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Instruction

Successful Approach

Four-time PGA Tour winner Billy Horschel's secrets for hitting more greens more of the time

BY SHAUN TOLSON

WITH AN IRON in his hands and a stance that allows him to take a full swing, Billy Horschel commands your attention. During the 2014 FedEx Cup Playoffs, when Horschel won two of the three events — the BMW Championship and the Tour Championship — as well as the FedEx Cup, he hit his approach shots on the green at least 75 percent of the time. More recently, when Horschel won the AT&T Byron Nelson in May, beating Jason Day in a sudden-death playoff, his greens-in-regulation percentage flirted with 71 percent for the tournament. He also hit almost 78 percent of his greens in regulation during the tournament's final round.

Horschel credits exceptional hand-eye coordination for his ability to solidly strike the golf ball, but many other factors contribute to his ability to consistently hit greens in regulation. Here, the PGA Tour star lays out his road map for hitting better approach shots. Follow his lead and you'll likely find yourself putting for birdie more often, making more pars, and consequently lowering your scores *and* your handicap.

Elevate./The Game/

Make an Impact

Sure, we all want to fine-tune our swings to look good, and Horschel says amateurs can always improve by working on the fundamentals, such as posture and body position at address. But he also acknowledges that a fixation on your swing's appearance can sometimes hinder the end result. "I'm a perfectionist at heart and I want my swing to look as great as it can," he says. "But there are times when I forget that the goal is to hit the golf shot solid."

"You can work on all the things in the world on the range, but if you're not hitting it solid, it doesn't matter how nice your swing looks," he continues. "Just focus on hitting it solid. That's the first key to hitting more greens."

THE LESSON: At impact, right-handed players should feel like their left hand is in front of the clubhead. "Having the left hand leading through impact stabilizes the clubface," says Horschel, "so golfers can hit the ball with a descending blow. That compresses the ball and makes it fly a lot straighter."



Hit the Fairway

When Horschel made headlines – and history – in 2013 by hitting all 18 greens in regulation during the second round of the U.S. Open at Merion Golf Club, he did so by hitting his approach shots from the fairway 85 percent of the time (Horschel missed only two fairways during that round). "Picking the right club or right shot off the tee and being able to put the ball on the fairway is key," he says. "It's great to hit it far, but even the long hitters at the top of the world rankings struggle when they're not hitting fairways. The guy who's hitting his approach from 215 yards away in the fairway is always going to hit it closer than the guy who's 200 yards away but in the rough."

THE LESSON: For Horschel, two things define accurate tee shots, which make accurate approach shots easier: rhythm and balance. "I focus on slowly taking the club away from the ball and keeping a smooth tempo going back," he says. "That helps me complete my backswing, and I always focus on a good balanced finish position."

"Most amateurs are always off-balance," he continues. "If you're right-handed, think that your entire body – from your hips to your chest – is facing the target or is even facing left of the target at the end of your swing. That will help you get through the golf shot."

GETTY IMAGES; DREW HALLOWELL (IMPACT); STAN BADZ/PGA TOUR (FAIRWAY)

Go Long (When Choosing a Club)

Amateurs unintentionally put too much pressure on themselves. They strive to play like the pros, which can get them into trouble because television broadcasts typically show only the golfers who are playing their best during that particular tournament. "Amateurs have this wrong image that Tour pros do things perfectly, that we're hitting the ball close every time," says Horschel. "That's far from the case. At the end of every year, the leader on Tour is hitting approach shots no better than 30 feet from the hole on average. So if you were to hit approach shots 10 yards left, right, short, or long of the pin, you'd be one of the best ball-strikers on Tour."

Most amateurs hit their approach shots short of the target, which often means they're missing the green. If you have a 150-yard shot, for example, and you can hit a full 8-iron 150 yards, Horschel advocates gripping down on a 7-iron instead. "You'll be more successful with the longer club every time," he says.



THE LESSON: When Horschel uses a longer club for the distance that his shot will travel, he takes a shorter swing. "I'll make a three-quarter backswing and a three-quarter follow-through to control the trajectory," he says. Some golfers find it easier to do that, he explains, by thinking of their golf swing like a clock face, where their head is at 12 o'clock, their feet at 6 o'clock, and – for right-handed players – 9 o'clock is to the right and 3 o'clock to the left. "Think about your left arm going to 9 or 10 o'clock on the backswing," Horschel says, "and your right arm going to 2 or 3 o'clock on the follow-through."

DREAMSTIME; DIMITRY ZIMIN (CLOCK); CHRISTOPHER KING (ILLUSTRATION); SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES (CADDY)

Plan Your Attack

At times during a round, a conservative strategy might prove the right course of action to take. "Amateurs think they have to attack every flag and that's not the case," says Horschel. "You need to understand when to put a shot 30 or 40 feet from the hole."

"When you have a situation where you can be aggressive and you have the right club in your hands," he continues, "then you try to hit it close." In those cases, Horschel explains, the hole should sit in an area of the green that doesn't bring a hazard into play and be no more than 150 yards away – or whatever distance an amateur can comfortably hit a 7-iron, a fairly forgiving club given its loft.

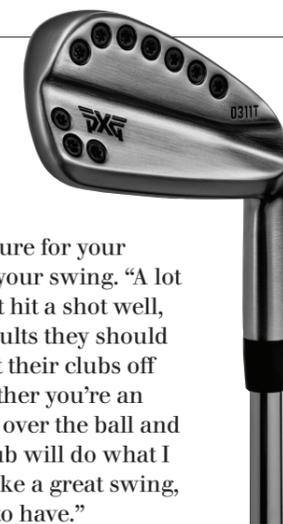
THE LESSON: When you must hit a conservative shot, typically with a long iron in your hands, Horschel says you should think about sweeping the ball off the turf. "Focus on just clipping the grass and feeling like you're leaving only grass clippings with the shot," he says. "This will help you hit the ball higher."

When you have a short iron or wedge in your hand, Horschel advocates taking a descending blow to compress the ball, but it's important to keep the depth of your divot the same from start to finish. "If your divot gets too deep somewhere along the way, focus on feeling like your head is staying behind the ball during the swing," he says. "That will shallow you out and also help with power."



Get Fitted

Horschel says that the latest and greatest golf clubs, no matter what technology they employ, will not offer a miracle cure for your game if they're not fit to your swing. "A lot of times, amateurs might hit a shot well, but they don't get the results they should because they just bought their clubs off the rack," he says. "Whether you're an amateur or pro, if you're over the ball and asking yourself if this club will do what I want it to do even if I make a great swing, that's not a good feeling to have."



THE LESSON: The right equipment in your hands can play a pivotal role in hitting better approach shots, and more greens in regulation, but it starts with a custom fitting, no matter the brand or the specific clubs. "Everyone needs to be custom fit for any set of clubs to give them the best chance to play the best golf they can," says Horschel. ■