


INSTITUTE OF GOLF - PART 2

Gain follows the pain



For more than 20 years, **James Graham** was haunted by regrets and what ifs about his golf game. In the name of research he hands over his mind, body and soul to the Institute of Golf

A Jack-of-all-trades but master of none – that's my sporting credo and it's served me well over my 42 years.

Yet golf has always been the monkey on my back as I drifted between tennis, table tennis and triathlon, among other minor sporting dalliances.

Although I had my glory junior golfing days fluking the odd round in the high-70s, a little voice always nagged that I'd overreacted in hanging up the bag 20-plus years ago. Luckily for me, so did the recently launched Institute of Golf.

For those of you who missed *The Cut's* feature last month entitled *New-age Approach*, the Auckland-based institute consists of the magazine's resident pro, Waitemata Golf Club's swing coach Craig Dixon, body mechanics Bradley Takai and Alex Porter and sports shrink David Nieth.

To see firsthand why there is so much industry buzz around this young quartet, I rashly consented to their invitation for a four-week boot camp. For the record, they wanted me at least a fortnight longer, with six weeks being regarded as the institute's minimum programme period. But I figure that if I'm going to give this frustrating game another chance I want results... and fast.

Boot Camp Diary Week One

My impatient streak hits its first hurdle with Dixon's video swing assessment of my game. After swatting a club half a dozen times while filmed from every conceivable angle, we reconvene at the Waitemata Golf Club pro-shop for the frame-by-frame analysis. In the interim, however, Dixon seems to have inadvertently erased my footage and replaced it with a hunchbacked look-alike who appears to have no grasp of the game's most basic fundamentals. This imposter stands too close to the ball and his posture makes Quasimodo look like a Pilates tutor.

In golf-pro parlance, I'm loading too late and releasing too early. Performance translation: I hit my 5-iron as long as I should be hitting the seven. My upper back is so tight I can only turn so far before the arms

take over. The real head-scratcher, after enduring this in agonising slow-motion, is how the hell am I able to get the club anywhere near the clubface hitting area? I cling to a thin shred of hope that at least I must have decent hand-eye coordination to pull off that kind of Houdini act. When Dixon's attempts to straighten me out in the correct set up posture result in a vice-like grip on my hump I'm banned from hitting any more balls until golf physio Takai has worked his magic.

The next day Takai's institute role picks up where Dixon leaves off, and I undergo a full body musculoskeletal assessment. The source of my problems isn't too hard for Takai to spot as I bend, twist and turn in every conceivable angle. The tight and woefully inactive muscles around my pelvis are reducing hip and pelvic mobility – surefire killers for golfers hoping to break 90 – shunting my pelvis forward and accentuating the curve in my lower back. Upstairs the news is no rosier with pectorals so locked my rounded shoulders have collapsed forward in meek surrender amplifying my upper back (thoracic) curve.

Takai tailor-makes a comprehensive prescription of golf-specific stretches and compiles a detailed five-page report. Buried in there between the scores of 'poor' ratings I'm encouraged to learn that at least my ankles work properly.

Later that same week, I start the first soft tissue release session. Takai's colleague rates my jammed upper back in his top-five all-time immovable objects. Takai quips that he'd hate to see the other four. Still, the relief is immediate at rehab Ground Zero.

Week Two

Takai's daily stretching and strengthening programme is getting easier and with it a new understanding of the relevance of firing the right muscles in sequence during the golf swing.

I'm not going to sugar-coat this part of the process though. That would be unfair to anyone sensible enough to follow. The soft tissue muscle release sessions have me writhing in pain so intense I feel like crying and laughing all in the same minute. You're left silently begging for those precious few seconds when Takai swaps to the other leg, ab or pectoral, even though you know it's about to hurt just as much. Anything for a moment's relief from the wall-climbing agony of having your dormant muscles

jump-started back to life. And if you think I'm making this part up, I had bruises to prove it the next day.

Amazingly, however, the physical pay-off comes remarkably fast. After a handful of sessions, I swear I'm now 3-4cm taller, my rounded shoulders have retreated back to their rightful place and the increased flexibility in my upper back feels incredible.

Satisfied with my progress, Takai gives me the green light for an assessment with strength and conditioning expert Porter. An hour later, I leave humbled all over again. As a life-long, gym-scoffing desk jockey with

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scrawny arms and 5-7kg of unwanted spare tyre, I knew this part wasn't going to be pretty. But Porter's end of session appraisal that "I'm doing okay for a girl" is still hard to swallow. I can only lift half my body weight in one of Porter's preferred core strength tests, the bench press. He demands 100 per cent before you can get serious about driving the par fours. And I can't manage a single chin-up. Pathetic!

This, I decide, as I cower out the door in humiliation, is my make-or-break point in the month-long exercise. It would be so easy to quit right here with the pressure tightening. After all, do I really need to know my golfing potential this badly? But I know I'm in too deep to take the easy way out. It's my second shot at golf, yes, but also a life free of back niggles and fretting about running out of notches on my belt buckle. Suck it up, I tell myself, I may not get this chance again.

Week Three

Finally, I'm allowed out on the practice fairway with Dixon. It's been a frustrating wait but from the first swing I sense it's been worth it. Although it's not yet perfect, I find my set up posture without any strain, and as I make my first tentative backswing I'm suddenly aware of my right leg muscles firing. I can actually feel my glutes taking

the load normally shouldered by my back at this point. And then something beautiful happens. Something that makes all the screaming for my mummy worth it – my upper back keeps turning. Okay, so I'm not rotating like Ernie Els, but I'll take a solid threequarter swing without any spare moving parts over what I had any day. And on the downswing, there's another new sweet sensation – clubhead lag. With the correct set up and better rotation through the back and hips, my hands are staying where they should for longer. The result: more club speed with what feels like a lot less effort, and a fuller pivot on the follow through.

The next day I'm back in the gym with renewed vigour. That is until Porter blindsides me with the joys of something called the Tabata interval. Named after its sadist inventor, Japan's Dr Izumi Tabata, this is essentially a killer four-minute anaerobic cycle in which you go as hard as you can for 20 seconds – it doesn't really seem to matter on what – and then rest for 10 seconds. In my case, it's on the rowing machine, and later in Porter's favourite strength and conditioning exercise for golfers, the air squat (see last month's issue of *The Cut* for details). I count about five or six steps on my way off the gym floor, but I'm grateful for the handrail. I seem to have lost momentary control of my hip flexors.

Week Four

In some ways I'd been dreading the session with institute psychologist David Niethe more than any other phase of this boot camp. Who really needs to hear you're pulling your drives because of a repressed memory from Sunday school? But he was in my head before I even knew it, subtly educating me as we chatted along the first fairway on the power the mind has on the way we play. He underlines his philosophy with self-improvement acronyms that I forget before the green, but his positivity is infectious. I'm so pumped I'm making plans to join the Masters tour before I've hit my second tee shot.

"Mind your language" is a Niethe favourite but not because I'm cussing too much. He means ditch the negative way of looking at your game and life – Niethe's intuitive approach spins off on tangents at any moment – and think of a more positive framing. To illustrate the impact this mind-over-matter mantra has on his own rapidly



diminishing single-figure handicap, he nails a short-iron approach to within half a metre of the hole.

Unfortunately, a couple of final week sessions with Niethe, whose role always comes last at the institute, only scratches the surface of his ability to “ignite the magic”. But he does leave me with indelible advice – a simple pre-shot routine. He shows me a nifty finger-wiggling trick that blurs my peripheral vision so I’m focused on nothing but the target. I go into a Tiger-like trance and blank out all thoughts other than the vision of the ball flying high and sweetly to the pin. I am in the mythical ‘zone’ for the first time in my golfing life. The only comparable feeling I’ve had is playing pool with a beer buzz and the Pulp Fiction soundtrack blasting. It’s like the ball is on some kind of telepathic remote control as it flies off the 5-iron approach to within two metres of the hole.

For the early stages in my final test of the month – my only full round – I stay on much the same roll, dropping just two shots in the first seven before a double-bogey stutter and a bogey on the ninth. Down the stretch I’m still playing out of my skin. My swing is effortless, I’m driving like a demon and throttling back a club to every green. My only weakness, it seems, is my short game which I’ve had precious little time to practise around everything else. All things considered though I can live with a few fluffed chips and three-putts when I’m signing a 79.

The last time I played, about six months earlier, I grovelled for a 91, more on instinct than skill. That was a completely different player (the proof is in the before, in black, and after, in white, shots of me above). In just a single, life-changing month I’ve dropped 12 shots, 5kg – thanks to the institute’s nutrition plan and a cupboard full of EAS supplements – and walked away with a completely new body and an air of confidence.

I’m not going to kid you, it’s been bloody hard work; almost in direct proportion to how badly I’d let myself slide. But when I see how far I’ve come in such a short time, I’m convinced that with a little more work and self-belief, I may tame this game yet. ☺

For more information, visit www.instituteofgolf.co.nz

Stretches to lower your scores

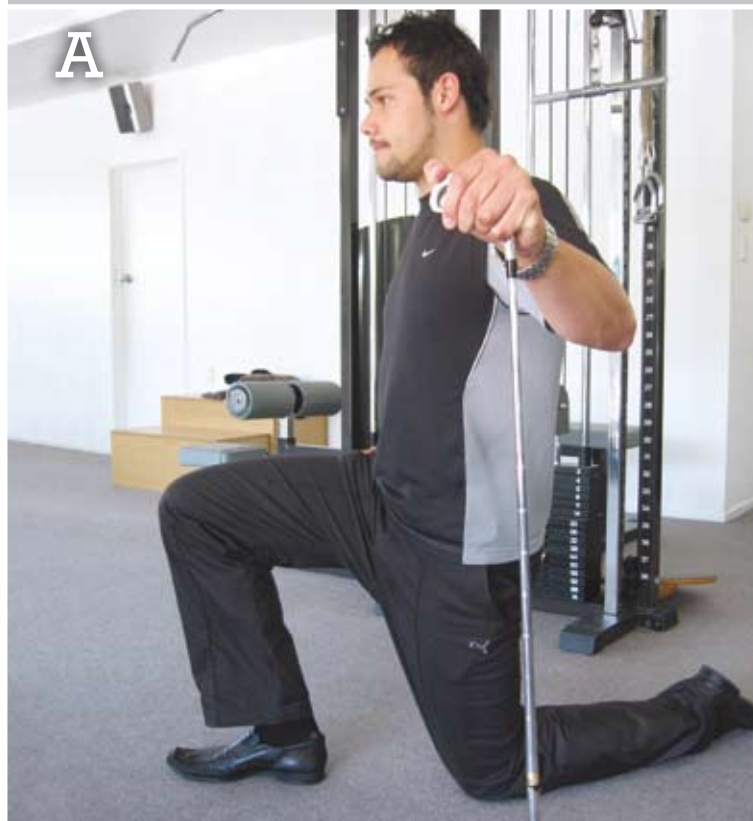
Institute physio Bradley Takai shares his three favourite pre-round routines to get you firing on all cylinders:

Hip flexor stretch

This helps take the pressure off your lower back and improves the mobility of the hips which in turn promotes an improved pivot through the ball.

Step 1: Kneel down on your left knee with your back straight, holding a club in your left hand for support as shown (A).

Step 2: Thrust your pubic bone forward and up, making





sure you are tucking your stomach in and up.
Step 3: Push the pelvis forward until a good stretch is felt in the front of the left hip and thigh (B). Hold for 25 seconds, relax and repeat before switching to the other leg.

Pectoral stretch

This one helps reduce shoulder protraction and excessive curve in your mid-back (thoracic spine). It also helps improve your set-up posture and your rotation.

Step 1: Place your arm on a wall or post bent at about 90 degrees (C).

Step 2: Take one step forward and push your weight forward until a stretch is felt across the chest (D).

Step 3: Hold for 25s, repeat and then switch to the other arm. (For an even deeper stretch, repeat the same process with the arms at 145 degrees).

Mid-back (thoracic) rotation

This is one of the best stretches you can do to help improve the rotation in your golf swing.

Step 1: Get down in a comfortable position

on your hands and knees. If you're on hard ground it may pay to place a towel under your knees.

Step 2: Slowly take your right hand off the ground and slide the arm underneath the left while pushing your right shoulder toward the ground (E). As you rotate your upper back you should feel a pleasant stretching sensation (F).

Step 3: Hold for 25s, move back to the starting position and repeat the movement again before switching to the other arm for the same process.

