

Two tips for grooving in swing changes in a fraction of the usual time.

For a long time during my challenge I idolised Vijay Singh. At this stage he was the number one golfer in the world but more importantly he was four years older than me. He was a shining beacon of “it can be done at any age” and this was tremendously inspirational.

The problem is that Vijay is all about graft. I’m doing him a huge disservice by labelling his game as such, but clearly much of Vijay’s success comes from a relentless pursuit of practice. Countless hours spent in a trance on the range. This seemed to me to be the perfect path. Having never had any real talent in other sports this seemed like the logical route. Ben Hogan famously said “*the answers are in digging the dirt*” and if it worked for Hogan and Vijay then it would work for me. I just needed to get out there and dig the dirt. Hit as many golf balls as I could and the answer would come.

But whilst this has its merits, I gradually realised that it wasn’t necessary. I slowly discovered that the real key was effective practice. The old cliché that “practice makes perfect” simply isn’t true. “Effective practice makes perfect”. I needed to find the ways to translate whatever skill I was working on into results as soon as possible.

I used a lot of techniques but ultimately the two that really worked for me are these:

The 32-ball drill

The second concept that I got from Dr Mumford was the 32-ball practice drill. This is as close to genius as I think I encountered during the year and totally transformed my practice regime. It approximately halved the number of balls I used on the range. In the first six months of the challenge I hit about 25,000 golf balls and would regularly hit in excess of 500 per day. In the last six months I hit about 10,000 and would very rarely exceed 200 per day.

The technique is a development of his clear key concept and, like everything he does, is based on all sorts of sound psychological practices. Most of which went completely over my head.

The gist of it is a technique to allow you to effectively and rapidly drill changes into the swing. So you hit a total of 32 balls for each issue that you're working on, alternating between four thinking of the change and four using the clear key to help the change be automatically incorporated into your swing.

Let's assume you have been to your local pro and he or she has told you to shift your weight a fraction more to the right on the backswing (the actual change doesn't matter – it works for anything). The 32-ball drill would go like this.

Four balls – hit while concentrating methodically on the swing change. Each shot is hit while focusing on the weight change.

Four balls – using the “Clear Key” with your last thought about the swing change being just as you start the phrase.

Four balls – focusing on the weight shift.

Four balls – on automatic using the “Clear Key”.

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Four balls – on automatic using the “Clear Key”.

Total balls hit – 32.

At this stage you now evaluate how effectively you've made the change. If you've made it well and you're striking the ball well then you have successfully programmed this new change into your swing. If you aren't happy then you repeat the process for another 32 balls.

I cannot emphasise just how important this was for my game. My range time was dramatically reduced just at the right time and any change that I needed to make was incorporated into my swing much, much faster. The only issue I had was that I actually started to miss my zen-like practice days where I would spend hours on the range often on my own bashing hundreds of balls, imagining myself to be like VJ Singh and suffering for my art. That is unlikely to be a problem you will have and it means you can very quickly move on to practicing the scoring parts of your game with the spare time you'll have.

The slow weighted club.

If I couldn't get to the range to help groove in any improvements I would use my weighted club – which was generally an old five iron with a weight taped onto the club face.

What I would do is very, very slowly take a full swing with this club and make sure I was focusing on all the various positions I needed to be in and in particular the issue that I was working on. The swing needs to be excruciatingly slow – ideally a full minute for each swing.

Using this technique something magical seemed to happen with whatever specific problem I was working on. When I next made it to the range or the course the new action seemed to be almost instinctively ingrained in my swing.

It's a very useful technique if you are very short of time and just have ten minutes or so to swing a club in the garden. It may be simple, but don't underestimate it.

One thing to be aware of: If, like me, you're getting a little creaky make sure you warm up with an ordinary club before you start swinging with weighted clubs. It's very easy to pull muscles with weighted clubs and you really don't want to do this since it will severely hold back the rest of your practice for a while.