A lot more complex. But the instinct is the same. And in a general way the action is very similar. Without being any great baseball fan I have seen a number of games, and I always noticed that the pitcher had a back-swing and a forward

swing and a follow-through and a finish that, allowing for the different plane of action, were substantially the same as in a stylish golfer. And I noticed that the pitcher with the greatest speed and accuracy seemed to be timing his swing as near perfectly as is humanly possible. It is very pretty to watch."



This is Stewart Maiden's idea of the approximate point in the swing at which the "hit" should begin. His idea is to start the downward swing with the left shoulder and left hip working simultaneously. The "hit" with the arms is thus held back until the hands are about the hip level. By this time, it will be noted, the hips have moved forward along the line of play, pivoting already is under way, and the right knee is beginning to knuckle in, lifting the right heel from the ground. The body-tension as the "hit" starts thus is extreme. The club still is facing at right angles to the line of flight, and it evidently is the "hit" that brings it over with the much-talked-of "kick" at the moment of impact.

"So you don't believe Walter Johnson could tell me *how* to throw a ball through that window?"

"No. But he might give you a bit of advice as to how to draw your arm back, and

tell you to throw overhand instead of side-arm; something like that. But if you ever get to throwing at all as he can, you'd have to develop timing."

"And then some! In other words, he couldn't tell me just when to cut the ball loose and just how to snap the wrist—that would have to be a developed instinct?"

"Yes. And don't bear down so on that snap. I'll bet Johnson is not conscious of any snap when he's shooting a fast one. He's just throwing."

"And the expert golfer is just swinging? Good enough. But you *do* tell 'em something about timing, don't you? Say a fellow is lunging at the start and getting the kick into the swing about a yard before the club reaches the ball. Don't you tell him to keep his body back?"

Stewart grinned. "No. On the other hand, I tell him to start his body first."

This was just about the most unorthodox thing, apparently, I ever heard a Scotch Presbyterian say. Stewart knew he was administering a shock. He went on to explain:

"I want the pupil to start the down-swing with his left shoulder and his left hip. As near as I can figure it, they move together. The point is, I want him to begin drawing his arms down with his hands in practically the same position as at the top of the swing. I want him to get his hands pretty well along on the swing, somewhere around the hip level, before the real *HIT* starts. And as near as I can tell you, *THAT* is timing; holding back the *hit* until the body has turned and the hips are shot along the line of play so as to produce all the tension possible."

The cautious Caledonian paused, considered, and then qualified somewhat.

"I should say, that is the way timing looks to me on the outside. Remember, I am not trying to tell you any secret of timing from the inside."

I sought to recapitulate on the outside.

"Start the down-swing with the left shoulder and hip. Keep the hands as at the top of the swing until the greatest tension is gained by the body-turn and shooting the hips. Then add to that the sudden unwinding of the wrists—the turn-over. Get all the spring in your system out at one time. Is that it?"

"Something like it. Then if you hit the ball on the nose you may get a golf shot."

"That's hopeful. And how many chances do you suppose there are for part of the combination to go wrong?"

"I don't know. About seven thousand. Especially if you try to think about it in parts. I don't like this business of taking a swing to pieces. And it's blue ruin to try to make a swing by sections. A teacher has to correct the outward faults that will prevent proper timing, if he can. As to the timing instinct——"

Stewart shook his head, the gesture carrying a strong inference that the timing instinct, if not inherent, must be a matter of fasting, meditation and prayer.

"When did you become conscious of a timing
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Stalking the Commonest Fault

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instinct?" I asked.

"Not yet. I suppose a man trying to play golf would sooner be conscious of not having it."

"When did you start playing golf?"

"When I was about five years old. Maybe four. I don't remember when I wasn't playing, as a youngster."

"Did you play by note or by ear?"

"By ear. And, say—that may be a sort of explanation of timing. You know some people can't learn to dance or keep time in music Rhythm, I think they call it. Well, maybe there's a good bit of rhythm in timing. Certainly there is in a proper swing."

"Now about clubs. Some people say a heavy club helps in timing, because you can feel the head through the swing better."

"That's rot. A club should be so balanced that the head may be felt. But that doesn't mean it has to be heavy. Most real hitters prefer light clubs. The slow swingers like heavy clubs as a rule. Bob McDonald doesn't seem to have much trouble timing his big shots, and the last time I saw him he was using wood clubs that weighed 12¼ or 12½ ounces: looked rather like child's clubs. And how he does crack 'em! Not many can drive with Bob."

"I have heard that some people advocate trying to time the swing so that the maximum velocity is reached at a point just beyond the place where the ball lies, on the idea that the ball rides the club some distance

and the speed of the club should be increasing after impact—that is, during the follow-through—so that the ball in rebounding from the club would get more of a shove."

Stewart shook his head again.

"Too fine a point for me," he admitted. "I think that's drawing it too fine, even if you could do it. And I don't believe one of the high-tension balls would stick on the club while it moved more than two inches at the most. One inch seems more like it. Better not bother about that. Hit the ball! If you can time your swing to deliver all the kick on that ball, you can feel you've done your duty. The ball will get away so fast it won't have time to debate with the club about whether it could get an extra yard of ride if the kick was an inch farther on. Timing is enough trouble when you are trying to fasten it right on the ball, and not some place ahead of the ball."

"So you think the commonest fault in golf has to do with timing."

"I didn't say so, and if I did, you would have what Ring Lardner calls a he-ll of a time sorting out the faults that affect timing. You might say that about seven thousand of the ten thousand or more golf faults have to do with timing. But there is one special fault, now. . . ."

"This sounds interesting—tell me more!"

"It'll keep. It's been going on a long time."