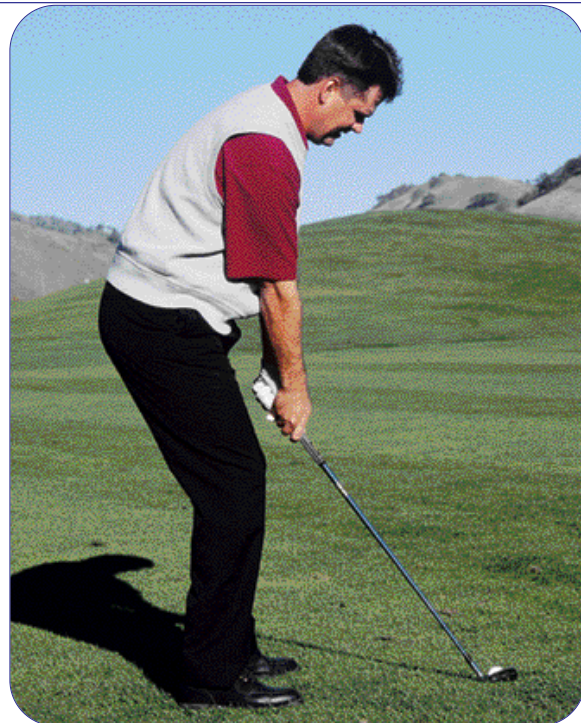


Why You Should Stand Closer To The Ball



By Brett Taylor with Al Barkow

Byron Nelson once remarked that at address you can't stand too close to the ball. In fact, you can, just as you can also stand too far from it, which is what most people do and is the worst of the two. Nelson's prescription really applied to a certain type of full swing plane — the upright one he had. We will get into that in more detail later, including how this applies to the short game. What Nelson did was to bring to everyone's attention an aspect of the golf swing that is not dealt with as much as it should be.

The majority of golfers stand too far from the ball at address, and especially when playing irons. This occurs when there is no bend in your elbows and your arms are stretched tautly out in front of you. This produces tension in your arms that transmutes into the rest of your body and induces a short, fast swing with no significant power.

In addition, the swing plane is flat or more horizontal, which makes it very difficult to hit the ball first with irons off the ground. With a driver, it often produces a "drop-kick," which is golf slang for striking the ground behind the ball before making contact with it.

A flat plane also generally produces hooked shots. You

may even be inclined to come over the top, sling your right shoulder out toward the ball in the downswing and cut across it, producing a slice. A lot of this occurs because the shoulder turn is too level. The left shoulder doesn't dip a bit as it should in the backswing.

Finally, when standing too far from the ball, your balance is not good. You are apt to fall forward in the downswing. This is what leads to a shank, which most golfers believe comes from standing too close to the ball. Because you're reaching out to get the clubhead on the ball, the forward pitch of your body may be too much and the shank of the club gets pushed into the ball.

Why do golfers stand too far from the ball? One answer is that it makes them feel as if they have more room to swing the club, which will then give them more power. It doesn't work that way, however.

Another reason, which is probably the most common, is poor posture. There is a certain laziness in this. Standing nice and tall to the ball takes some effort. Slumping the shoulders and bending a lot at the waist is easier, and there is less strain on the back. But, in fact, the reaching out can hurt your back even more.

Why do people stand too close to the ball? We can't say for certain why it happens when it does, and it is not nearly as common as the opposite. It could be psychological. There is not the fear many golfers feel that they will miss the ball if they stand too far from it.

When you are too close to the ball at address, there is invariably a separation of the body and arms, because you must take the club to the outside or away from your body. The backswing tends to be herky jerky rather than smooth. More importantly, you have to play catch up throughout the swing by re-routing the path of the club in the downswing — swinging it back to the inside — in

order to get the clubhead moving down the line of flight at impact.

There are major timing problems in this movement, and when it is not achieved, which is often the case, the club stays outside and cuts across the ball causing a slice or a badly pulled shot if the clubface is closed at impact. The length of your backswing is also restricted, which means a loss of power.

Your swing plane is very much affected by the distance you stand from the ball at address. Too far away results in a too-flat plane. Too close produces a too-upright plane. To swing on the correct plane for your body type, you need

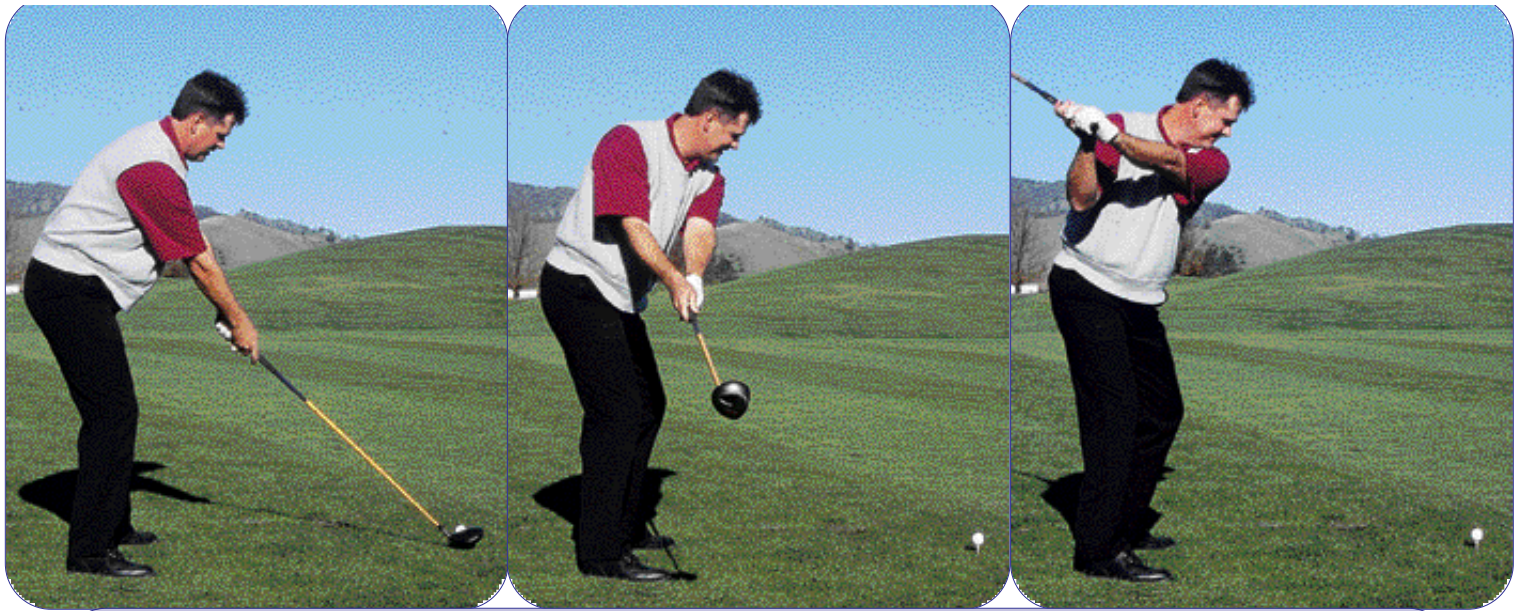
9-Iron



Driver



Whether you are addressing the ball with a 9-iron or a driver, the butt of the club should be on a line just outside your shoulder sockets. This is the measure to use to stand the proper distance from the ball. The ball may be farther from (or closer to) your feet with each club, but only because the length of the club varies. When the distance from the ball is correct, the backswing plane will be the same for all clubs, with the shaft above the right shoulder.



If you stand too far from the ball, with the butt of the club well forward or outside your shoulder sockets, your arms will be too tense, you will bend forward from the waist too much and the swing plane will be too flat or horizontal. From this back-swing position, you are apt to hit behind the ball, produce a badly hooked shot or come over the top with your right shoulder and hit a slice.

to find the right distance from the ball. It is not hard to do. When you address the ball, bend only at the waist to maintain the proper spine angle. Let your upper arms hang straight down from your shoulders with a slight bend at the elbows. Set the club so its butt is just outside the line of your shoulder sockets — not even with your sockets, not way outside of them and not inside of them. Then adjust the distance of your feet from the ball to maintain the spine angle, the

bend at the elbows and the butt of the club in relation to your shoulder sockets.

There is another way to check your position. Your right thumbnail should be on a line directly over your feet. Some teachers also give as a checkpoint the distance the butt of the club is from your body or thighs. I think that's too imprecise, because that distance varies with the length of the club being used. As the club gets longer, your spine angle



When you stand too close to the ball, with the butt of the club on a line inside your shoulder sockets, your arms must swing out away from the torso in the takeaway to find swinging room. There is a tendency to not turn the body enough in the backswing. The backswing plane also is going to be too upright or vertical. As a result, in the downswing the club must be re-routed so it comes to the ball from inside to outside the target line. This poses a timing problem.

gets more vertical — you're less bent over — and the distance changes. That, and the fact that you are actually looking back toward your hands, makes it difficult to judge. Therefore, the butt of the club in relation to your shoulder sockets — just forward or outside — is the most precise and consistent method.

Now, when you take the club back, you should put the club on the correct plane for your height or body type. How

do you know you are on the correct plane? When the shaft of the club at the completion of your backswing is directly over your right shoulder. You're flat if the club is below the shoulder, and upright if it is inside of it.

It's important to realize that the upper arms, and only the upper arms, hang straight down. I think many people misunderstand that it is the entire arm. You need to have the slight bend at the elbows, which means the entire arm



For chip shots and short pitches, you want to stand quite close to the ball, with the butt of the club well inside your shoulder sockets. You are almost certain to hit the ball first because the backswing and downswing are going to be quite vertical and shorter. You have far more control of the club-head standing up close to the ball than you would if you were stretching your arms out. Solid strikes are almost guaranteed.

does not hang straight down, to get your hands forward of the shoulder sockets without adding tension. On the golf course, you will know when you are standing too far from the ball (or even too close) because you will feel tension in your arms.

The Short Game Is A Different Story

When playing chip shots and short pitch shots, you definitely want to stand closer to the ball than you do for full-swing shots. Now you want the butt of the club inside your shoulder sockets. You will not shank the ball from this position. On the contrary, you will hit the most solid and well-controlled chip shots and pitch shots possible.

Remember, you aren't making a pivot. Your swing for these

shots is very short. The club should never get past waist high in most cases. At that, the path of the club in the backswing will be quite vertical in both directions, which is exactly what you want. You will almost invariably hit the ball solidly because your downswing path will be downward.

Too many average golfers stand too far from the ball for these short shots and mishit the ball, usually hitting behind it and chunking the shot. It is mainly because the backswing is too long. It opens up a margin for error that need not be there at all. So get up close to the ball when chipping and pitching — with the ball just forward of your toes — and you will save many a stroke per round. GI

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